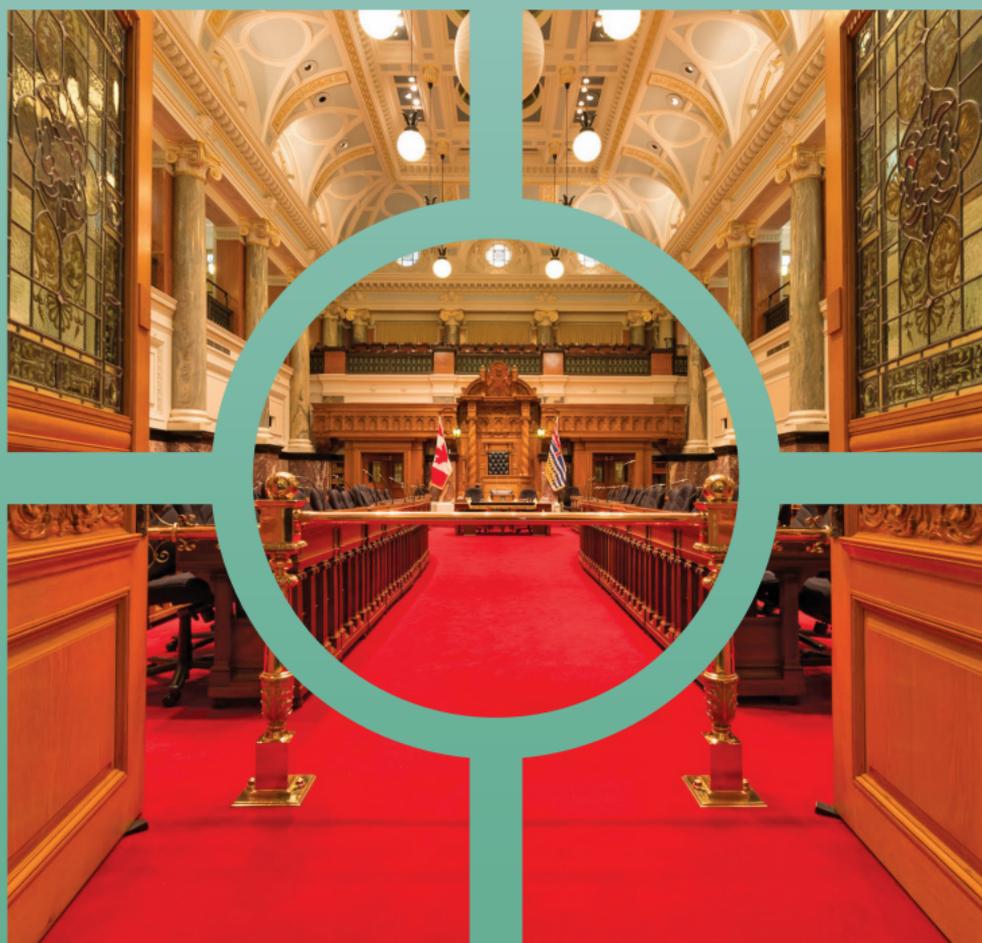


Welcome to the House



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
of BRITISH COLUMBIA

Welcome to the House



IN VICTORIA

Opened in 1898, British Columbia's grand and historic Parliament Buildings stand in the heart of B.C.'s capital city, Victoria.

The Parliament Buildings and surrounding areas are located in the traditional territories of the Lekwungen (pronounced Le-KWUNG-en) people. Now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations, these Coast Salish people have a rich culture and history dating back thousands of years.

In these 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.

Contents

OUR PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM	2
The Crown	
The Government	
The Opposition	
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA	5
The Legislative Assembly	
Officers of the House	
Speaker	
Clerk of the House	
Sergeant-at-Arms	
A DAY IN THE HOUSE	7
Opening Ceremonies	
Routine Business	
HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW	11
Bills	
First Reading	
Second Reading	
Committee of the Whole House	
Third Reading	
Royal Assent	
Proclamation	
VISITING THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY	13

DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The Canadian Constitution sets out how responsibilities are divided between the federal government of Canada and the governments of Canada's provinces and territories.

In general, the federal government passes laws and takes major responsibility for policies and activities – such as national defense and citizenship – that affect all of Canada. Provincial and territorial governments look after such activities as education, health care and highways, and pass laws that affect only the people of their province or territory.

A third level of government – municipal – is responsible for such things as policing, firefighting, snow removal and recycling programs, and for passing laws (called bylaws) that affect cities and local communities.

Our Parliamentary System

■ The Crown

Canada is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government based on Great Britain's which has a long and honourable history dating back nearly 800 years. King Charles III is Canada's head of state. He is represented in B.C. by the Lieutenant Governor. The Lieutenant Governor reads the Speech from the Throne at the start of a new legislative session, gives Royal Assent to bills (meaning they can then become law), and dissolves the Legislative Assembly prior to an election.

■ The Government

B.C. 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 political party that obtains the support of a majority of the MLAs 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 their 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 or Cabinet. Cabinet ministers answer directly to the Legislative Assembly and must maintain the confidence – the support of – a majority of the elected members.

■ The Opposition

The opposition consists of elected members who do not belong to the governing party. The opposition party that wins 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.

SHADOW CABINET

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.



Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

■ The Legislative Assembly

The Legislative Assembly is made up of the Lieutenant Governor and all MLAs from both the government and opposition. The primary function of the B.C. Legislative Assembly is to make laws.

When the House is sitting, MLAs are responsible for studying and debating all bills put before them. It is their job to explore arguments for and against each bill and to consider the views and concerns of British Columbians before deciding to support or reject it. If the majority of MLAs support a bill, it will eventually become an Act of the Assembly, otherwise known as a law.

It is also the job of the MLAs to examine the activities of Cabinet ministers and their ministries. They 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.

FUNCTION OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

ASK QUESTIONS

APPROVE FINANCES

MAKE LAWS

■ Officers of the House

– The **Speaker** is an MLA selected by the other Members of the Legislative Assembly to oversee debates and make sure the House follows established rules of behaviour and parliamentary procedure. The Speaker is neutral and only votes to break a tie.

The Speaker represents the House on all ceremonial or formal occasions and is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the various branches of the Legislative Assembly.

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 **Clerk of the House** is the senior permanent officer of the Legislative Assembly. The Clerk, assisted by a number of Clerks Assistant, maintains all official House documents, provides advice on parliamentary procedure to the Speaker and all MLAs, and administers the various departments of the Assembly on the Speaker's behalf. The Clerk of the House is non-partisan, having no bias for or against any political party.
- The **Sergeant-at-Arms** is responsible for enforcing the Speaker's orders, ensuring the security of the Legislative Chamber and surrounding buildings. The Sergeant-at-Arms is also responsible for the care and custody of a ceremonial staff called a mace – the symbol of the Speaker's authority within the House.

DID YOU KNOW...

Invented in the middle ages, the mace was once a vicious and highly effective weapon. Many centuries ago in Britain, the Sergeant-at-Arms would employ the mace to protect the Speaker from the more excitable members of Parliament.

Today, however, the mace is used for peaceful and purely symbolic purposes – the House cannot meet unless the mace is resting on the Clerk's Table.

The mace used today is the third one since B.C. became a province of Canada in 1871. It was entirely handmade by Victoria silversmiths Jefferies and Company, from silver found in B.C. The mace is plated with 24 carat gold and weighs 11 pounds.

A Day in the House

■ 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, who carries the mace. The Speaker is followed by the Clerk of the House and the Clerks Assistant.

Once the Sergeant-at-Arms places the mace on the Clerk's Table – located in the centre of the Chamber below the Speaker's chair – the meeting may begin.

■ Routine Business

A typical day in the House will involve a number of "Routine Business" activities. These include:

– Introduction of Bills

Bills are proposed new laws. MLAs introduce bills to the House for study and debate.

– Statements by Members

This is the time when up to six private members (MLAs who are not in Cabinet) may make a two-minute statement on topics of their choice.

– Question Period

The 30-minute period every Monday to Thursday when MLAs – particularly members of the opposition – question the Premier and Cabinet ministers directly about government plans and activities. Often both heated and noisy, it is up to the Speaker to maintain order throughout Question Period.

DID YOU KNOW...

Following a centuries old British tradition from a time when Members of Parliament wore a sword as part of their daily dress, the government side of the House is separated from the opposition side by a distance of two sword lengths.

Originally meant to ensure the continued good health of MLAs should a debate get particularly heated and result in a sword fight, this distance is now purely symbolic.

– Petitions

MLAs may present petitions on behalf of their constituents (people who live in their riding), asking government to take action on a particular issue.

– Parliamentary Committee Reports

Select Standing and Special Committees are authorized by the Legislative Assembly to investigate and report on a particular aspect of government operations or a specific issue. Once the committee members have considered the evidence they have gathered, they will write a report and deliver it to the House.



– Orders of the Day

The remainder of a typical day in the House is taken up with “Orders of the Day,” and might include debates and votes related to proposed new legislation and other business MLAs move (make a motion) to introduce for the consideration of the House.

MOTION

A motion is a formal proposal made by an MLA requesting that the House take a particular action, order something to be done, or express an opinion on a specific topic. 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.

How a Bill Becomes Law

■ Bills

Most bills are introduced to the Legislative Assembly by Cabinet ministers. Bills that apply to the entire province 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.

All bills must pass through three “readings” and an in-depth study by the Committee of the Whole House before becoming law. Except in urgent cases, these stages occur on different days to make sure that MLAs and members of the public have the time and opportunity to examine each bill and suggest changes or improvements.

■ First Reading

At the first reading, the bill’s sponsor introduces the proposed bill and explains its purpose. MLAs do not discuss the bill’s merits at this point, but simply vote on whether to accept it for future debate. If they vote yes, the bill is scheduled for second reading – to give MLAs time to study it.

■ Second Reading

During second reading, MLAs debate the bill’s general principles and goals. After the debate, they vote on whether the bill will proceed to the next step: study by the Committee of the Whole House.

■ Committee of the Whole House

All MLAs are members of the Committee of the Whole House, responsible for examining each section of the bill. The committee members may ask the bill’s sponsor detailed questions about each section’s meaning and purpose. The committee may also decide to amend the bill. Depending on the bill, the committee stage can take anywhere from a few days to several weeks.



When the Committee of the Whole House has finished its debate and passed any amendments, the MLAs vote to “report” the bill back to the House. Once this is done, no further changes can be made to the bill unless the House votes to send the bill back to the committee for a second review, but this rarely happens.

■ **ThirdReading**

During third reading, MLAs may choose once again to debate the bill before taking a final vote. If the bill passes third reading, the Speaker will declare it to be an Act.

■ **RoyalAssent**

The Lieutenant Governor comes to the Legislative Chamber to give Royal Assent (the King’s official approval) to the new Act. What started as a bill is now a law of the Province of British Columbia.

■ **Proclamation**

Most Acts come into force immediately after Royal Assent. Others, however, contain a special proclamation section that sets a different date for the Act to come into force. This gives the people affected by the law more time to prepare for the change.

DID YOU KNOW...

In 1898, the year the present Parliament Buildings were opened, 80 bills were introduced and 65 were passed.

Bill 52, the Franchise Extension Act, 1898 – which proposed to give women the right to vote in provincial elections – was one of the 15 bills that did not make it into law.

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:

Parliamentary Education Office
Parliament Buildings
Victoria BC V8V 1X4
250.387.8669
PEO@leg.bc.ca

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Victoria BC V8V 1X4
250.387.3046
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