

The First Days of a Parliament

The opening of a new Parliament is a very busy time for all Members of Parliament. For newly elected Members it can also be a somewhat bewildering experience.

Members participate in a number of major events, both public and private, and many less dramatic, though no less important ones. In the first months, Members will also endeavour to learn as quickly as possible how to function efficiently and effectively, while coping with all of the other demands made on them. In the longer term, Members will want to acquire a feel for the parliamentary traditions and practices that make being a Member of the House of Commons unique.

Even before the House convenes and Parliament settles down to work, Members will participate in their first official function, their swearing in. In the first few days that the new Parliament actually sits, three other major events will occur – election of the Speaker, the Speech from the Throne, and the beginning of the debate on the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne. It may be that during the Address Debate, as it is called, a newly elected Member will pronounce his or her maiden speech.

Elected Members take the Oath in order to take their seats in the House, in an ancient ceremony that normally takes no more than fifteen minutes.

Soon after, the three major events listed above occur in quick succession. First, at the beginning of the new Parliament, when the House assembles, the Members choose a Speaker in an election conducted by secret ballot, a procedure used for the first time in September 1986. The Standing Orders, or rules of the House, set out a voting procedure that is followed, through several ballots if necessary, until a candidate has received a majority of the votes cast.

Speech from the Throne

After a Speaker has been elected, usually on the following day, the House proceeds to the Senate Chamber to hear the Governor General read the Speech from the Throne. The Speech imparts the causes

of summoning Parliament, prior to which neither the House nor the Senate can proceed with any public business. The Speech from the Throne formally opens the first session or any subsequent sessions of a Parliament, and marks the first occasion of “Parliament Assembled” in its three constituent parts: the House of Commons, the Senate and the Sovereign or the Sovereign’s representative. After the Speech from the Throne, the Speaker and Members return to the House.

Following certain formal and organizational proceedings, the Prime Minister makes a motion that the Speech from the Throne be considered either this day or on some future day. As the motion for the Address in Reply itself is relatively unspecific, debate is very wide-ranging, which provides one of the few opportunities for private Members to speak on topics of their choice.

It may be during the Address Debate that a newly elected Member makes his or her maiden speech. By old parliamentary usage, a Member who wishes to make his or her maiden speech enjoys the privilege of being the first to “catch the Speaker’s eye” if he rises at the same time as Members who are not newly elected. Tradition permits a Member making a maiden speech to use a written text, a practice discouraged in other instances.

Proceedings

After these first few fast-paced days, a more regularized program of business begins, during which Members have numerous opportunities to participate actively and publicly. A typical day in the House begins with “Routine Proceedings” at 10 a.m., whereby documents are tabled, reports made, petitions presented and bills introduced. After Routine Proceedings, the House moves to “Government Orders” until 2:00 p.m. when, for 15 minutes, Members recognized by the Speaker may make oral statements for 60 seconds on a topic of their choice. At 2:15 p.m. Question Period begins, providing Members with the opportunity to question the Ministry on various aspects of government policy

and matters of topical concern. Question Period is one of the most public operations of responsible government, in that Ministers answer to the House for the conduct of their departments and for the decisions contemplated or taken by the Government. At 3:00 p.m. the House takes up Government Orders again. From 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. (11:00 a.m. to noon on Mondays), the time is given over to “Private Members’ Business”, when the House debates bills and motions sponsored by Members not of the Ministry. At 6:30 p.m., the “Adjournment Proceedings” take place, giving Members an opportunity to debate, in some detail, answers that were given during Question Period. Three such question-and-answer exchanges take place, for 10 minutes each, after which (7:00 p.m.) the House adjourns for the day. The order of proceedings is somewhat different on Wednesdays and Fridays.

This brief and admittedly sketchy explanation of the House practices and procedures might appear to make becoming an effective Member of Parliament a daunting task for a new Member. Fortunately, there are many people to whom new Members can turn for help in adjusting to their new roles and responsibilities.

The Speaker acts in a non-partisan and impartial capacity in upholding the Standing Orders, and may be consulted on procedural and other matters. The Clerk of the House is the chief procedural adviser to the Speaker and to Members of the House. The Clerk is also responsible for a wide range of duties relating to the proceedings and official records of the House and its committees. Assisting the Clerk are the Deputy Clerk and other Table Officers – Clerk Assistants, Principal Clerks and Deputy Principal Clerks – as well as the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel and the Deputy Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel. These men and women are always available to provide assistance to Members.

Unfortunately, space does not allow a full elaboration of the many subjects touched upon in this short article. There will be plenty of opportunity, however, for new Members to ask questions and receive more complete information at the “Orientation for Newly Elected Members”, a series of briefing sessions organized by all branches of the House at the beginning of each new Parliament. It is hoped the briefings, which are designed to guide new Members in virtually all areas of their new responsibilities, will make the Members’ time in Ottawa both memorable and more productive.