



OPENING OF PARLIAMENT

INTRODUCTION

The opening of Parliament signals the formal beginning of the work of a new Parliament following a general election. The three elements of Parliament participate in the opening: the Sovereign (through their representative the Governor General), the Senate and the House of Commons.

A Parliament is often divided into two or more sessions; therefore, the opening of Parliament also marks the opening of the first session of the new Parliament. The central event of the opening is the [Speech from the Throne](#). It is, however, only one part of the ceremonies and procedures relating to the opening of Parliament.

PROCLAMATION FOR OPENING OF PARLIAMENT

Parliament is convened by means of a proclamation issued by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister. This formal announcement summons senators and members of the House of Commons to the opening of Parliament at a specific time and date. This proclamation is issued before the election, while another one may be issued after the election to change the date.

OPENING OF PARLIAMENT

The opening of Parliament takes place in the Senate Chamber. The events relating to the opening of Parliament originally took place on a single day, but since changes were made to the Standing Orders of the House of Commons in 1986 to provide for the election of its Speaker by secret ballot, it has generally taken place over two consecutive days.

The following pages outline the general events that take place in the Senate Chamber. There may be variations depending on particular circumstances.

PRELIMINARY SITTING (ONLY DURING THE FIRST SESSION OF A PARLIAMENT)

- The bells calling the senators to the chamber ring for fifteen minutes before the time the Senate is set to sit.
- If the Speaker of the Senate has been newly appointed, they inform the Senate that a Commission under the Great Seal has been issued appointing a new Speaker of the Senate. The Commission is then read by the Clerk of the Senate, after which the Speaker, escorted by two other senators (normally, the Leader or Representative of the Government and the Leader of the Opposition), takes their seat.
- The Speaker announces to the Senate that a message has been received from the Secretary to the Governor General, stating that a deputy of the Governor General (a Justice of the Supreme Court) will come to the Senate at a certain time, to open the first session of the new Parliament.
- If there are any new senators, they are introduced and sworn in.
- The sitting of the Senate is then suspended to await the arrival of the deputy at the time indicated in the proclamation.
- The deputy enters the Senate and takes the chair in front of the throne.
- The Speaker orders the Usher of the Black Rod to go to the House of Commons and inform its members that the deputy desires their attendance in the Senate Chamber.
- Once the members of the House of Commons reach the Senate Chamber, they remain behind the bar.
- The Speaker of the Senate conveys to the members of the House of Commons a message from the Governor General that it would not be appropriate to open Parliament until they have chosen their Speaker.
- The members of the House of Commons leave the Senate Chamber and return to the House of Commons in order to elect their Speaker.
- The deputy of the Governor General leaves the Senate Chamber.
- The sitting of the Senate resumes.
- The Speaker informs the Senate of a message received from the Secretary to the Governor General stating the date and time the Governor General will come to the Senate to formally open Parliament and read the Speech from the Throne.
- The sitting of the Senate is then adjourned.

SITTING DURING WHICH THE SPEECH FROM THE THRONE IS READ

- Fifteen minutes prior to the sitting, the bells ring, calling the senators to the Senate Chamber. Guests not involved in the procession have already taken their assigned seats.
- At the appointed hour, the Speaker's parade enters the chamber.
- The Speaker reads the prayers.
- If it is not the first session of a new Parliament:
 - The Speaker announces to the Senate that a message has been received from the Secretary to the Governor General, stating the time at which the Speech from the Throne will be read.
 - If there are new senators, they are introduced and sworn in.
- The sitting of the Senate is suspended to await the arrival of the Governor General.
- The Justices of the Supreme Court enter and take their seats, which are located in the area normally occupied by the clerks' table.
- The Governor General's procession arrives at the chamber, and all rise. The Usher of the Black Rod and other dignitaries escort the Governor General and spouse.
- The Speaker of the Senate orders the Black Rod to summon the members of the House of Commons and inform them that the Governor General desires their attendance. The Speaker of the House of Commons leads the procession of House members to the Senate Chamber.
- Once the members of the House of Commons have arrived at the bar of the Senate, the newly-elected Speaker makes a brief statement to inform the Governor General of the result of the Speaker's election, and to claim recognition of the rights and privileges of the House of Commons and its members.
- On behalf of the Governor General, the Speaker of the Senate affirms the parliamentary privileges of the House of Commons.
- The Governor General reads the Speech from the Throne, which outlines the government's legislative and policy agenda for the session.
- After the speech has been read, the Secretary to the Governor General gives a copy to both Speakers.
- The members of the House of Commons withdraw.
- All rise as the Governor General's procession leaves the Senate Chamber.
- The sitting of the Senate resumes.
- Pursuant to rule 10-1, a pro forma bill, Bill S-1, An Act Respecting Railways, is introduced. The bill receives first reading. No further action is taken on this bill.
- The Speaker informs the Senate that they have received a copy of the Speech from the Throne and begins to read it. Traditionally, the reading is dispensed.
- A motion to consider the Speech from the Throne when the Senate next sits is moved, and the question is put to the Senate for a decision.

- A motion proposing that the Committee of Selection be appointed to nominate the senators who will serve on the various committees is proposed and, after debate, may be adopted or debate adjourned.
- The Senate adjourns.

OPENING OF A SUBSEQUENT SESSION

The events and proceedings for the opening of a subsequent session during the same Parliament closely resemble those for the opening of a new Parliament after a general election. The main difference is that there is no preliminary sitting since the House of Commons is not required to elect a new Speaker for subsequent sessions within the same Parliament.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

The Speech from the Throne originated in medieval England as the address that the Sovereign made to each Parliament explaining why it had been summoned. Since the establishment of the cabinet system of government in the 18th century, the Speech from the Throne has consisted of a general statement of government policy and the presentation of its proposed legislative program.

In Canada, it is rare for the Sovereign to be present in person in Parliament. Only once, on October 14, 1957, has the Sovereign – Queen Elizabeth II – opened a Parliament. Twenty years later, on October 18, 1977, she opened the 3rd Session of the 30th Parliament. The first time a Sovereign was present in the Parliament of Canada was during the royal visit of 1939, when King George VI gave Royal Assent to bills at a special ceremony on May 17.

ETIQUETTE FOR THE READING OF THE SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

Senators, dignitaries and guests take their seats in advance of the arrival of the Governor General's procession. All present in the chamber stand as the Governor General or their deputy enters the chamber, and again when they leave.

As the speech is being read, those attending listen in silence. It is inappropriate to express support or displeasure in any way in the presence of the Governor General or their deputy. To do so openly while the speech is being read would improperly involve the Governor General in partisan considerations. The Speech from the Throne represents the agenda of the government. Any comment on its merits by parliamentarians should take place during the period assigned in each chamber for debate on the Address in Reply.

RE-READING OF THE SPEECH FROM THE THRONE IN BOTH CHAMBERS

This formality, by which the two Speakers “read” the Speech from the Throne to their respective houses, is a vestige of the time when the Sovereign’s speech could not be reproduced easily. The Speakers no longer actually re-read the Speech from the Throne as it is printed in the Journals and the Debates. After declaring that a copy of the speech has been obtained, the Speakers are dispensed from reading the speech and a motion is moved to take the speech into consideration at the next sitting.

PARLIAMENTARY PRIVILEGE

The claim to privilege has its origins in constitutional history, at a time when the English Commons asserted their privileges against the Crown. The custom by which the Speaker of the House of Commons claims parliamentary privilege from the Sovereign dates back to the Speakership of Sir Thomas More (1523-1529). Parliamentary privilege is comprised of the rights accorded to parliamentarians and to Parliament to enable them to fulfill their functions without interference or obstruction. In Canada, although this practice continues to be referred to as a “claim” to privileges, it is in fact a declaration that is largely ceremonial, since these privileges are authorized by the *Constitution Act, 1867*.

PRO FORMA BILL

Bills S-1 in the Senate and C-1 in the House are introduced at the beginning of each session and given first reading, but there is no intention of proceeding further with them. This is an old practice by which the two houses affirm their independence from the Crown and claim the right to deliberate and legislate without having to follow the direction announced in the Speech from the Throne.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT

[Senate Procedure in Practice](#) (Chapter 3)

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON OTHER POINTS COVERED IN THIS NOTE

[Senate Procedural Note No. 9, The Speaker of the Senate](#)

[Senate Procedural Note No. 12, Parliamentary Privilege](#)