

Speaker of the House

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 Speaker

The Speaker is the key figure in the Legislative Assembly (also known as the House), a position open to all MLAs except the Premier and Cabinet ministers. The Speaker is elected by secret ballot immediately after each general election, or when a Speaker dies or retires. It is the first order of business for a new Parliament.

THE NEED FOR A SPEAKER

The primary role of the opposition is to question government actions and present alternatives to government positions. While this kind of adversarial system is a cornerstone of democracy, debates can – like a hockey game – sometimes get heated.

The Speaker serves as a very necessary “referee,” making sure all MLAs play by the rules.

The Speaker is chosen to oversee debates and make sure the House follows established rules of behavior and parliamentary procedure.

The Speaker is responsible for making sure that all MLAs are treated fairly and impartially no matter what party they belong to. The Speaker is neutral and votes only to break a tie.

OPENING CEREMONIES

At the start of each day, the Speaker, dressed in black silk robes and a three-cornered hat called a tricorne, enters the Legislative Chamber escorted by the Sergeant-at-Arms and the Clerks of the House. The Sergeant-at-Arms carries a ceremonial staff called a mace, which is the symbol of the Speaker's authority in the House.

The Speaker as a Presiding Officer

One of the Speaker's most difficult tasks is balancing the right of the majority to conduct business with the right of the minority to be heard.

It is the Speaker's job to enforce the Standing Orders – the House rules of parliamentary procedure – established to make sure debates in the House are carried out properly and that all MLAs have the opportunity to participate.

These rules require all MLAs to show respect for the Speaker and for each other. For example, members must not speak until “recognized” by the Speaker, nor interrupt when the Speaker is speaking.

To discourage personal attacks, MLAs must direct their speeches or questions to the Speaker, not to each other. They must also use the name of another MLA's riding – “the Member for Victoria,” for example – rather than the MLA's actual name.

If an MLA does not obey the rules and makes unparliamentary remarks, the Speaker will ask the member to withdraw those remarks. If the member ignores the Speaker's instructions, the Speaker will order the MLA to withdraw from the House for the day.

For more serious offences, the Speaker can “name” the MLA. This means the MLA will be suspended from the House (without pay) for one to 15 days.



DID YOU KNOW...

The Speaker's impressive carved oak chair is located on a platform at the south end of the Legislative Chamber.

The Speaker's Chair is also referred to as a Throne and is used by the Lieutenant Governor when reading the Speech from the Throne at the start of each session.

The Speaker as Administrator

The Speaker is also responsible for representing the House on all ceremonial and formal occasions and for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the various branches of the Legislative Assembly in the Parliament Buildings and the Legislative Precinct.

The Speaker also acts as Chair of the Legislative Assembly Management Committee. Made up of MLAs from both government and opposition, the Management Committee determines what services and how much funding members receive.

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

The Speaker has been part of the British parliamentary system since 1377.

In the beginning, the Speaker was responsible for carrying messages from Parliament – often complaints or grievances – to the King or Queen. Sometimes the monarch was not pleased with the messages and as many as nine Speakers met a violent death.

This rather bloody and dangerous past explains why Speakers elected today pretend to be reluctant to take the Speaker's Chair and must be dragged by their colleagues to the front of the Legislative Chamber.

The Speaker as MLA

The Speaker continues to serve as an MLA even after being elected to the position of Speaker.

Even though the Speaker is neutral and must avoid taking public positions on politically controversial matters, the Speaker still listens to the people of his or her riding and represents their interests in the House by making private recommendations to government on issues that affect them.

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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