



## Government Overview

Learn about the legislative process at federal and provincial/territorial levels and read a glossary of policy terms. Also learn how medications are regulated in Canada.

### Government 101

In Canada, there are two orders of government: the federal government and provincial governments. Each Canadian has a role to play in our challenging and evolving democratic systems.

Advocacy efforts are critical to driving change and better supporting the arthritis community. But it can be difficult to understand what's going on in Parliament or Legislatures across Canada and it sometimes feels like our lawmakers are speaking another language! Here we provide more information about how things work in government, and we define often-used policy terms and acronyms.

### Federal Government

The delivery of healthcare may be a provincial responsibility, but the federal government also plays a significant role in funding healthcare and shaping healthcare policies.

#### Structure

##### Parliament:

- The Monarch (represented by the Governor General)
- Senators
- Members of Parliament (MPs)

## **Government:**

- Executive (the Monarch/Governor General, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet)
- Federal departments (such as National Defence, Justice and Finance)

## **Overlap:**

- Monarch/Governor General
- Prime Minister
- Cabinet members (Senators and MPs)

Three branches work together to govern Canada: the executive, legislative and judicial branches. The executive branch (also called *the **Government***) is the decision-making branch, made up of the **Monarch** (represented by the **Governor General**), the **Prime Minister**, and the **Cabinet**. The legislative branch is the law-making branch, made up of the appointed **Senate** and the elected **House of Commons**. The judicial branch is a series of independent courts that interpret the **laws** passed by the other two branches.

**Parliament** itself is made up of the following three parts: the Monarch, the Senate and the House of Commons.

Canada is a **constitutional monarchy**, which means that we recognize the Queen or King as the **Head of State**, while the Prime Minister is the **Head of Government**.

## **How Does Parliament Change to Keep Up with the Needs of Canadians?**

Canadians' values are influenced by events and issues at local, national and international levels. Parliament is influenced by the views of Canadians, and as a result every Parliament creates new laws and alters existing ones. The way the courts interpret these laws also changes over time. This makes our system very flexible and able to adapt to changes as they occur.

# How a Bill is passed in Parliament

## 1 FIRST READING

Any idea for a new law or a change to current law is written down. The idea is now called a *bill*. The bill is printed and read in the Chamber where it is introduced.

## 2 SECOND READING

The bill is given a Second **Reading** in the Chamber where it is introduced, where parliamentarians debate the idea behind the bill. They consider questions such as, “Is the idea behind the bill good?” “Does it meet people’s needs?” “Who will be affected by this bill?” If the Chamber votes for the bill and it passes this stage, it goes to a committee.

## 3 COMMITTEE STAGE

At the Committee Stage, the bill is studied carefully. Committee members hold *hearings* or special meetings where different people inside and outside government can make comments about the bill. The committee can ask for government officials and experts, or *witnesses*, to come and answer questions. The committee can suggest changes or **amendments** to the bill when it gives its report to the Chamber.

## 4 REPORT STAGE

At the Report Stage, the committee reports the bill back to the Chamber. All parliamentarians can then debate it. During this stage, those who were not part of the committee that studied the bill can suggest changes to the bill.

## 5 THIRD READING

The bill is then called for a Third Reading. The parliamentarians debate it again. Sometimes they can change their minds about a bill. They might vote for it at Second Reading but not at Third Reading if they do not like the changes made to the bill. If it passes Third Reading, the bill then goes to the other Chamber, where it goes through the same stages.

## 6 ROYAL ASSENT

Once both the Senate and the House of Commons have passed the bill in exactly the same wording, it is given to the Governor General (or his or her appointed **representative**) for Royal Assent (final approval), and it can become law.

## Provincial and Territorial government

Under Canada's federal system, the powers of government are shared between the federal government and 10 provincial and three territorial governments. The provinces are responsible for education, health and social services, highways, the administration of justice, and local government. However, overlapping and conflicting interests have stretched provincial concerns across virtually every area of Canadian life. Provinces are free to determine their own levels of public services, and each province has been true to its economic and cultural interests in its own way.

In the provinces, the Legislature has only one body, an elected Legislative Assembly. An elected representative provincially is called a Member of the Legislative Assembly or MLA. In Ontario, the elected provincial official is called a Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP); in Quebec, your representative is called a Member of the National Assembly or MNA.

In the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, members of Legislative Assembly run without party affiliation in what is known as a "consensus government." They then elect a speaker and a premier from among these independent members.

Provincial and territorial bills pass through essentially the same process as federal bills do, with the exception that there is no upper house (Senate) they need to go through - they pass through just the one sequence of first reading to Royal Assent carried out by the provincial or territorial legislature. Progress of these bills can be found on the legislature websites of each jurisdiction.

# Glossary

## **Amendment**

A change that is made to a bill, a motion or a committee report with the intention of improving it.

## **Bill**

A First draft of new legislation introduced into the Federal Parliament or Provincial/Territorial Legislatures.

## **Budget**

The government's plan for how it will collect and spend money each year.

## **Cabinet**

The Cabinet is a group of all Ministers. The Cabinet makes decisions about the Government's priorities and policies, the legislation that will be presented to Parliament or Legislature, and how to collect and spend money.

## **Cabinet Minister**

A person — normally a Member of Parliament or a Senator or a Member of Legislature— who is chosen by the Prime Minister or Premier, to help govern. A Minister is usually the head of a government department.

## **Caucus**

A group made up of all elected officials from the same political party. Caucuses meet regularly.

## **Committee**

A group of elected officials selected to study a specific subject or bill and write a report about it.

## **Constituency**

The specific geographic area in Canada that an elected official represents in the federal, provincial or territorial government. (Synonym: riding or electoral district)

## **Dissolution**

The bringing to an end of a Parliament or Legislature, either at the end of its term or if the government is defeated on a motion of non-confidence. It is followed by a general election.

## **Federal Government**

The government of Canada that acts and speaks for the whole country.

## **House of Commons**

One of three parts of Parliament. MPs meet and debate in the House of Commons Chamber.

## **Law**

A rule for all Canadians made by Senators, Members of Parliament and the Governor General through discussion and voting.

## **Legislation**

Bills that are passed by Parliament.

## **Legislature**

The legislature of a province or territory is made up of a legislative assembly along with the lieutenant governor. A legislative assembly is the body of people elected in each province and territory to create and pass laws.

## **Member of Legislature**

In Canada, members of legislative assemblies are members of the elected provincial legislatures and are called MLAs in all provinces and territories, except:

- Ontario, where they have been called Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs);
- Quebec, where they are called Members of the National Assembly (MNAs); and
- Newfoundland and Labrador, where they are called Members of the House of Assembly (MHAs).

## **Member of Parliament**

Technically, members of both the Senate and the House of Commons are Members of Parliament (MP), but most often this term is used for someone elected to a seat in the House of Commons. Each member of Parliament represents one of the ridings into which Canada is divided.

## **Official Opposition**

The political party that usually has the second-largest number of MPs elected to the House of Commons. Both the House and Senate have an Official Opposition.

## **Opposition**

All political parties and independent Members who do not belong to the governing party.

## **Provincial or territorial government**

Each of Canada's 10 provinces and three territories has a legislature that makes laws for the people living in that province or territory. Each legislature is located in the capital city of the province or territory.

## **Question Period**

A daily period of time in the Parliament of Legislature when elected officials ask the government questions about its activities or important issues.

## **Royal Assent**

The last stage before a bill becomes a law.

## **Senate (Upper House)**

The Upper House of Parliament is made up of 105 Senators.

## **Senator**

A person appointed to the Upper House of Parliament by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister. A Senator represents a region of Canada.

## **Session**

The periods into which a Parliament is divided. Sessions start with a Speech from the throne and are ended by prorogation (suspension).

## **Sitting**

A meeting of the Senate or of the House of Commons within a session. Usually one day long, although a sitting can last for only a matter of minutes or may extend over several days.

## **Speech from the Throne**

Each new session of Parliament or a Legislative Assembly is formally opened with the reading of the Speech from the Throne. The speech is written by the government of the day to outline the government's broad goals for the session.