

How a Bill Becomes Law



In British Columbia's grand and historic Parliament Buildings, our elected representatives – called Members of the Legislative Assembly or MLAs – meet to shape the future of our province by debating and passing the laws that govern British Columbians.

British Columbia is divided into 85 constituencies or ridings. One MLA is elected from each riding to speak on behalf of the people who live there.

Make Laws

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

The Legislative Assembly does not, however, actually *write* the laws. Draft laws (known as bills) are prepared and written outside the House, generally by the government ministry proposing them.

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

Bills

Bills fall into two categories: public bills and private bills.

A public bill applies to the entire province. The law that sets the voting age, for example, started as a public bill, as did the law that determines the age when someone in British Columbia can drive a car.

Most public bills are introduced to the Legislative Assembly by Cabinet ministers. Only government bills can require the spending of public money (our tax dollars) or impose a new tax and 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.

A public 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. Private bills generally deal with a specific problem affecting that person or group.

Readings

All bills must pass through three “readings” and an in-depth study by the Committee of the Whole House before becoming law.

Except in urgent cases, these stages occur on different days to make sure that MLAs and members of the public have the time and opportunity to examine each bill and suggest changes or improvements.

THE HOUSE

Another name for the Legislative Assembly is the House.

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 from February through May and again in October and November.

■ First Reading

At the first reading, the bill's sponsor introduces the proposed bill 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 scheduled for second reading – to give MLAs time to study it.

■ Second Reading

During second reading, MLAs debate the bill's general principles and goals, but do not yet discuss specific sections. If a bill is complex or contentious, second reading may last for several days.

Once the debate is over, MLAs vote on whether the bill will proceed to the next step. The vote represents the House's opinion of the bill in general – some MLAs may vote in favour of sending it forward even though they do not entirely agree with the contents. They know that at the next stage, when the bill goes before the Committee of the Whole House, they will be able to propose changes, known as amendments.

DID YOU KNOW...

B.C.'s system of government is based on Great Britain's, which dates back nearly 800 years. Many of B.C.'s parliamentary procedures also date back to that time.

Bills go through “readings” because, long before the printing press was in general use, handwritten bills were read aloud to the members of the British Parliament. The term continues today.

■ Committee of the Whole House

All MLAs are members of the Committee of the Whole House, responsible for examining each section of the bill. The committee members may ask the bill's sponsor detailed questions about each section's meaning and purpose. The committee may also decide to amend the bill. Depending on the bill, the committee stage can take anywhere from a few days to several weeks.

When the Committee of the Whole House has finished its debate and passed any amendments, the MLAs vote to "report" the bill back to the House. Once this is done, 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 rarely happens.

■ Third Reading

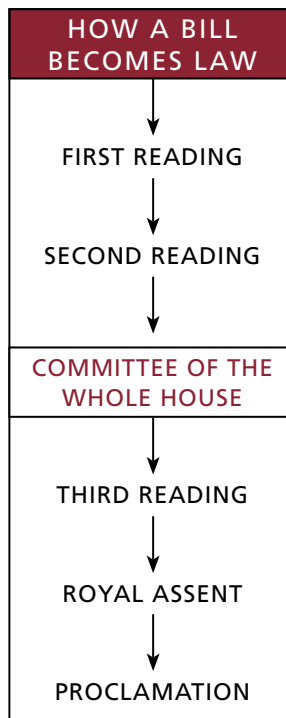
During third reading, MLAs may choose once again to debate the bill before taking a final vote. If the bill passes third reading, the Speaker will declare it to be an Act.

■ Royal Assent

The Lieutenant Governor comes to the Legislative Chamber to give Royal Assent (the Queen's official approval), to the new Act. 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, 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 British Columbia's Parliament Buildings are available Monday through Friday throughout the year, and seven days a week 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. Please note that the galleries are often full during Question Period – the 30-minute period every Monday to Thursday when MLAs ask questions about government activities.

For further details, visit www.leg.bc.ca or contact:

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