

ASKING A QUESTION

Under the Standing Orders, MLAs can only ask questions that are urgent and important, and must ask or answer questions briefly and precisely – they cannot use the time to present their own opinions or begin a back-and-forth argument.

MLAs must direct their questions to the minister officially responsible for the subject (hospitals, roads or tree licences, for example), but must not ask questions:

- about proposed new laws or government funding requests (these are handled through regular debates), or
- that refer to matters currently before a court or waiting to go to court (judges and juries need to remain impartial; a public discussion could influence their decisions).

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

If a question requires a long, detailed or highly technical answer from the government, the MLA must ask it as a written rather than an oral question.

Written questions are printed in the Orders of the Day, the Legislative Assembly's daily agenda.

A written question will stay on the Orders of the Day until the Cabinet minister responds or the legislative session ends. The MLA can re-submit the question at the start of the new session.

PROVIDING AN ANSWER

Cabinet ministers do not know in advance what oral questions they will be asked during Question Period.

When a Cabinet minister is asked a question, he or she may:

- answer the question,
- take the question "on notice," which means the minister will answer it at a later date, when he or she has the right facts and figures,
- allow another member of the Cabinet to answer in his or her place, or
- choose not to respond.



VISITING THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

WE WELCOME VISITORS. Free tours of the B.C. Parliament Buildings are available Monday through Friday throughout the year, and on Saturdays and Sundays in the summer months.

To see MLAs in action, visitors are welcome in the public galleries of the Legislative Chamber whenever the House is sitting. The galleries are often full during Question Period – the 30-minute period every Monday to Thursday afternoon when MLAs ask questions about government activities.

For more information on the work of the Legislative Assembly, please contact:

**Public Education and Outreach
Room 144, Parliament Buildings
Victoria B.C. V8V 1X4
250-387-8669 phone
250-356-5981 fax
PEO@leg.bc.ca**

For information on visiting the Parliament Buildings, please contact:

**Tour Office
Parliament Buildings
Victoria B.C. V8V 1X4
250-387-1400**

Or visit the Legislative Assembly website at: www.leg.bc.ca

THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

QUESTION PERIOD



SHAPING BRITISH COLUMBIA'S FUTURE

In the grand and historic British Columbia Parliament Buildings, our elected representatives – called Members of the Legislative Assembly or MLAs – come to meet, debate and pass the laws that govern the people of British Columbia, and help shape the future of our province.

GOVERNMENT IN B.C.

In British Columbia, one MLA is elected from each of the 79 ridings across the province to speak on behalf of the people of that riding.

Candidates are usually members of an organized political party, but may also run for election as independents.

The political party that wins the largest number of seats in a general election forms the governing party, and its leader becomes the head of the provincial government, known as the Premier. The opposition consists of elected members who do not belong to the governing party.

THE CABINET

The Premier selects a small group of MLAs from his or her party to work as ministers of the Crown, in charge of the day-to-day activities of individual government ministries (such as Health or Finance), and responsible for proposing new laws.

The Premier and the ministers can be collectively referred to as the Government, the Executive Council or the Cabinet.

QUESTION PERIOD

Every Monday to Thursday, beginning just after 2:00 p.m., MLAs participate in Question Period, an intense 30-minute period of rapid-fire questions and answers.

All MLAs have the right to ask for information from the Cabinet and the right to hold Cabinet ministers responsible for their actions. They do this by studying and debating all proposed new laws (called bills) and government funding requests, and by participating in Question Period.

The purpose of Question Period – which, like all Legislative Assembly activities, is open to the media and the public – is to make sure the people of B.C. know what their government is doing and why it is doing it.

During Question Period, any MLA (but it will usually be a member of the opposition) can ask Cabinet ministers questions about their ministry's plans and activities, and the benefits of those activities for British Columbia. At the same time, the questions give Cabinet ministers the opportunity to clarify or explain their actions to the public.

DID YOU KNOW...

B.C.'s system of government is based on Great Britain's, which dates back more than 800 years.

The practice of asking Cabinet ministers direct questions is a relatively new invention, however, dating back less than 300 years.

The first recorded parliamentary question was asked in the British House of Lords in 1721, when the government of the day was asked to confirm the rumour that the chief cashier of the government-owned South Sea Company had fled the country and been arrested in Brussels.

The Prime Minister confirmed the arrest, and the Lords agreed to ask the King to order the culprit's return to England.

HOW QUESTION PERIOD WORKS

Question Period is considered by many to be the highlight of the day in the Legislative Assembly (also known as the House) – a time when MLAs can raise the current political concerns of the day and make their views known to the public.

Although Question Period can be loud and sometimes chaotic, with MLAs often becoming passionate and heated about particular issues, there are certain rules and procedures that must be followed.

THE ROLE OF THE SPEAKER DURING QUESTION PERIOD

The Speaker of the House is an MLA elected by the other members of the Legislative Assembly to carry out the Standing Orders (the House rules of parliamentary procedure and behaviour).

The Standing Orders are designed to ensure debates are properly conducted and that MLAs from both government and opposition have the opportunity to participate. They also

THE SPEAKER AS REFEREE

During Question Period, the Speaker must work like a referee at a hockey match or soccer game – ruling some questions out of bounds and occasionally ordering an MLA off the field for bad conduct.

The job takes a great deal of skill, particularly in B.C. where our Question Period lasts only 30 minutes – the shortest Question Period in Canada. This means the Speaker must keep MLAs on topic and quickly decide whether to allow a follow-up question.

require all MLAs to show respect for the Speaker, and for each other. For example, members must not speak unless "recognized" by the Speaker, or interrupt when the Speaker is speaking.

It is also up to the Speaker to make sure that Question Period runs smoothly. He or she decides the order in which MLAs will ask their questions, and how long an MLA can take to ask or answer a question – if an MLA goes on too long, the Speaker will bring the MLA to order.

The Speaker also has the authority to:

- decide if a question is "out of order" (not related to the activities of government, for example, or too vague or containing unparliamentary language), and ask to have it re-phrased or simply move on to the next question; and
- determine if the MLA who asked the question should be allowed to ask a supplementary (follow-up) question for further clarification or information.

If the Speaker allows a supplementary question, the MLA must pose it right after the Cabinet minister's response, not later in Question Period.

