

CHAPTER EIGHT

Parliament

The Public Arena of Politics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

1. Name three major functions of the Canadian legislature in general, and discuss the distinct functions of the House of Commons and the Senate in particular.
2. Describe the major stages in the life cycle of a Parliament and the three major items of business for each session. Describe how politicians interact in Parliament, both within their party and with other parties.
3. Describe the composition of the House of Commons, and how this fails to resemble Canadian society as a whole.
4. Identify the rules in place to prevent misconduct by members of Parliament, senators, and Cabinet ministers.
5. Name the kinds of committees in the House of Commons and describe what they do.
6. Distinguish between non-financial and money bills and trace the path that each must follow in order to become law.
7. Analyze recent Senate reform proposals and their alternatives.

The Parliament of Canada is the main arena of politics in the country; when it is in session, the issues, parties, events, personalities, and even scandals that are part of political life become the focus of national media. It is here that the public game of power politics is played. With journalists as their guide, Canadians become spectators in the clash of ideas and events that could ultimately affect their lives.

In this chapter, we examine the origin and functions of the Canadian Parliament and explain how it operates. Elections decide which party controls Parliament and

therefore determines who runs the executive. Members of Parliament (MPs) and senators discuss, debate, and argue over the virtues and justice of laws and how they affect all Canadians. They use Parliament as a forum for tabling their ideas about who should “get what, when, and how” in Canada. It is perhaps no wonder that reform of Parliament, especially of the Senate, is so often hotly debated.

THE PARLIAMENT OF CANADA

The Parliament of Canada, established by the *Constitution Act, 1867*, was shaped by Britain’s Westminster model. It legally includes three bodies: the House of Commons, the Senate, and the Crown. As the embodiment of the Crown, the monarch plays a formal role in the Canadian legislative process through the governor general. To become law, legislation must pass through these three bodies. The **legislature**—the branch of government that makes or amends laws—is **bicameral**; that is, it is composed of two Houses. It has an elected lower House of representatives (the House of Commons) and an appointed upper House (the Senate). The parliamentary *executive*—the prime minister and Cabinet—is based in the lower House and is responsible to it. The executive directs parliamentary business, while an institutionalized opposition is charged with criticizing government.

Canada is a **parliamentary democracy** in that Parliament exercises power on behalf of the public and may be called the “repository of popular sovereignty.” In a parliamentary system, the political executive receives its power to govern from the legislature. The prime minister and Cabinet are accountable to Parliament and may govern only as long as they retain the “confidence” of the majority of the House of Commons. We have seen that this is called *responsible government*. Canada’s system is also a *representative democracy* in which citizens choose individual MPs to represent them in making national policies.

The Origins of Canada’s Parliament

All countries have some means of discussing common problems and to decide what, if any, action should be taken to resolve them. The Canadian Constitution established Parliament as the main institution for this purpose.

In Britain, the idea of parliament can be traced back to the medieval council that the king used to summon for advice. This gathering, over time, was called “parliament” from the Old French, meaning “discussion.” As centuries passed, political power gradually shifted from the monarch to Parliament. By the eighteenth century, senior advisers or ministers sat in the Commons (rather than the upper House); by the nineteenth century, they required the support of the Commons,

legislature: The branch of government that makes or amends laws.

bicameral: Refers to a legislature composed of two Houses.

parliamentary democracy: A system of government in which Parliament exercises power on behalf of the public and may be called the “repository of popular sovereignty.”

not just the king, to retain office. In this way, executive power came to be centred in Parliament.

Canadians borrowed the blueprint for their Parliament from Britain and adapted it. From the early stages, Canadians concentrated on making the governor and the executive council responsible to the elected assembly. At Confederation in 1867, Canada joined the world of states as a representative, parliamentary democracy. It established an adversarial system of party politics with a clear dichotomy between government and opposition. It also established a code of procedures to govern the behaviour of members and adopted norms of behaviour to counteract potential hostility arising from the partisan nature of the House.

From the beginning, Canada's lower House, the House of Commons, was an *elected* assembly while the upper House was *appointed*. The idea of an appointed upper House was considered appropriate for two reasons. The first was that the founders believed that "men of wisdom and good stock" would be among the best qualified to watch out for the public interest. They also thought that such a body could help to protect provincial rights. Indeed, Confederation would not have been achieved without an agreement on the appointed upper House. This is often overlooked in contemporary debates about Senate reform.

The Functions of Canada's Parliament

As the vehicle for representative democracy, Parliament provides a forum for members to debate major political issues of the day. The debate is relayed to the public by the mass media, informing and also openly responding to public opinion.

Like many other legislatures, the Canadian institution has three major functions:

- ♦ It has *policy-making functions*, including the passage of legislation (a lengthy process outlined below).
- ♦ It has *representational functions* since it is responsible for expressing the interests and opinions of the electorate and dealing with the problems of constituents.
- ♦ It has *system-maintenance functions* that contribute to the working and legitimacy of other parts of the political system and the state itself.

The Canadian legislature performs a host of other services as well. It legitimates the activities and policies of the government; it regularly participates in the recruitment and socialization of future members of the government; it aids in the regulation and management of conflict; and it may serve to integrate and achieve consensus among rival political elites. The two Houses of Parliament each have specialized functions, which we explore below.

The Life Cycle of Parliament

The term *Parliament* is used in different ways. Its general usage is, as we have seen, to describe a certain type of legislature. However, the term *Parliament* is also used to refer to the House of Commons *building* in Ottawa, and it is also used in a very specific way to identify a particular government from the time of its election to the formation of the next government. Parliaments in this latter sense are labelled by consecutive numbers, which change after each general election. For example, the 343 MPs returned in the 2025 general election collectively form the forty-fifth Parliament.

All Parliaments pass through the same life cycle, but their lifespans vary and each is unique in significant ways. In each Parliament, there may be one or a number of **sessions**, or working periods when Parliament is open for business. The number of sessions depends on the wishes of the government of the day and on the length of the Parliament—that is, on how much time elapses between general elections. The Constitution requires Parliament to meet at least once a year.

Generally, a session of Parliament includes three major events concerning the business of Parliament: a Speech from the Throne, the presentation of a budget, and the tabling of the estimates. Each session begins with the governor general, at the prime minister's request, summoning MPs and senators to Parliament. Both gather in the Senate chamber with ceremony to hear the **Speech from the Throne**, which outlines the government's legislative agenda. The first Speech from the Throne in a new Parliament tends to be a reiteration of campaign promises. The May 2025 Speech from the Throne was notable in that it was delivered not by the governor general but by King Charles III, who travelled to Canada to do so. That decision was widely seen as an assertion of Canadian sovereignty in the face of threats by US president Donald Trump to annex Canada and turn the country into the fifty-first US state.

After the speech is read, members return to their respective chambers to commence business. In the House of Commons, a debate on the throne speech usually occupies the first few days of the session; afterwards, the normal timetable of the House comes into effect. In total, six days may be used to debate the speech. A break taken by the House within a session is called an **adjournment**, or a **recess**.

The second feature of parliamentary sessions is the budget. Delivered by the minister of finance, the **budget** document is primarily concerned with setting out where the revenue will come from to carry out the government's program. It generally includes tax changes to raise revenue and is kept secret until it is unveiled in a dramatic, public presentation. Tax changes go into effect immediately, although the legislation for them is necessarily drawn up later. A four-day **budget debate** (not necessarily on consecutive days) follows the presentation of the budget. The debate can be dramatic, because it provides the opposition with an opportunity to try to defeat the government. Such a defeat does not happen to governments that have

session: Working period when Parliament is open for business.

Speech from the Throne: Delivered by the governor general, it outlines the government's proposed legislative program for the forthcoming session.

adjournment (recess): A break period taken by the House of Commons within a session.

budget: A document that primarily sets out the revenue and expenditures required to carry out the government's program.

budget debate: The four-day (not necessarily consecutive) debate that follows the presentation of the budget.



IMAGE 8.1 King Charles's Speech from the Throne, May 27, 2025

a majority of members in the House of Commons. Minority governments fare differently. In 2005, with only a minority, Paul Martin's government barely survived a vote on the budget. Mark Carney won a minority government in the 2025 election, and will similarly need to convince opposition parties to vote with his government on budget bills.

Tabling the **estimates**—the government's spending proposals for the next fiscal year—is the third major item of business for each session. Apart from these three events, every session is devoted largely to debating the political issues of the day.

When the government wants to end a session of Parliament, it closes it. Closing a session is called **prorogation**. Prorogation of one session is often immediately followed by the summoning of the next. Unless there is prior agreement, any legislation that has not successfully completed all stages of the process automatically dies when Parliament is prorogued. Sessions used to last a year or less, but in recent years they often have been longer.

In 2006, Parliament passed Bill C-16, which brought in fixed election dates every four years unless an earlier **dissolution** was forced on the federal government or the prime minister requested the governor general to use their prerogative to dissolve Parliament. Dissolution is the name given to the ending of a particular Parliament. Bill C-16 necessitates an election on either the third Monday in October in the fourth calendar year following polling day for the last general election, or at a time when the government has been defeated in the House of Commons or when the governor

estimates: The government's spending proposals for the next fiscal year.

prorogation: Closing a session of Parliament. Formally, this is done by the governor general on the advice of the prime minister.

dissolution: The end of a particular Parliament, which occurs every four years or at the request of a prime minister who seeks a new mandate, or whose government has been defeated in the House of Commons.

general has approved a dissolution.¹ The 2015 and 2019 elections both followed the rules of Bill C-16. However, the subsequent 2021 election resulted when a minority government was defeated. The 2025 election was triggered when Mark Carney requested a dissolution. In both cases, the dates envisioned by the fixed election legislation were not observed.

THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Today, the House of Commons has 343 MPs, distributed among the provinces and territories by a formula that adheres to the principle that each should be represented in proportion to its population. Detailed rules concerning how many MPs are elected and how the constituency boundaries are determined are discussed in Chapter 12.

The Functions of the House of Commons

The House of Commons has several distinct functions:

- ◆ As a representative institution, it is supposed to reflect the ideas and wishes of Canadians. On the other hand, it is also expected to lead and educate the public.
- ◆ It provides the government with the authority to govern.
- ◆ It supervises the work of the Cabinet. Motions of confidence and non-confidence determine which party will form the government.
- ◆ It passes laws, imposes taxes, and authorizes government expenditures.
- ◆ It provides a forum to legitimize decisions that are taken by the government under existing statutes or regulations.
- ◆ It provides a forum for backbenchers to initiate ideas and, to a limited extent, even legislation, through Question Period, parliamentary debates, and private members' bills.
- ◆ It is a forum for extended debates on political questions that expose the advantages and disadvantages of different courses of action.
- ◆ It acts as a critic or watchdog to keep the government accountable.
- ◆ It provides an alternate government in the form of the Official Opposition party.
- ◆ It provides a training ground for future leaders.

¹ In theory, the governor general retains some discretionary power in the matter of dissolution (see Chapter 3).

Members of Parliament

Each MP is elected to the House of Commons (usually on a party “label”) in a single-member constituency. MPs constitute a visible link between the public and the federal government.

The position of MP has many facets. The basic work of **backbenchers**—those on the government side who are not ministers, or those on the opposition side who are not designated as party critics—is of two types: parliamentary and constituency. In Parliament, the job is basically to support the party leadership and attend plenary sessions of the House of Commons to debate and vote on legislation. Apart from this, MPs also serve on parliamentary committees and are members of parliamentary caucuses. They also have constituency duties to perform. For many, the constituencies they represent are far from Ottawa, and it takes considerable time and effort to act as representatives. They take up constituent problems with ministers, public servants, or representatives of government agencies. They may also inform constituents about legislation and issues that are being discussed in Parliament. In summary, MPs choose many different roles to play in the House.

backbenchers: MPs on the government side who are not ministers or on the opposition side who are not designated party critics.

For their efforts, MPs receive a salary of \$209,800, benefits and pensions, an office budget, travel allowances (return trips between Ottawa and their respective ridings for themselves and a named person), and free telephone and mail services. The prime minister is paid \$419,600.

Theoretically, almost any adult Canadian with residency in the country can run for Parliament and be elected as an MP. In practice, however, it is not so simple. Campaigns are expensive and usually require a significant personal investment of money and time. A good education is necessary to understand and communicate issues to the public, and it is helpful to have an alternative source of income for security in such a tenuous job. To be victorious, one also must be affiliated with, and win a candidacy for, a political party. Independents without a party label are rarely elected.

MPs do not represent a cross-section of the population. Those with British and French backgrounds predominate, as do those with law degrees. Most MPs come from urban areas because the majority of ridings are clustered around larger city centres. Most are middle-aged men. No women were elected as MPs in Canada until 1921, and the number of women MPs did not reach double digits until 1979 (see Close-Up 8.1).

According to *microcosm* theory, representative bodies like Parliament can only truly be representative of Canadian society if their membership is similar to Canada as a whole. In other words, if 50 per cent of the population is made up of women, then Parliament should also consist of 50 per cent women. In that respect, Canada’s parliament has traditionally failed, although there have been some improvements

in recent years. Advocates of this theory argue that Parliament must become more diverse. But others reject this view, arguing that perfect symmetry between society and Parliament is unrealistic and that, in any case, one does not have to be from a particular group in order to represent that group's interests. The fact that many MPs represent constituencies with very diverse populations supports this latter argument.

CLOSE-UP 8.1

Agnes Macphail

Agnes Macphail (1890–1954) was the first woman elected to the Canadian House of Commons. She was elected in 1921 (the first year in which all women had the right to vote) and stayed in office until 1940. Three years after leaving Ottawa, Macphail became one of the first two women elected to the Ontario legislature (1943–45 and 1948–51).

Macphail began as a member of the United Farmers–Independent Labour Party for Grey County in Ontario, but once elected she sat with the Progressive Party. Later, she became an independent and eventually joined the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).

Macphail was concerned with preserving the rural way of life and, particularly in the Ontario legislature, worked to bring issues of concern to women to the attention of the government. She fought to improve civil rights for women, as well as equal pay and the right to vote.



IMAGE 8.2 Agnes Macphail, first woman MP in Canada

In 2016, the Special Committee on Electoral Reform published its study of electoral reform and related issues, including diversity amongst MPs. The committee considered how electoral reform and other changes could lead to “a Parliament that mirrors Canada.”² In particular, the committee considered how the number of women, Indigenous people, and people with disabilities in the House of Commons could be boosted. However, there are other groups to consider. Racialized people are traditionally under-represented. So too are members of the working class, given that MPs are usually wealthy or at least hail from upper-middle-class backgrounds. We rarely see welders or carpenters, for example, elected to Parliament.

Why does the Canadian Parliament lack diversity? As Melanee Thomas, an expert in gender representation in politics, told the committee, “we have no evidence to

² Special Committee on Electoral Reform, *Strengthening Democracy in Canada: Principles, Process and Public Engagement for Electoral Reform* (House of Commons, 2016), <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/ERRE/Reports/RP8655791/errerp03/errerp03-e.pdf>.

suggest that voters discriminate against candidates on the grounds of gender or race.” But there tends to be fewer women on the ballot in competitive constituencies where they are more likely to win. In part this is due to individual factors that convince women to not run for office, but it also reflects that parties are more likely to nominate men as candidates in competitive seats. Greater diversity in Parliament, many scholars agree, could be achieved if parties were committed to this outcome.

Only 104 women were elected in the 2025 election, and the proportion of women elected as MPs decreased from the previous 2021 election. However, the proportion of racialized MPs increased. Eleven Indigenous candidates were elected in the 2021 election, and that increased to 12 in 2025. Very slowly, the Canadian Parliament is becoming more diverse and is coming to more closely resemble Canadian society. But this is not a linear process.

Rules of the House

The procedures for the daily activities in the House of Commons are set out in the Standing Orders. The **Standing Orders** contain the rules of the House, which are of a general nature, impartial, and technically amendable. Although the rules prevent any particular party from receiving partisan treatment, they do allow the government to monopolize the time of the House and for the most part to set its agenda. The rules of debate also favour the government. Individual members, as we shall see, are guaranteed some time to put forward bills, but this is minimal.

Procedural rules have been designed to reduce antagonism in the House of Commons by limiting the direct personal interaction of the members. For example, verbal confrontations during debate are constrained by the requirement that no member may speak officially without recognition by the speaker and that all statements must be addressed to the chair. This means that members do not speak directly to one another or even of one another, inasmuch as individuals are referred to not by name but through more impersonal titles, such as “the prime minister,” “the leader of the Opposition,” or “the honourable member for constituency X.”

There is even a list of terms deemed to constitute “unparliamentary language.” It is not permitted, for example, to use expressions that cast doubt on the legitimacy of a member’s birth, nor to allege that a speech has been inspired by intoxicating substances. Members have been suspended from the House for suggesting that another member was lying and then refusing to withdraw the accusation.

Other rules that help to reduce antagonism include the principle that, once recognized by the speaker, every MP has the right to speak for a specific length of time without interruption if the speech remains relevant to the motion before the House. Rules also protect certain persons (especially the royal family and the governor general) from explicit attacks.

Standing Orders: Contain the rules of the House of Commons that are of a general nature and more or less permanent.