

4 How does the system work?

Within the Government of Canada, policy decisions are made in many ways. On a daily basis, civil servants make decisions about how to deliver programs, how to fund them, and how to regulate their operations. Sometimes policies and programs are shaped by high-ranking officials in the public service, including those working within the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Sometimes, they are shaped by elected parliamentarians and ministers who are in a position to influence law. At another level, each political party also develops a platform through which they articulate their general policy perspectives on major issues.

The point is, there are many ways in which policy is developed. We encourage you to become engaged, whether the issue that concerns you is one determined by civil servants, high-level bureaucrats, or elected officials.

One of the most obvious channels through which to weigh in on an issue of concern is through the legislative process. In order to advocate effectively, it is important to know how this process works. This knowledge will help you determine how and when to intervene, as well as what strategies might get your voice heard. The information provided below on the legislative process is specific to the federal government, but much of it can be applied at the provincial level as well.

The Federal Legislative Process

To put it simply, Canadian Parliament makes laws that govern life in Canada. Sometimes these laws are harmful to particular people or communities, and should be amended. Other times, the development of new laws is required. We advocate to influence the legislative process and try to bring about just laws that benefit all.

Before any act becomes law, it is known as a bill or legislation. Bills are introduced in Parliament either as government bills—put forward by a member of Cabinet—or private members' bills—put forward by backbench MPs from any party in the House of Commons. Although bills are most commonly introduced in the House of Commons, they can also originate in the Senate.

As soon as a bill or piece of legislation is introduced or “tabled” in either House, it is published on the [Parliament of Canada website](#). It then goes through a long and arduous process before becoming law. The website allows you to monitor the journey of a bill through the legislative process, so you can determine when and how to intervene.



What journey does a bill make?

A bill goes through readings in both the House of Commons and the Senate where it is studied, debated and voted on, before the Governor General (the Queen's representative in Canada) can give it Royal Assent to become law.

First Reading: The bill is simply introduced or “tabled” in Parliament.

Second Reading: The bill is debated in principle and may be sent to committee for study.

Committee stage: The bill is closely scrutinized by the committee. Witnesses are called to testify and amendments may be proposed.

Third reading/report stage: The bill is sent back to the House with any proposed amendments and these amendments are voted on by MPs.

After three readings in the House, the legislation then goes on to the Senate — sometimes known as the “chamber of sober second thought” — and journeys through precisely the same process.

Where and when can you advocate?

There are many ways to get involved during the legislative process between first and third reading. Each stage provides different opportunities to raise your voice on what you see as the strengths or weaknesses of any piece of legislation.

Do your homework and know your audience...

Make sure you read a bill carefully and **do any necessary additional research** to ensure that your advocacy is well-informed. Make sure to talk with the people who are most invested in, or affected by, the legislation. For example, if you are advocating for the rights of refugees in Canada, be sure to consult with people from the refugee community. This will help you gain important insights into the legislation. Likely, it will also offer a personal reward.



Find out whether the bill that concerns you is a government bill or a private member's bill. When the ruling party holds the majority of seats in the House of Commons, government bills tend to pass. On the other hand, in a majority context a private member's bill — introduced by a backbench MP from any party in the House — can have much more difficulty passing (unless it is sponsored by an MP within the governing party!). A private member's bill is still worth speaking to, however, as it provides a great opportunity for building awareness about a particular issue regardless even if it doesn't become law (see side panel).

Determine who your audience will be by **identifying the MPs and ministers most responsible for the bill.** Frequently, cabinet ministers with specific government portfolios — e.g. foreign affairs, refugees and immigration, defence, Indigenous affairs, etc. — are responsible for pieces of legislation relevant to their work. Your audience should also include the relevant “critics” from the opposition parties; their job is to hold the elected official to account, so they are also keen to hear

whether Canadians support a bill or not. And don't forget to include your own MP; it is always important to communicate with him or her.

Regardless of whether the bill is a government or private member's bill, it is important to stay in touch with its sponsor(s) and supporters, as well as its opponents, and to be familiar with arguments on all sides. If you are not sure where an MP stands on an issue, check their party platform or [voting record](#) on bills and motions in the past.

First and second reading...

Once a bill is introduced at first reading, you can already start showing your support or concern by writing to MPs or sending in petitions to outline your perspective. When a bill receives second reading, you can encourage the government to send it to committee for proper study.

Committee stage...

The committee stage is when the most substantive consideration is given to its contents, so it's a unique opportunity to provide input.

During committee stage, a group of MPs studies the bill. They listen to the testimony of witnesses who have a particular stake or expertise in the issue. After the study is complete, the committee writes a report, outlining its observations and recommending potential amendments. The composition of these committees is proportional to the composition of the House of Commons. This means that the party in power will have the highest number of members on any given committee, and so has more influence on who is able to testify and what amendments move ahead. While only individuals who are specifically invited by the committee may testify in-person, any citizen can send in a written submission!

If you think that you have particular expertise to contribute to the policy discussion, you, your group or your organization should consider [submitting a brief](#) to the committee.

story

IN 2011 NONVIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad began in Syria as part of what was referred to as “Arab spring.” By the end of the year the situation had turned to war, with many international players helping to support either the regime or one or more of the opposition groups. By early 2015 over 200,000 people had been killed and millions displaced. Because of MCC's longstanding relationships with Syrian partners, MCC workers based in Lebanon visited Ottawa in the fall of 2013 and again in 2014 to encourage Canada to increase its humanitarian assistance and to support local groups working within Syria and neighbouring countries to build peace across ethnic and religious lines. MCC staff in Canada reiterated this request to a parliamentary committee studying the conflict in Syria. In late 2014, the Government of Canada provided a major funding grant for an MCC peacebuilding project in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

“ **Public policy advocacy is a particular type of peacebuilding. Advocacy is a way to give non-violent voice to messages from citizens to their government about the rules that affect people’s lives.**

Stu Clark and Sophia Murphy

Make sure to follow the guidelines closely to increase the likelihood of your submission being read and included in the committee’s decision.

Even if you don’t submit anything to the committee, be sure to monitor the committee hearings [online](#) and read the final report. Not only will you hear analysis and learn about the interests of MPs on the committee, but you may gain insight into what amendments—if any—are likely to be accepted.

Third reading...

Once the bill goes back to the House of Commons for third reading, you still have the opportunity to weigh in, because this is when MPs will vote on any proposed amendments. Are there amendments proposed? Do you support them? Do they strengthen or weaken the bill? Write to MPs, letting them know what you think they should consider as they prepare to vote on amendments and third reading of the bill.

Again, once a bill successfully completes three readings in the House of Commons, it moves on to the Senate for the exact same process. While senators are not elected officials, they are still charged with ensuring legislation is made effectively! You can also write to senators in the upper house to offer your opinion on the legislation.

In short, if your issue involves a piece of legislation, think about what kind of legislation it is, who the stakeholders are (MPs and civil society alike), and where you could get involved in the legislative process.



story

PRIVATE MEMBER’S BILL C-300

Canadian mining companies are notorious around the world for being environmentally and socially irresponsible in their mining practices. From exploiting workers to polluting local water sources, Canadian mining companies have regularly given priority to profit over people. However, since many of the companies operate outside of Canada, few Canadians have actually heard about their irresponsible activities abroad. This has begun to change.

In 2009, Liberal MP John McKay introduced a heavily debated private member’s bill called Bill C-300 that proposed to regulate the Canadian resource extraction industry, by enforcing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and putting in place mandatory requirements for the protection of human rights and environmental standards. Unfortunately, this bill was eventually defeated in the House of Commons by only a few votes.

Nevertheless, the public became aware of Canada’s mining record like never before, and the resource extraction industry considered the bill to be a wake-up call. CSR entered into Canada’s political consciousness, making it much more difficult for companies to get away with what they used to. Numerous other private members’ bills related to mining have followed C-300.

Although private members’ bills rarely pass, they still play a big part in raising awareness and holding people accountable.

“ **The way to right wrongs is, first, to turn the light of truth upon them.**

Ida B. Wells

Political Engagement Map

