

The Role of Government and Opposition

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.

The Legislative Assembly

B.C.'s system of government is based on Great Britain's, which dates back nearly 800 years. Under this system, MLAs elected from each riding make up the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia.

The primary function of the Legislative Assembly (also known as the House) is to make laws. When the House is sitting, MLAs are responsible for studying and debating all proposed new laws (called bills) and considering the views and concerns of British Columbians before deciding to support or reject the bill.

It is also the job of the MLAs to examine the activities of Cabinet ministers and their ministries, to approve taxes, and to debate and vote on government funding requests.

DID YOU KNOW...

The House "sits" – is in session – only part of the year. When the House is not in session, MLAs work in their home ridings, advising and helping their constituents in dealing with government programs and services.

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 to work as ministers of the Crown. They are in charge of the day-to-day activities of government ministries (such as the Ministry of Health or Ministry of Finance) and are responsible for proposing new laws.

Together, the Premier and the ministers make up the Executive Council, often referred to as Cabinet.

DID YOU KNOW...

MLAs who are not in Cabinet are called private members or "backbenchers," even though they actually sit on chairs. That's because our system was first established in Great Britain, where all members sat on benches but only Cabinet members got to sit in front. Everyone else had to sit on the benches in the back.

Opposition

The opposition party that holds the largest number of seats in an election becomes the Official Opposition, also known as His 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.

The Opposition Leader usually sets up what is called a "Shadow Cabinet" – members of the opposition assigned to watch specific ministries very closely and to represent the opposition party's position in debates about that ministry's plans and activities.

Holding Government Accountable

The opposition is key to making sure government remains accountable to the people of B.C. Opposition MLAs have a number of opportunities to question the government and comment on its actions, including:

■ The Speech from the Throne

Written by the government, the Speech from the Throne is read by the Lieutenant Governor at the opening of every new legislative session. The speech outlines the government's plans for the session – to introduce a tax cut, for example, or to increase spending on hospitals. MLAs then have up to six days to debate the government's plans and priorities.

■ The Budget

By law, the government must introduce the provincial budget on the fourth Tuesday of February (although this date may change if there has been a recent provincial election). Read by the Minister of Finance, the budget speech outlines how much the government's new and ongoing programs will cost and where it will get the money to pay for them (from taxes, for example, or other revenue). MLAs then have six days to debate the budget and question the costs and figures. Next, the government's figures and spending plans are reviewed by a committee.

■ Question Period

Question Period is an intense, 30-minute period every Monday to Thursday, when MLAs question the Premier and Cabinet ministers about government plans and activities. Often both heated and noisy, it is up to the Speaker to keep order through Question Period.

■ Debates on Bills

Any MLA may propose a new law (called a bill), but most are introduced by Cabinet ministers. All bills must pass through three “readings” – as well as an in-depth study by the Committee of the Whole House – before becoming law. This gives MLAs the time to examine each bill closely and suggest changes or improvements. If the majority of MLAs support a bill, it will eventually become an Act of the Assembly, otherwise known as a law.

Maintaining Confidence

The government must be able to maintain the support and confidence of a majority of members to remain in office. This is known as the “confidence convention.” A government which maintains the confidence of the Assembly is able to secure the Assembly’s approval of new laws and the expenditure of public funds.

If a government is no longer able to maintain the confidence of a majority of Members, it is expected to resign or seek the dissolution of the Legislative Assembly in order for a provincial election to be held.

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.

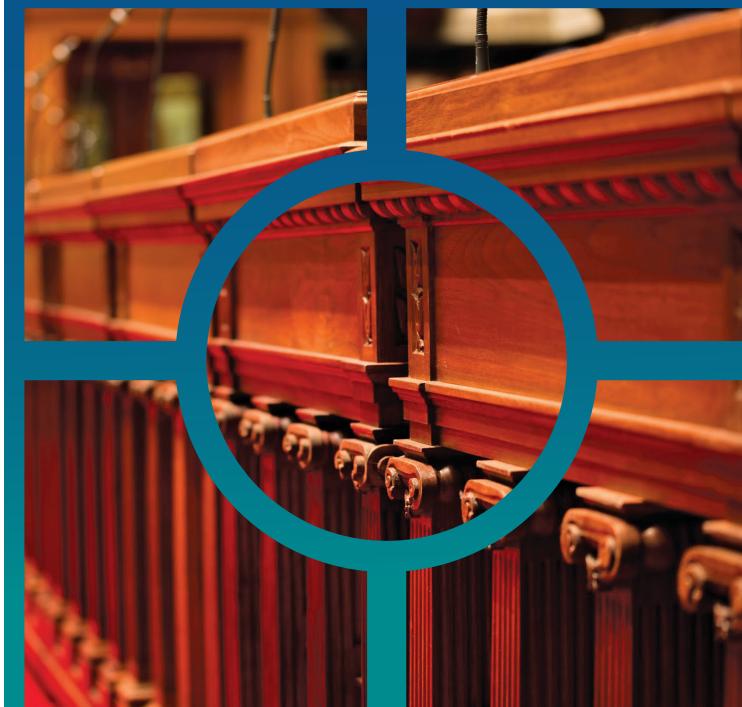
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