

■ DEBATES ON BILLS

Any MLA may propose a new law (called a bill), but most are introduced by Cabinet ministers. All bills must pass through three “readings” – as well as an in-depth study by the Committee of the Whole House – before becoming law, to ensure MLAs have the time and opportunity to examine each bill closely and suggest changes or improvements.

If the majority of MLAs support a bill, it will eventually become an Act of the Assembly (a law).

■ GOVERNMENT BILLS

Any government bill that requires spending public funds (our tax dollars) or imposes a new tax must be accompanied by a recommendation or “message” from the Lieutenant-Governor. This tradition dates back hundreds of years, when only the King or Queen could raise funds for public projects.

MINORITY GOVERNMENT

If the governing party holds more than 51 per cent of the seats in the Legislative Assembly, they have a “majority” government and losing a vote of non-confidence will probably never happen, since government party members will usually (although not always) vote to support government actions.

Occasionally, however, a party wins less than 51 per cent (but more than any other single party) and forms what is called a “minority” government.

Then, the government must look to MLAs from other parties for support – and those MLAs will hold the balance of power.

There have been three minority governments in British Columbia.

The last was in 1952.

MAINTAINING CONFIDENCE

The government cannot spend any public funds or make any new laws without the approval of the Legislative Assembly.

After the debates on the Speech from the Throne and the budget are completed, MLAs will vote on whether or not to approve the government’s plans and expenditures. MLAs will also vote on each bill as it passes through the reading process.

If a majority of elected members do not support the plans announced in the Speech from the Throne, the amounts outlined in the budget or certain designated bills, this means the government has lost the confidence – the support – of the House, and a provincial general election may be called. (Without a vote of non-confidence, the government must call an election every four years from the date of the last election.)



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
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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 ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION

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.

B.C.'s system of government is based on Great Britain's, which dates back over 800 years. Under this system, one MLA is elected from each of the 79 ridings across the province to speak on behalf of the people of that riding. Together, the elected MLAs make up the B.C. Legislative Assembly.

The primary function of the Legislative Assembly (also known as the House) is to make laws. When the House is sitting, MLAs are responsible for making arguments for and against all proposed new laws (called bills) and considering the views and concerns of British Columbians before deciding to support or reject the bill.

It is also the job of MLAs to examine the activities of Cabinet Ministers and their ministries, to approve taxes, and to debate and vote on government funding requests.

DID YOU KNOW...

The House "sits" – is in session – only part of the year. When the House is not in session, MLAs work in their home ridings, advising and helping their constituents in dealing with government programs and services. They may also serve on one or more legislative committees, brought together to discuss social and economic issues of importance to British Columbians.

THE GOVERNMENT

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.

It is up to the Premier to select 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 the Ministry of Forests or Ministry of Health Services) and for proposing new laws.

Together, the Premier and the ministers can be collectively referred to as the Government, the Executive Council, or the Cabinet. Cabinet ministers are responsible to the Legislative Assembly, which means they must account for their actions and plans.

THE OPPOSITION

The opposition consists of elected members who do not belong to the governing party. MLAs in opposition may belong to a political party or they may be independent members.

The primary role of the opposition is to question government actions and present alternatives to

THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

The key figure in the Legislative Assembly, the Speaker of the House, is an MLA elected by the other members of the Legislative Assembly to oversee debates and make sure everyone follows established rules of behaviour and procedure. If an MLA decides not to follow the rules, the Speaker can ask the MLA to withdraw from the House for the day.

government positions. For example, opposition members will review government spending plans, debate proposed government bills and may try to modify the bills by suggesting amendments.

If the opposition consists of a sufficient number of members, a "shadow cabinet" is usually established. In a shadow cabinet, each opposition MLA is assigned to watch one specific ministry very closely and ask questions about that ministry's plans and activities.

HOLDING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE

The opposition is key to making sure government remains accountable to the people of B.C.. Opposition MLAs have a number of opportunities to question the government and comment on its actions, including:

■ THE SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

Written by the government, the Speech from the Throne is read by the Lieutenant-Governor at the opening of every new legislative session. The speech outlines the government's plans for the session – to introduce a tax cut, for example, or to increase spending on hospitals. MLAs then have up to six days to debate government priorities and plans.

■ THE BUDGET

Usually right after the Speech from the Throne and the debate following it, the government will introduce the provincial budget. Read by the Minister of Finance, the budget speech outlines how much the government's new and ongoing programs will cost and where it will get the money to pay for them (from taxes, for example, or other revenue). MLAs then have six days to debate the budget and question government costs and figures. The government's future spending plans are then debated and reviewed by a committee.

THE QUEEN AND THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

As a constitutional monarchy Canada's head of state is Queen Elizabeth II. She is also the head of state for each of Canada's provinces and territories.

In B.C., as elsewhere in Canada, the federal Governor General appoints a Lieutenant-Governor to act on behalf of the Queen. The Lieutenant-Governor is responsible for reading the Speech from the Throne and for giving Royal Assent to bills, which means they can then become law.

■ QUESTION PERIOD

Held while the House is in session, Question Period is an intense, 30-minute period every Monday to Thursday afternoon when MLAs are allowed to ask Cabinet ministers direct questions about what the government is doing and why it is doing it. Often both heated and noisy, it is up to the Speaker to keep order throughout Question Period.