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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 87 constituencies or ridings. One MLA is elected from each riding to speak on behalf of the people who live there.

Becoming an MLA

Any Canadian citizen 18 years of age or older on election day who has lived in B.C. for at least six months may be nominated as a candidate for election as an MLA.

Potential candidates fill out the nomination forms, signed by at least 75 voters, that state they are eligible for election and indicate which political party (if any) they are affiliated with. Candidates can live in one riding and run for election in another, so they must state in which riding they intend to run. They must also file a financial disclosure statement and pay a deposit.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties play an important role in the recruitment, nomination and election of MLAs. During an election, political parties issue their party platform.

Candidates who run for election as members of a particular party (rather than as independents) share similar views on issues such as health care, education, and the environment.



Elections

The Canadian Constitution requires that all provinces and territories – as well as the federal Parliament – hold a general election within five years of the last election.

However, British Columbia has fixed election dates every four years. The election process starts, when, on the advice of the Premier, the Lieutenant Governor dissolves Parliament. The “writs of election” are then issued. A 28-day campaign period begins, at the end of which voters go to the polls to choose their MLAs. Outside of fixed election dates, a provincial general election may also be called if the government loses a vote of confidence in the Legislative Assembly.

On election day, preliminary results are released to the public, but the election period is not officially over until the 50th day after the writ was issued. The Chief Electoral Officer certifies the final results and submits a list of MLAs elected in each riding to the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly. This is referred to as the “return of the writ,” and now the election process is complete.

After an official swearing-in ceremony, MLAs can take their seats in the Legislative Chamber.

Government

In our system of parliamentary democracy, governments must be supported by a majority of Members in the Legislative Assembly. Majority government results from a provincial election where one political party wins the majority of seats in the Assembly. A minority government occurs when a governing party does not win the majority of seats in an election, but is able to maintain the support of a majority of the Assembly's Members. The leader of the government is known as the Premier.

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



The Premier and the ministers together make up the Executive Council, also known as Cabinet.

Opposition

The opposition party that holds the largest number of seats in an election becomes the Official Opposition, also known as Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, which enjoys privileges and carries out duties long established by tradition. It holds an important position in the Legislative Assembly and contributes to the overall effectiveness of Parliament by monitoring the Cabinet and encouraging the government to make well-planned and appropriate decisions.

The primary role of the Official Opposition, as well as other smaller opposition parties and independent MLAs, is to question government actions and to present alternatives to existing government policies.

ONCE ELECTED

Once elected, MLAs have a number of responsibilities, both in their home ridings and in the Legislative Assembly. They take these responsibilities very seriously because what they do will ultimately affect the lives of every British Columbian in some way.

MLAs in the House

MLAs represent their constituents (people who live in their ridings) by asking questions and raising issues of concern to them during debates.

They also act for their constituents by presenting petitions on their behalf that ask government to take action on a particular issue and by introducing both public and private bills.

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

■ Make Laws

Any MLA may propose a new law (called a bill). Most bills are introduced 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. MLAs are responsible for studying and debating all bills put before them. If the majority of MLAs support a bill, it will become an Act of the Assembly, otherwise known as a law.

■ Approve Finances

MLAs are also responsible for approving taxes and for debating and voting 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.

■ Scrutinize Government

Every Monday to Thursday, MLAs participate in Question Period, an intense 30-minute period of rapid-fire questions and answers. This is the time for members of the opposition to question the Premier and Cabinet ministers directly about government plans and activities.

■ Parliamentary Committee Work

Committees are made up of MLAs from both the government and the opposition, but generally do not include either the Premier or Cabinet ministers. Most MLAs sit on at least one committee.

MLAs at Home

MLAs maintain an office year-round in their home riding to provide his or her constituents with advice, guidance and hands-on assistance in dealing with government.

When the House is not sitting, MLAs work in their constituency offices or meet with individuals, local businesses and community groups.

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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To visit the Parliament Buildings, go to www.leg.bc.ca/tours or contact:

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