

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 85 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

The political party that wins the largest number of seats in a general election forms the governing party. Its leader becomes the head of the provincial government and 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.

Together, the Premier and the ministers make up the Executive Council, often referred to as the 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 party that wins the second 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.

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 third Tuesday of February. 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 cannot spend any public funds or make new laws without the Legislative Assembly approval.

After debates on the Speech from the Throne and the budget are completed, MLAs vote on whether or not to approve the government’s plans and expenditures.

If a majority of elected members do not support the plans announced in the Speech from the Throne, the amounts outlined in the budget or certain designated bills, the government has lost the confidence – the support – of the House, and a provincial election may be called.

MINORITY GOVERNMENT

If the governing party holds more than 51 percent of the seats in the Legislative Assembly, they have a “majority” government. If a party wins less than that but more than any other single party they form a “minority” government.

There have been three minority governments in British Columbia. The last was in 1952.

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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