



Budget Day Traditions in British Columbia

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Budget day is an important part of the political and legislative process in British Columbia. The day each year that government introduces financial plans for the forthcoming fiscal year is a British parliamentary practice, with origins dating back to the period of the Norman Conquest.

Traditionally, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer carries the budget speech every spring from 11 Downing Street to the Houses of Parliament before delivering an address on the floor of the House of Commons. Budget day in BC varies slightly from practices in the United Kingdom and comprises a unique combination of laws, parliamentary practice, and tradition.

Prior to 2001, there was no fixed date for provincial budget day, which usually took place during the winter. Since 2001, however, an amendment to the *Budget Transparency and Accountability Act* requires that the budget be released on the third Tuesday of every February, one week after the opening of the spring session of the Legislative Assembly. The delivery of the budget occurs after the Speech from the Throne.

Although budget day takes place every spring, preparations begin months prior. No later than mid-September of the previous year, the Minister of Finance is required to prepare a budget consultation paper in accordance with the *Budget Transparency and Accountability Act*. This paper guides the work of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services which consults the public on the priorities which should form the basis of the upcoming provincial budget. This committee, composed of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) from all parties, conducts consultations on the contents of the paper with stakeholders from across the province. The committee prepares a report including its recommendations which must be completed by November 15.

Budget day is often accompanied by intense media attention and fanfare. Beginning early in the morning of budget day, reporters, business leaders and stakeholders, and government officials gather at a designated venue known as the budget “lock-up.” At the “lock-up,” reporters and stakeholders have the opportunity to preview the budget, examine supplementary documents, and pose questions to the Finance Minister and government officials prior to the public release of the budget. Strict rules are in effect during the “lock-up.” For example, the use of cell phones is prohibited, and no information can be disseminated to outside sources until the Minister of Finance rises in the House to officially deliver the budget address. Reporters and stakeholders are also separated during “lock-up” and are sometimes given varying types or amounts of budget documentation.

The provincial budget is typically released on the afternoon of budget day. The Minister of Finance rises in the Legislative Assembly, presents the budget documents and tables a copy of the Main Estimates document for later referral to the Committee of Supply. Following this, the Minister delivers the budget speech, which typically consists of an assessment of the province’s financial situation and an overview of the government’s spending policies for the forthcoming year. The Minister of Finance is permitted up to two hours to deliver the address in accordance with the

Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. The budget address can also be read from a prepared speech, a rare occurrence in the House where MLAs are generally expected to speak from memory or notes.

One budget day tradition unique to Canadian parliamentary practice is the wearing of new or special shoes by the Finance Minister. This practice began accidentally in 1966 when federal Liberal Finance Minister Mitchell Sharp, mistakenly believing this was the tradition at the time, wore a new pair of shoes to deliver the budget. It is not known when the practice first started in BC, but Finance Minister Elizabeth Cull donned a new pair of shoes as early as 1994 to deliver that year's budget. Since then, the unveiling of a Finance Minister's new shoes has become a popular tradition. For instance, Liberal Minister of Finance Carole Taylor wore green-coloured shoes to deliver the 2008 "green" budget. Even the act of not donning new footwear attracts media attention. Rather than buy new shoes of his own for 2009 budget day, Finance Minister Colin Hansen opted to donate money to the Salvation Army to buy shoes for disadvantaged children.

The budget debate officially begins after the budget address and the Finance Minister moves, "That the Speaker do now leave the chair for the House to go into Committee of Supply." The Standing Orders define the maximum time limits permitted for responses to budget address and subsequent debate. The Leader of the Official Opposition or other designated Member such as the Opposition finance critic is allotted a maximum of two hours to critique the budget and to offer alternative plans; individual MLAs are then allowed up to thirty minutes each for debate. Overall, the budget debate must be held on at least eight sittings. Amendments to the budget are permitted after the fourth day, but the entire time permitted for budget debate cannot exceed six sitting days. On the sixth day, the Speaker may interrupt debate at least thirty minutes before the ordinary adjournment and call a vote to pass the budget. By tradition, this vote may be treated as a vote of confidence. If the vote is lost, the government could be said to have lost the confidence of the Legislative Assembly and may be expected to resign. If the vote passes, the Legislative Assembly resolves itself into the Committee of Supply in order to consider the detailed Ministry budgets, known as "estimates".

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