

Question Period

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.

Question Period

Every Monday to Thursday, MLAs participate in Question Period, also known as "Oral Questions." It is an intense 30-minute period of rapid-fire questions from MLAs to the Premier and/or Cabinet ministers. Like all Legislative Assembly activities it is open to the media and the public, to make sure British Columbians know what their government is doing and why.



THE CABINET

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.

How Question Period Works

Question Period is considered by many to be the highlight of the day in the Legislative Assembly (also known as the House) – a time when MLAs can raise the current political concerns of the day and make their views known to the public.

Although Question Period can be loud and sometimes chaotic, with MLAs often becoming passionate and heated about particular issues, there are certain rules and procedures that must be followed.

DID YOU KNOW...

B.C.'s system of government is based on Great Britain's, which dates back nearly 800 years.

The practice of asking Cabinet ministers direct questions is a relatively new invention, however, dating back less than 300 years.

The first recorded parliamentary question was asked in the British House of Lords in 1721, when the government of the day was asked to confirm the rumour that the Chief Cashier of the government-owned South Sea Company had fled the country and been arrested in Brussels.

The Prime Minister confirmed the arrest and the Lords agreed to ask the King to order the culprit's return to England.

The Speaker and Question Period

The Speaker of the House is an MLA elected by the other members of the Legislative Assembly to carry out the Standing Orders (the House rules of parliamentary procedure and behaviour).

The Standing Orders are established to ensure debates are properly conducted and that MLAs from both government and opposition have the opportunity to participate. These rules require all MLAs to show respect for the Speaker and for each other.

THE SPEAKER AS REFEREE

During Question Period, the Speaker must work like a referee at a hockey game or soccer match – ruling some questions out of bounds and occasionally ordering an MLA off the field for bad conduct.

The job takes a great deal of skill, particularly in B.C., where our Question Period lasts only 30 minutes. The Speaker must keep MLAs on topic and quickly decide whether to allow a follow-up question.

It is also up to the Speaker to make sure that Question Period runs smoothly. He or she decides the order in which MLAs will ask their questions and how long an MLA can take to ask or answer a question – if an MLA goes on too long, the Speaker will bring the MLA to order.

If a question is not related to the activities of government, is too vague or contains unparliamentary language, the Speaker has the authority to declare it "out of order." The Speaker can ask to have it re-phrased or can simply move on to the next question.

The Speaker also has the authority to determine if the MLA who asked the question should be allowed to ask a follow-up (supplemental) question for further clarification or information. If the Speaker allows a supplemental question, the MLA must pose it right after the Cabinet minister's response, not later in Question Period.

Asking a Question

Under the Standing Orders, MLAs can only ask questions that are urgent and important, and must ask or answer questions briefly and precisely – they cannot use the time to present their own opinions or begin a back-and-forth argument. MLAs must direct their questions to the minister officially responsible for the subject – hospitals, roads or tree licences, for example. They must not ask questions about proposed new laws or government funding requests, as these are handled through regular debates. Questions about matters either currently before a court or waiting to go to court are also not allowed, because judges and juries need to remain impartial and a public discussion could influence their decisions.

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

If a question requires a long, detailed or highly technical answer from the government, the MLA must ask it as a written rather than an oral question.

Written questions are printed in the Legislative Assembly's daily agenda, called the Orders of the Day.

A written question will stay on the Orders of the Day until the Cabinet minister responds or until the legislative session ends. If a question remains unanswered, the MLA can re-submit the question at the start of the next session.

Providing an Answer

Cabinet ministers do not know in advance what oral questions they will be asked during Question Period.

When a Cabinet minister is asked a question, he or she may:

- answer the question,
- take the question “on notice,” which means the minister will answer it at a later date when he or she has the right facts and figures,
- allow another member of Cabinet to answer in his or her place, or
- choose not to respond.

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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