

How a Government Bill Becomes Law

To become law, a bill must first be introduced in either the Senate or the House of Commons. It must then pass through various stages in each House: first, second and third reading. Finally, it must receive Royal Assent.

1. Definitions

Public bills are proposals for laws that will affect the public in general. Most public bills are introduced by Cabinet ministers. Bills sponsored by the government are numbered from C-1 to C-200 in order of presentation. Bills sponsored by the Senate are numbered starting at S-1.

Private bills are limited in scope because they concern only an individual or a group of individuals. Private bills confer a right on some person or group or relieve them of a responsibility.

2. Policy proposals

Most legislation originates with the government. Policy proposals requiring legislation are submitted to Cabinet by ministers.

3. Cabinet

Cabinet consists of government members of the House of Commons or the Senate who are appointed by the Prime Minister.

Policy proposal is considered by the appropriate Cabinet committee and recommendations are made to the Cabinet.

If Cabinet approves, the responsible ministry issues drafting instructions to the legislation section of the Department of Justice.

Draft bill is prepared in two official languages and approved by the responsible minister.

Draft bill is presented to Cabinet for approval.

If approved, it is ready to be introduced in Parliament.

4. Parliament

First reading of the bill

First reading in either the Senate or the House of Commons. Bill is printed.

Second reading of the bill

Second reading in the same House of Parliament. Members debate and vote on the principle of the bill. The House may decide to refer the bill to a legislative, standing or a special committee, or to Committee of the Whole.

Consideration in committee

The appropriate parliamentary committee studies the bill clause by clause. A committee can summon witnesses and experts to provide it with information to help committee members improve the bill.

Report stage

The committee reports the bill to the House indicating any proposed amendments. The House considers the amendments and votes for or against them.

Third reading of the bill

The House debates and votes on the bill as amended. After a bill has been read three times in the House, it is sent to the Senate for consideration.

5. Royal Assent of the bill

The bill is presented to the Governor General for assent.

Governor General may assent the bill in the Queen's name, withhold assent or reserve assent.

When a bill is given Royal Assent, it becomes law.

6. Statute in force

A statute comes into force (becomes law) upon Royal Assent, or when it is proclaimed by the Governor General, or on a day specified in the act. Different sections may come into force at different times.

Adapted from "The Federal Legislative Process in Canada" by Inba Kehoe. Queen's University. <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Reference/queens-e.html> (Accessed February 20, 2008).