



GUIDE  
*to the Canadian*  
HOUSE OF COMMONS

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Guide to the Canadian House of Commons

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House of Commons  
Chambre des communes

Every day, there is something in the news about the House of Commons. It may be about a bill that was passed, an issue raised in Question Period, or a statement by a Member of Parliament. Yet for all the attention the House receives, many Canadians still have questions about what happens there and the role that Members of Parliament play.

The idea behind this guide is to answer some of those questions. It explains how the House of Commons fits into Canada's parliamentary system of government. It also describes the work done in the Commons and gives a look at the day-to-day life of a Member of Parliament.

The House of Commons is a fascinating place. It is a forum where all Canadians have a direct link to the governing of the country. In the Commons Chamber, the nation's most critical issues are debated, and Members can express the views of the people they are elected to represent. By understanding how the House of Commons works, Canadians will be in a better position to judge the performance of their representatives and to see how they themselves can participate in our system of government.

Peter Milliken, M.P.  
Speaker of the House of Commons



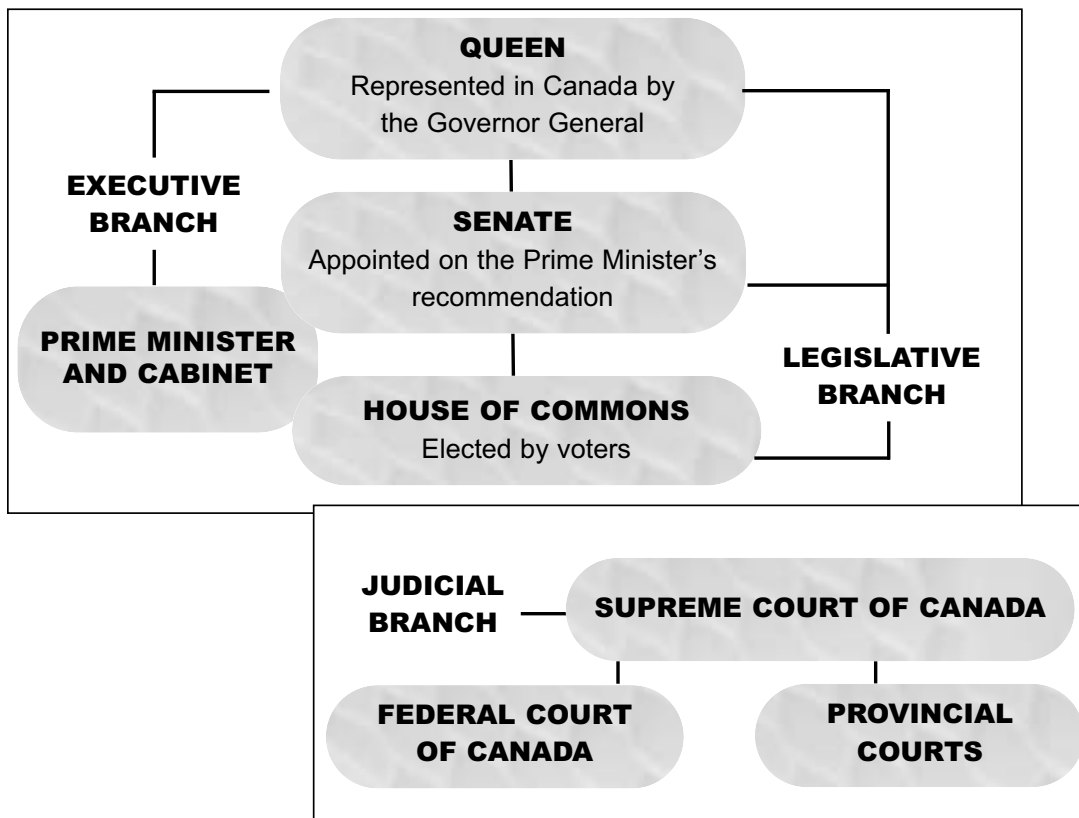
# THE CANADIAN PARLIAMENT



Our system of government is part of the reason why Canada is known around the world as a good place to live. Canada's parliamentary system is open and democratic. It offers the opportunity for people to give their input and it is designed to make sure proposals for laws are carefully considered.

Canada's Parliament consists of three parts: the Queen, the Senate and the House of Commons. They work together to make the laws for our country. The executive branch consists of the Queen, the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the departments of government. They implement the laws. The legislative branch makes the laws, and the judicial branch – which is not part of Parliament – applies them.

## CANADA'S PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM



## THE QUEEN

Canada is a constitutional monarchy. This means that the laws governing Canada recognize the Queen as the formal Head of State. All federal laws are made in the Queen's name. She also performs many important ceremonial duties when visiting Canada.

## THE GOVERNOR GENERAL



The Governor General's Standard is a symbol of the Crown's sovereignty in Canada

The Governor General is the Queen's representative in Canada. The Queen appoints the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister. The Governor General usually serves for five years. One of the most important roles of the Governor General is to ensure that Canada always has a Prime Minister. For example, if no party had a clear majority after an election, or if the Prime Minister were to die in office, the Governor General would have to choose a successor.

The Governor General acts on the advice of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The duties of the Governor General include the following: summoning, opening and ending sessions of Parliament; reading the Speech from the Throne; giving Royal Assent to bills; signing state documents; and dissolving Parliament for an election.

### DISTRIBUTION OF SENATE SEATS

AREA	SEATS
Ontario	24
Quebec	24
Maritimes	24
Nova Scotia	10
New Brunswick	10
Prince Edward Island	4
Western provinces	24
Manitoba	6
British Columbia	6
Saskatchewan	6
Alberta	6
Additional representation	9
Newfoundland and Labrador	6
Northwest Territories	1
Yukon Territory	1
Nunavut	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>105</b>

## THE SENATE

The Senate studies, amends and either rejects or approves bills passed by the House of Commons. It can also introduce its own bills, except those to spend public money or impose taxes, which must be introduced in the House of Commons. No bill can become law until it has been passed by the Senate. Senators also study major social, legal and economic issues through their committee work.

One of the duties of the Senate is to represent the interests of Canada's regions, provinces, territories and minority groups. Seats in the Senate are distributed to give each major region of the country equal representation.

The Senate has 105 members. Senators are appointed by the Governor General on the recommendation of the Prime Minister and hold office until age 75.

## THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

The House of Commons is the major law-making body in Parliament. In the Commons Chamber, Members devote most of their time to debating and voting on bills. The Chamber is also a place where Members represent constituents' views, discuss national issues and call on the government to explain its actions.

How do you become a Member of Parliament (MP)? By running in a federal election, which is held about every four years. In each of the country's 308 constituencies, or ridings, the candidate who gets the most votes is elected to the House of Commons, even if he or she gets less than half of the total votes.

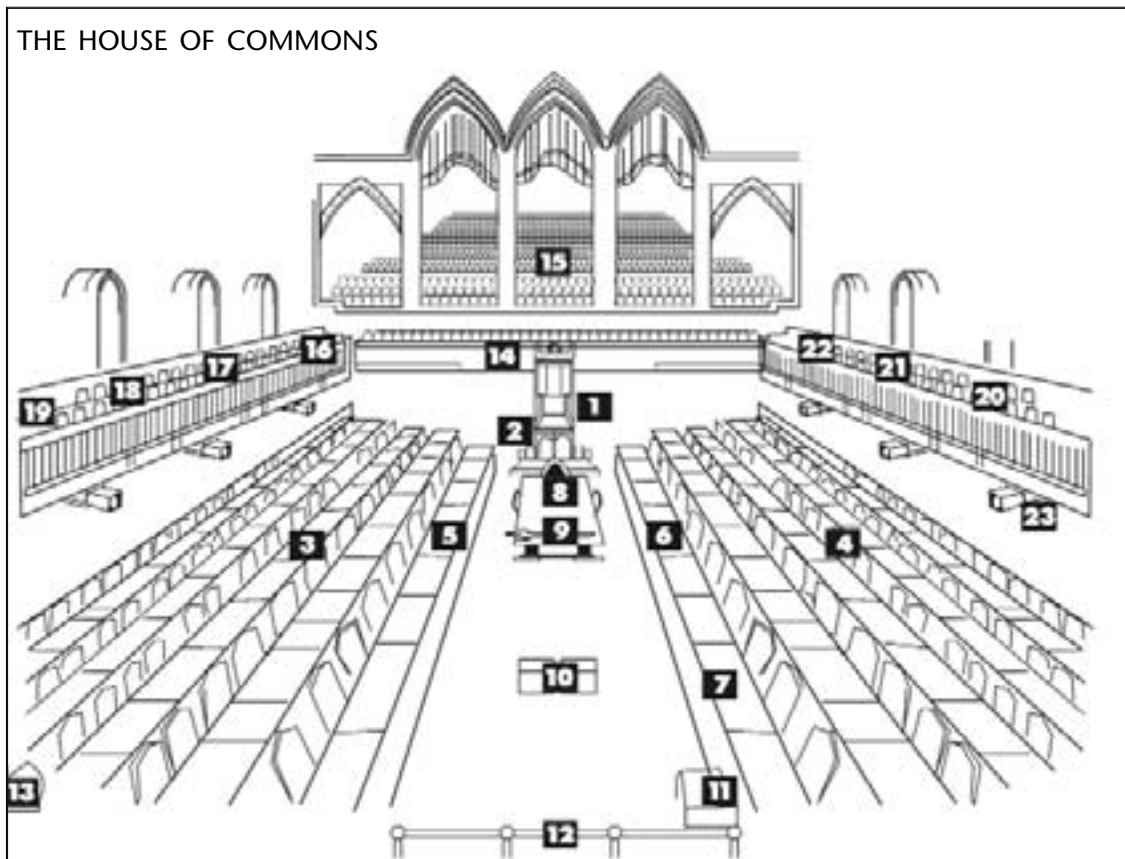
Seats in the House of Commons are distributed roughly in proportion to the population of each province and territory. In general, the more people in a province or territory, the more Members it has in the House of Commons. Every province or territory must have at least as many members in the Commons as it has in the Senate.

DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSE OF COMMONS SEATS	
AREA	SEATS
Ontario	106
Quebec	75
Nova Scotia	11
New Brunswick	10
Manitoba	14
British Columbia	36
Prince Edward Island	4
Saskatchewan	14
Alberta	28
Newfoundland and Labrador	7
Northwest Territories	1
Yukon Territory	1
Nunavut	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>308</b>



## WHO'S WHO IN THE HOUSE

When you think of Canada's Parliament, you might think of the Parliament Buildings — one of Canada's best known symbols and the place where Parliament's work is done. Parliament is a place and a process, but it is also about people, each doing a different job to make the whole system run well.



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\* Depending on the number of MPs elected from each political party, government Members may be seated on the opposite side of the Chamber with opposition Members (or vice versa).

## **THE SPEAKER**

After each general election, the Members of the House of Commons elect a Speaker from among MPs by secret ballot. The Speaker presides over the House of Commons and ensures that everyone respects its rules and traditions. The Speaker must be impartial and apply the rules to all Members equally.

The Speaker represents the Commons in dealings with the Senate and the Crown. The Speaker is also responsible for the administration of the House and its staff and has many diplomatic and social duties.

## **THE PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister is the leader of the party in power and is the Head of Government. A Prime Minister's duties include presiding over Cabinet meetings, meeting official foreign delegations to Ottawa and answering questions in the House of Commons. Since the Prime Minister is usually a Member of Parliament (two Prime Ministers who held office in the 1890s were Senators), he or she also spends time helping constituents.

## **THE CABINET**

The Prime Minister chooses the Cabinet Ministers, and the Governor General formally appoints them. Most are MPs, and there is always at least one representative from the Senate. The Prime Minister and Cabinet meet regularly to discuss and decide on important issues affecting Canada. These issues concern government spending, ideas for bills, and new policies, programs and services. Most Cabinet Ministers are in charge of a government department and they report on their department's activities to Parliament.

A key feature of Cabinet is the concept of collective responsibility, which means that all Ministers share responsibility for the administration of government and for the government's policies. They must all support a Cabinet decision. They may not agree with it, but they have to support it in public. If a Minister cannot support a decision, he or she must resign from Cabinet.

Another important feature of our parliamentary system is responsible government. This means that the government must have the support of the majority of Members in the House of Commons to stay in power. In the British tradition, if the government loses a vote on a major measure, or on any motion of non-confidence, it is expected to resign or to ask the Governor General to call a general election.

## **MINISTER OF STATE**

Sworn to the Privy Council and a member of the Cabinet, a Minister of State is assigned to assist a Cabinet Minister in a specific area within his or her portfolio. These areas often concern government priorities, such as health, infrastructure and human resources development.



## **PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY**

Parliamentary secretaries are appointed by the Prime Minister to help Cabinet Ministers. They table documents or answer questions for a Minister, participate in debates on bills, speak to committees on government policies and proposals, and serve as a link between parliamentarians and Ministers. As members of the Privy Council, parliamentary secretaries attend some Cabinet meetings as well.

## **LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION AND CRITICS**

The role of the Official Opposition is to challenge government policies, hold the government accountable for its actions and give voters an alternative in the next election. Generally, the Leader of the Opposition is the leader of the party with the second largest membership in the Commons. This person leads opposition debates and suggests changes to government legislation or alternative proposals. Each opposition party in the Commons has its own leader and appoints critics from among its members. Each critic handles a certain subject, such as health or defence. They present their party's policies on the subject and comment on government policies.

## **HOUSE LEADERS**

Each recognized party appoints one member to be its House Leader (a recognized party is one that has a minimum of 12 seats in the House of Commons). The House Leaders of all the parties meet regularly to discuss upcoming business in the Commons, how long bills will be debated and when special issues will be discussed.

## **WHIPS**

Each recognized party also has a Whip. The Whips ensure that enough party members are in the Chamber for debates and votes. Given the many responsibilities MPs have, this is not always easy. The Whips also determine which committees a party member will sit on, assign offices and seats in the House, and discipline members who break party ranks.

## **HOUSE OFFICERS**

Seated at a long table in front of the Speaker are the Clerk and other procedural officers of the House. They advise the Speaker and Members on the rules to be followed in the Commons. The Clerk is the senior official of the House of Commons Administration and keeps the official record of proceedings. At the end of the table lies the Mace, the symbol of the authority of the House of Commons. At the end of the Chamber, opposite the Speaker, sits the Sergeant-at-Arms. This person is responsible for the security and maintenance of the Parliament Buildings and has ceremonial duties. House officers and Members are assisted by the parliamentary pages, who carry messages to the Members in the Chamber.

## A WORKING DAY IN THE COMMONS CHAMBER



A working day in the Commons starts when the bells ring to call MPs to the House. The Speaker and the Clerks march through the Hall of Honour to the Commons Chamber, with the Sergeant-at-Arms leading the way carrying the Mace. The Speaker goes to the raised chair at the far end of the Chamber. After he leads the House in a brief prayer, the House is called to order and the day begins.

The House of Commons meets for about 130 days a year. Each day the House meets is called a sitting. When it is in session, the House sits Monday through Friday.

A day in the House is divided into different parts so that Members can discuss all the business at hand.

### MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

A 15-minute period is set aside each day for any Member who is not a Cabinet Minister to make a statement on a subject of national, regional or local importance. Each statement lasts a maximum of one minute.

### ORAL QUESTIONS

This closely watched 45 minutes is best known as Question Period. It is a chance for opposition Members, and sometimes government Members, to ask questions of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers. It is an exercise in accountability.

### PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Members can ask Ministers any question about their area of responsibility, without giving advance notice.

For one hour each day, Members who are not Cabinet Ministers can have their bills and motions debated by the House. There are special procedures for selecting which bills and motions will come to the attention of the House.

### GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Government orders are any items of business (such as motions or bills) that the government puts on the House of Commons' agenda.

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## NOTICES OF MOTION FOR THE PRODUCTION OF PAPERS

Members can ask the government to present certain documents to the House of Commons. The government can respond to the requests at this time.



### ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Routine proceedings can cover many different subjects:

- Ministers and parliamentary secretaries table committee reports, responses to petitions and other documents;
- Ministers make short announcements or talk about government policy, and the opposition parties reply;
- Members present petitions to the House, and committees table their reports;
- Government bills are introduced and given first reading, and Members introduce their Private Members' bills for first reading.

### ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A Member who is dissatisfied with an answer given in Question Period can ask, in writing, for the matter to be raised again during the adjournment proceedings at the end of the day. A Cabinet Minister or parliamentary secretary responds.

# PARLIAMENTARY HIGHLIGHTS

## THRONE SPEECH

When a session of Parliament opens, the House of Commons is invited to the Senate Chamber to hear the Speech from the Throne. The speech sets out the government's proposed legislative agenda – the policies and bills it plans to introduce during the session. It is read by the Governor General or sometimes the Queen.

## BUDGET SPEECH

Each year, the Minister of Finance makes a statement known as the Budget Speech. It details the government's economic policy and its plans for collecting and spending public money.

## ROYAL ASSENT

A bill must receive Royal Assent before it can become law. The Governor General or one of her deputies (the Chief Justice of Canada or other justices of the Supreme Court of Canada) gives Royal Assent to a bill in writing. At least twice a year, Royal Assent must be given in a ceremony held in the Senate Chamber with Senators and Members of Parliament present.



# MAKING CANADA'S LAWS

## HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

### FIRST READING

The bill is considered read for the first time and is printed.

### SECOND READING

Members debate the bill's principle.

### COMMITTEE STAGE

Committee members study the bill clause by clause.

### REPORT STAGE

Members can make other amendments.

### THIRD READING

Members debate and vote on the bill.

### SENATE

The bill follows a similar process.

### ROYAL ASSENT

The bill receives Royal Assent after being passed by both Houses.

When you fly in an airplane, visit a national park or buy a product in a store, you are doing something that has probably been touched by a law made in Parliament.

An idea to make a new law or to change an existing law starts out as a "bill." Each bill goes through several stages to become law. At first reading, the bill is considered read for the first time and is printed. There is no debate. At second reading, Members debate the principle of a bill – Is the idea behind it sound? Does it meet people's needs? If a bill passes at second reading, it goes to a committee of the House.

Committee members study the bill carefully. They hold hearings to gather information. They can ask for government officials and experts to come and answer questions. The committee can propose amendments, or changes, to the bill.

When a committee has finished its study, it reports the bill back to the House. The entire House can then debate it. During report stage debate, Members can suggest other amendments to the bill.

Once report stage is over, the bill is called for third reading debate. Members who voted for the bill at second reading may sometimes change their minds at third reading after seeing what amendments have or have not been made to the bill. After a bill has passed third reading in the House of Commons, it goes through a similar process in the Senate. Once both Chambers pass the bill in the same form, it is given Royal Assent and becomes law.

The chart shows the usual path followed by government bills introduced in the House of Commons.

## THE ROLE OF A MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

A Member's job is as varied as the many regions of Canada and the people who live here. To understand their role, it helps to look at the different places where Members work.



### IN THE CHAMBER

Television and the Internet bring the Commons Chamber into homes and schools across the country. This is where Members help to make Canada's laws by debating and voting on bills. The Chamber is also a place where MPs can put local, regional or national issues in the spotlight. They represent their constituents' views by presenting petitions, making statements and asking questions in the House.

With such a high profile, it is easy to think that Members do most of their work in the Chamber. Actually, Members spend a great deal of the working day – and many evenings – in committee rooms, at meetings and wherever their constituents gather.

### IN COMMITTEE

Committee work is an important part of a Member's job and the law-making process. Members can look at bills in greater depth than is possible in the Chamber, where there is a large group of people involved and a full timetable. In committee, Members also study important issues such as finance and health, and the spending plans of federal departments. With the range of committees and sub-committees that operate, Members may sit on more than one. Committees can sit from 4 to 40 hours a week and sometimes travel across the country to hear from people.

### IN CAUCUS

Activities in the Chamber do not start until 2 p.m. on Wednesdays so that Members can attend party caucus meetings. At these meetings, Senators and Members of Parliament from the same party determine policies and parliamentary strategy. They ask questions of their leaders and explain the views of their constituents. MPs from the same area also discuss common issues at regional caucus meetings.

## IN THE OFFICE

To meet their constituents' needs, MPs have an office in Ottawa and one or more in their riding. Their offices are often the first stop for people who need help. Members act as "ombudsmen," helping constituents with questions about visas, pension benefits, income tax – anything that is the business of the federal government. Members and their staff are good resources because they understand how federal departments are organized and where to find answers.

Aside from time in the Chamber and committee meetings, a typical day in the life of a Member of Parliament is filled with meetings, activities and other duties. Journalists call for an interview on a bill being studied by the Member's committee. A visiting constituent wants to talk about a federal program. A meeting is scheduled with parliamentarians from another country. A constituent is in Ottawa to accept an award and extends an invitation to attend the ceremony. Time has to be set aside to prepare a speech to give in the House. Plus there are letters, phone messages and e-mails to answer. Fortunately, Members have dedicated staff to help them in their work.

They return to their ridings as often as possible. For many Members, the trip home covers several thousand kilometres. But being in the riding lets Members talk to constituents face to face and attend local activities. Opening a new business, speaking to a civic group, laying a wreath on Remembrance Day, attending a high school graduation – these are many of the events that Canadians invite their Members of Parliament to attend. Travel time plus this busy schedule means less time for their families and themselves.

## BEING PART OF PARLIAMENT

The House of Commons provides a link between Canadians and their Parliament. The people we elect to represent us – farmers, teachers, lawyers, business people and others – bring their ideas and experience to bear on their work. Members make a difference by creating laws and helping their constituents with problems. They work within the structure of Parliament and their parties to make decisions in the interest of Canada. We may or may not like what they do. The system gives us the chance to show our approval or displeasure at every federal election.

Electing Members of Parliament gives Canadians a voice in the affairs of our country and in holding the government to account for its actions. When we vote, when we tell our Member of Parliament what we are thinking, or when we ask questions about the system, we help the system to be stronger and serve us better.

### FINDING OUT MORE

The Library of Parliament has more information about Canada's House of Commons.

**Information Service  
Library of Parliament  
Parliament Hill  
Ottawa, ON  
K1A 0A9**

**Telephone:  
Toll-free 1-866-599-4999  
National Capital Region (613) 992-4793**

The Parliament of Canada Web site carries webcasts of Chamber proceedings and televised committees as well as the audio of other public committee meetings. You can also tune into Commons debates and some committee meetings on the Cable Public Affairs Channel and Web site.

These Web sites offer information on other aspects of Parliament.

<b>Parliament of Canada</b> – <a href="http://www.parl.gc.ca">www.parl.gc.ca</a>	<b>Elections Canada</b> – <a href="http://www.elections.ca">www.elections.ca</a>
<b>Governor General of Canada</b> – <a href="http://www.gg.ca">www.gg.ca</a>	<b>Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC)</b> – <a href="http://www.cpac.ca">www.cpac.ca</a>
<b>Public Works and Government Services Canada</b> – <a href="http://www.parliamenthill.gc.ca">www.parliamenthill.gc.ca</a>	<b>Government Information Services</b> – <a href="http://www.communication.gc.ca">www.communication.gc.ca</a>
<b>Supreme Court of Canada</b> – <a href="http://www.scc-csc.gc.ca">www.scc-csc.gc.ca</a>	<b>National Capital Commission</b> – <a href="http://www.capcan.ca">www.capcan.ca</a>
<b>Department of Justice</b> – <a href="http://www.justice.gc.ca">www.justice.gc.ca</a>	