

THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

WELCOME
TO THE
HOUSE

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY



PROVINCE OF
BRITISH COLUMBIA

IN VICTORIA

Opened in 1898, the grand and historic British Columbia Parliament Buildings stand at the heart of BC's capital city, Victoria.

In these 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.

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OUR SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

BC's system of government is based on Great Britain's and has a long and honourable history dating back more than 800 years.

Under this system, one MLA is elected from each of 79 constituencies or ridings across the province. Candidates are usually members of an organized political party, but may also run for election as independents.

■ THE GOVERNING PARTY

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 CABINET

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 government ministries (such as the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Health).

Together, the Premier and the ministers are known as the Executive Council or Cabinet. Cabinet ministers are directly answerable to the Legislative Assembly and must maintain the confidence – the support – of a majority of the elected members. They are also responsible for proposing new laws, known as bills.

■ THE OPPOSITION

The opposition consists of elected members who do not belong to the governing party. The primary role of the official opposition,

as well as other smaller opposition parties and independent MLAs, is to question government actions, present alternatives to government positions and provide the option of an alternative government.

SHADOW CABINET

The official opposition enjoys privileges and duties well established by tradition. It holds an important role—in the Legislative Assembly and—contributes to the overall effectiveness of parliament by monitoring the Cabinet and encouraging the government to—act—prudently.

■ THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Together, MLAs from the governing party and the opposition make up the BC Legislative Assembly.

The primary function of the Legislative Assembly is to make laws.

When the House is sitting, MLAs are responsible for studying and debating the bills put before them. It is their job to explore all arguments for and against each proposed law and to consider the views and concerns of British Columbians before deciding to support or reject the bill. If the majority of MLAs support a bill, it will eventually become an Act of the Assembly (otherwise known as a law).

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 “Estimates” – the money requested by government ministries each spring to fund programs and pay staff for the coming year. This is called **granting supply**.



DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The Canadian Constitution sets out how responsibilities are divided between the federal government of Canada and provincial/territorial governments.

In general, the federal government passes laws and takes major responsibility for policies and activities — such as national defense and citizenship — that affect all of Canada. Provincial and territorial governments look after such activities as education, health care and highways, and pass laws that affect only the people of their province or territory.

A third level of government — municipal — is responsible for such things as policing, fire fighting, snow removal and recycling programs, and for passing laws (called by-laws) that affect the local community

KEY WORDS

THE HOUSE: Another name for the Legislative Assembly.

Although MLAs work year round in their home ridings and on parliamentary committees, the House “sits” — is in session — only part of the year, usually February through May and October and November.

SITTING: Daily meeting of the Legislative Assembly — for example, Monday afternoon or Tuesday morning.

SESSION: A series of sittings of the Legislative Assembly during a parliament.

PARLIAMENT: Refers both to the period between general elections (for example, the six legislative sessions between 2001 and 2005 made up BC’s 37th Parliament), and to elected assemblies.

■ THE QUEEN AND THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

Canada's system of Government is a constitutional monarchy. It is a parliamentary system of government based on the British model. Canada is a federation made up of ten provinces and three territories.

The British Monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, is the constitutional head of state of Canada and is represented in Canada by the Governor General. Lieutenant Governors are the Queen's representatives in each province and are appointed by the Governor General in Council (federal government). The Lieutenant Governor's approval (called the Royal Assent) is needed for a bill to become law.

At the beginning of each new session of the Legislative Assembly, the Lieutenant Governor also opens the session by reading the Speech from the Throne, which announces the government's plans for that session. He or she also prorogues (closes) each session, and dissolves the Legislative Assembly prior to an election.

■ OFFICERS OF THE HOUSE

- The **Speaker** is an MLA elected by the other members of the Legislative Assembly to oversee debates and make sure the House follows established rules of behaviour and procedure. The Speaker is neutral and only votes to break a tie.

DID YOU KNOW...

In 1898, the Speech from the Throne – read by Lieutenant Governor Thomas McInnes – expressed the hope that the “vast discoveries of gold in the Yukon” would stimulate the BC economy.

They did.

Tens of thousands of miners passed through British Columbia on their way to the Klondike.

The Speaker is also responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the Legislative Assembly, including the Legislative Library, security and Hansard (Hansard is the official written record of every word said in the House; since 1991, debates are also broadcast by Hansard Television), and for representing the House on all ceremonial or formal occasions.

- The **Clerk of the House** is the senior permanent officer of the Legislative Assembly. Non-partisan (no bias for or against any political party), the Clerk is responsible for maintaining all official House documents, for providing advice on parliamentary procedure to the Speaker and other MLAs as required, and for administering the various departments of the Assembly on the Speaker's behalf. The Clerk of the House is assisted by a number of Clerks Assistant.

- The **Sergeant-at-Arms** is responsible for enforcing the Speaker's orders when necessary and ensuring the security of the Legislative Chamber and surrounding buildings. The Sergeant-at-Arms is also responsible for the care and custody of the Mace – the symbol of the Speaker's authority within the House.

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

The Speaker has been part of the British parliamentary system since 1377.

In the beginning, the Speaker was responsible for carrying messages, often complaints or grievances, from the people's representatives to the King or Queen. Sometimes the monarch was not entirely pleased with the messages from parliament, and as many as nine Speakers literally lost their heads.

This rather bloody and dangerous past explains why a Speaker elected today will pretend to be reluctant to take the Speaker's Chair and must be dragged to the front of the Legislative Chamber.

A DAY IN THE HOUSE

■ OPENING CEREMONIES

At the start of each day of the Legislative Assembly, the Speaker, dressed in ceremonial costume (including tricorn hat and black silk robe), will enter the Legislative Chamber escorted by the Sergeant-at-Arms, who carries the Mace. The Speaker is followed by the Clerk of the House and the Clerks Assistant.

Once the Sergeant-at-Arms places the Mace on the Clerk's Table – located in the centre of the Chamber, below the Speaker's chair and between the desks of the members of the government (on the Speaker's right) and the members of the opposition (on the Speaker's left) – the meeting may begin.



DID YOU KNOW...

Invented in the middle ages, the Mace was once a vicious and highly effective weapon.

Many centuries ago, the Sergeant-at-Arms would employ the Mace to protect the Speaker from the more excitable Members of Parliament.

Today, however, the Mace is used for more peaceful and purely symbolic purposes: the House cannot meet unless the Mace rests upon the Clerk's Table.

The current Mace is BC's third since it became a province of Canada in 1871. It was entirely handmade by Jefferies and Company, Victoria silversmiths, from native BC silver.

It is plated with 24 carat gold and weighs 11 pounds.

■ ROUTINE BUSINESS

A typical day in the House will involve a number of “Routine Business” activities. These include:

■ INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

All proposed laws must first be introduced and explained to the House by an MLA.

■ TWO-MINUTE STATEMENTS

Up to six private members may make a two minute statement on topics of their choice.

■ ORAL QUESTIONS

The highlight of the House day is **Oral Questions** – an intense 30 minutes every Monday to Thursday afternoon while the Legislative Assembly is in session.

This is the time for MLAs – particularly members of the opposition – to question the Premier and Cabinet ministers directly about government plans and activities. Often both heated and noisy, it is up to the Speaker to maintain order throughout the question period.

■ PETITIONS

MLAs may present petitions on behalf of people in their riding (called constituents), asking government to take action on a particular issue – such as a much-needed new road or road repair.

DID YOU KNOW...

Following British tradition, the government side of the House is separated from the opposition side by a distance of two sword lengths.

Originally meant to ensure the continued good health of MLAs should a debate get particularly heated, sword fights are now rare. In fact, no weapons at all are allowed in the House today.



■ COMMITTEE REPORTS

There are a number of select standing (permanent) committees authorized by the Legislative Assembly to investigate and report on social and economic issues of importance to British Columbians, such as finance or Aboriginal affairs, health or education, for the duration of the session.

Occasionally, the Legislative Assembly also sets up what are called “special” committees to look closely at a single, specific issue. A special committee ceases to exist after it has completed its investigation and presented its final report to the House.

■ ORDERS OF THE DAY

The remainder of a typical day in the House is taken up with “Orders of the Day”, which may include debates and votes related to proposed new legislation and any other business MLAs may move (make a motion) to introduce for the consideration of the House.

MOTION

A motion is a formal proposal made by an MLA, requesting the House to do something, or to order something to be done, or to express an opinion on a particular topic.

An MLA must first make a motion before any discussion or debate can begin. Once the debate is finished, the House will vote on the motion.



HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW

■ BILLS

Most bills are introduced to the Legislative Assembly by cabinet ministers and are called **public bills**. A bill introduced by an MLA who is not a cabinet minister is known as a **public bill in the hands of a private member**. A bill introduced by an MLA on behalf of a person or group outside the Legislative Assembly is called a **private bill**.

All bills must pass through three “readings” – as well as an in-depth study by the Committee of the Whole House – before becoming law. These stages are designed to make sure that MLAs and members of the public alike have the time and opportunity to examine each bill and suggest changes or improvements.

DID YOU KNOW...

In 1898, 80 bills were introduced and 65 were passed.

Bill 52, the Franchise Extension Act, 1898 – which proposed to give the vote to women in provincial elections – was one of the 15 bills that did not make it into law.

■ FIRST READING

At the first reading, the bill’s sponsor introduces the proposed law and explains its purpose. MLAs do not discuss the bill’s merits at this point, but simply vote on whether to accept it for future debate. If they vote yes, the bill is assigned a number, printed and scheduled for second reading – usually a few days later to give MLAs time to study it.

■ SECOND READING

During second reading, MLAs debate the bill’s general principles and goals. After the debate,

they vote on whether the bill will proceed to the next step: study by the Committee of the Whole House.

■ COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE HOUSE

All MLAs are members of the Committee of the Whole House.

In the Committee of the Whole, MLAs study each section of each proposed bill. They may ask the bill's sponsor detailed questions about each section's meaning and purpose, and may decide to amend (change) the bill in some areas. Depending on the bill, the committee stage may last anywhere from a few days to several weeks.

When the committee has finished its debate and proposed amendments (if any), the members will vote to "report" the bill back to the House. Once this happens, no further changes can be made to the bill unless the House votes to send the bill back to the Committee for a second review (but this is very rare).

■ THIRD READING

During third reading, MLAs may choose once again to debate the bill before a final vote. If the bill passes third reading, the Speaker will declare it to be an Act.

■ ROYAL ASSENT

The Lieutenant Governor will come to the Legislative Chamber to give the new Act Royal Assent (the Queen's official approval) – and what started as a bill is now a law of the Province of British Columbia.

PROCLAMATION

Most Acts come into force immediately after Royal Assent. Others, however, will contain a special proclamation section that sets a different date for the Act to come into force. This gives the people affected by the law more time to prepare for the change.

VISITING THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

WE WELCOME VISITORS. Free tours of the BC 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:

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250-387-8669 phone
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For information on visiting the Parliament Buildings, please contact:

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





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