



The Parliament of Canada — Democracy in Action

Canada's Parliament, as conceived by the Fathers of Confederation in 1867, continues to be a vibrant example of democracy in action. In Parliament, our representatives examine the top issues of the day, decide on policies and laws, and hold the government accountable for its actions.



Who Are the Players?

Canada's Parliament consists of three parts: the Queen (our Head of State), represented by the Governor General; the appointed Senate; and the elected House of Commons.

The Governor General calls Parliament together after every general election, reads the Speech from the Throne outlining the government's objectives, and approves all bills passed by the Senate and the House of Commons.

The Senate, also known as the Upper or Red Chamber, has 105 members. Senators are appointed by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister to represent regions, provinces or territories. Senators can serve until the age of 75.

The House of Commons has 301* members, who are elected to represent the people in their ridings. Our Constitution states that a Parliament cannot last longer than five years, after which a general election must be held. Members sit in the House of Commons Chamber, which is decorated in green following the tradition of the British House of Commons.

Making Canada's Laws

The Constitution authorizes Parliament to make laws in certain areas of jurisdiction, such as criminal law, defence, international trade and broadcasting.

Senators and Members of Parliament both study, debate and often amend legislative proposals or "bills."

Bills are usually proposed by the government and introduced in the House of Commons. The Senate also initiates legislation, but any bills to collect or spend public funds must originate in the Commons.

Both Houses must approve bills in identical form before they can become law. Bills become law when they receive Royal Assent, on a date specified in the bill or on a date set by Order-in-Council.

The Legislative Process

All bills normally go through a similar series of steps in both the Senate and the Commons.

Introduction	The process begins when a bill is introduced.
First Reading	The bill is “read” for the first time, without debate, and printed.
Second Reading	The principle of the bill is debated. It is then voted on and the bill is sent to a parliamentary committee.
Committee Stage	A committee hears witnesses, examines the bill clause by clause and submits a report recommending the bill be accepted as is or with amendments, or that it not proceed any further.
Report Stage	Additional amendments to the bill may be moved, debated and voted on.
Third Reading	The bill is debated a final time and voted on.
Message	Once passed, the bill is sent to the other House, where the process starts again from first reading.
Royal Assent	The Governor General or a deputy gives the bill Royal Assent.

All in a Day's Work

A Parliament is made up of one or more sessions. A session can last a few days or several years. It ends when it is prorogued by the Governor General, at the request of the Prime Minister. A Parliament comes to an end when the Prime Minister asks the Governor General to dissolve it and call a general election.

The Constitution requires Parliament to meet at least once a year. In general, Parliament sits about 27 weeks of the year. Sittings start in September and usually continue until June, with breaks to permit Parliamentarians to work in their regions or ridings, or travel on official business.

Each House meets regularly to deal with national issues and debate legislation. In addition, the Senate and the House of Commons have committees that study bills and specific issues in detail.

An agenda determines the daily order of business from the moment the Mace—representing legislative authority—is placed on the Table at the start of the day's sitting until the sitting is adjourned.

A regular sitting day always includes “routine” business. At this time, statements are made, bills introduced, petitions and committee reports presented, documents tabled and other business transacted.

Most days, the major part of the sitting is spent debating legislation proposed by the government. Time is also reserved to debate bills or motions proposed by those who are not in Cabinet, whether Senators or private Members.

Most Canadians are familiar with Question Period in the House of Commons. It is a time for the Prime Minister and Cabinet to be held accountable for government policies and activities. The Senate also has a Question Period, when Senators ask questions of the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

Order in the Chamber

At the beginning of each Parliament following a general election, a Speaker is chosen to preside over each House. The Speaker of the Senate is appointed on the advice of the Prime Minister. In the House of Commons, Members elect another Member to be their Speaker.

To ensure the orderly flow of business, the Senate and the House of Commons observe certain parliamentary rules and traditions, both written and unwritten. It is each Speaker's duty to interpret these rules impartially, to maintain order, and to defend the rights and privileges of Parliament, Senators and Members, including the right to freedom of speech.

The Speaker sits on a raised chair at one end of the Chamber. Government members sit on the right and Opposition members on the left, although if the government has a large majority, some of its members are seated on the left as well.

Working for You

Together, Senators and Members of Parliament play an active role in the legislative process, contributing their ideas and energy to create our laws. For more than 130 years, Parliamentarians have participated in the development of our democracy and shaped Canada's destiny.

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