

# How a Government Bill Becomes Law

## Legislative Library of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario

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This guide explains the stages of the process by which a typical government-initiated bill becomes law. See also the guides: [How a Government Bill Becomes Law \(Pre-Legislative Stages\)](#), [How a Private Member's Public Bill Becomes Law](#), [How a Committee Bill Becomes Law](#), [How a Private Bill Becomes Law](#), and the Backgrounder: [When do Ontario Acts and Regulations come into Force?](#)

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### Explanation: (also see [Diagram](#) below)

In a Westminster-style parliament such as Ontario's, most significant legislation and (normally) any that specifically directs the expenditure of public monies, is introduced as a Government Bill. 'Government' in this usage refers to the Executive Council (the Cabinet), which serves as the government so long as it maintains the confidence of the legislature.

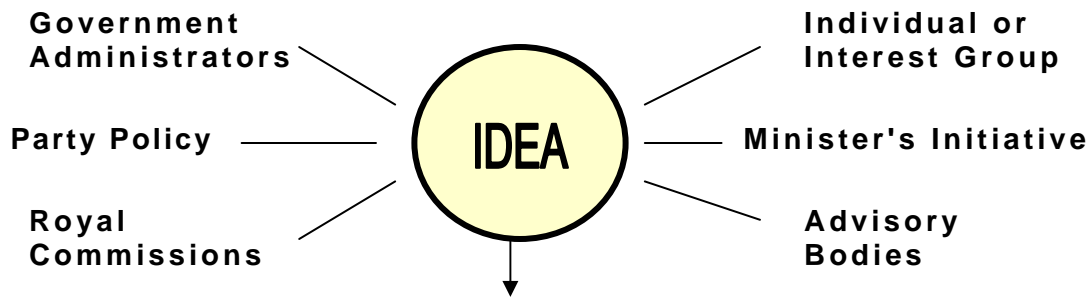
In this system, the Cabinet is a collective executive, and although a Government Bill is typically introduced to the House by a Minister (usually of the department most affected by the Bill), this is on behalf of the Cabinet, whose full support stands behind the Bill. This is why the defeat of Government Bills has broader implications, such as the possible withdrawal of confidence in the government. It is also why any Minister unable publicly to support a Government Bill is expected to resign from Cabinet.

It was in part to ensure the passage of Government Bills that strong party discipline evolved in parliamentary systems, and in today's legislature, a Government Bill is expected to have the full support not only of the Cabinet, but also (with minor exceptions) of the entire caucus of the governing party(ies). This has at least two significant effects.

One is that under conditions of majority government it is extremely unlikely that a Government Bill will be defeated. It may be delayed, or held up in committee, or be pushed aside on the legislative timetable by more pressing bills, or die on the Order Paper when the House prorogues or is dissolved, but it is unlikely to suffer actual defeat in the chamber.

Another consequence is that Government Bills, unlike private bills or private Members' bills, are the end-product of processes of consensus-building: within Cabinet, between Cabinet and caucus, and between senior administrators and political advisors. These all take place in the [pre-legislative stages](#), out of public view, and it is in these stages where the fate of a legislative proposal is still very much 'up in the air'. Once a Government Bill is introduced to the legislature, it is the government's expectation that barring opposition stalling, shifting government priorities, or unforeseen circumstances, the Bill *will* pass, and the government will bring its considerable resources to bear on making sure this happens.

The following diagram shows the **formal legislative stages** in the life of a Government Bill.



**Pre-legislative Stages**

- Click [HERE](#) for elaboration

**First Reading**

- Bill is introduced in the House and given **First Reading** and put on the agenda (*Orders and Notices Paper*) of the Assembly
- Minister may make statement or explanation of purposes of Bill
- First Reading is decided without amendment to the text of the Bill and without debate
- Compendium of background information is supplied to Opposition Parties
- Bill is printed and distributed

**Second Reading**

- debate on principle of the Bill
- Minister may make a speech to open debate
- each Member may make one speech only
- Minister may make closing speech
- no amendments to text of Bill at this stage
- after debate concludes, Speaker puts question on the motion for **Second Reading**
- if Bill is given **Second Reading**, it may, by unanimous consent, be ordered for **Third Reading**
- otherwise, Bill is referred to **Committee of the Whole House** or a **Standing** or **Select Committee** as designated by the Minister or Parliamentary Assistant
- if 8 or more Members require that the Bill be referred to a **Standing** or **Select Committee**, the Minister designates the Committee

**Order for Second Reading Discharged and Bill Referred To Standing Committee**

- before Second Reading debate begins, Bill may be ordered referred to a **Standing Committee** for review and/or hearings
- as the principle of the Bill has not yet been adopted, the Committee's consideration may be wide ranging
- when the Bill is reported to the House it is ordered for **Second Reading**

### Select or Standing Committee

- purpose is to comment on, ask questions about and/or propose amendments to various sections of the Bill
- proceedings are less formal than in House and members may speak more than once
- Committee may invite individuals, groups and Ministry officials to comment on the Bill in writing or in person before the Committee
- Committee may travel to various locations in the province to receive public comment or to view a situation first hand
- following public submissions, Bill is considered clause by clause. Each clause of the Bill may be considered, amended or deleted, and new clauses may be added
- Bill is reported back to House after completion of clause-by-clause consideration
- if amendments have been made, Bill is reprinted
- when Committee reports Bill to the House, Bill is ordered for **Third Reading** unless Minister or Parliamentary Assistant directs that it be referred to **Committee of the Whole House**

### Committee of the Whole House

- purpose is to comment on, ask questions about and/or propose amendments to various sections of Bill
- proceedings are conducted in the Legislative Chamber but are less formal than under House rules and members may speak more than once. All Members of the Assembly are members of Committee of the Whole House
- Bill is considered clause by clause. Each clause of the Bill may be considered, amended or deleted, and new clauses may be added
- individuals and groups cannot participate in the proceedings
- Ministry officials may sit on the floor of the Chamber to provide advice to Minister
- if amendments have been made, Bill is reprinted
- when **Committee of the Whole House** reports Bill to House, Bill is ordered for **Third Reading**

### **Third Reading**

- debate is more restricted than at Second Reading and is limited to the contents of the Bill
- no amendments to text of the Bill may be moved at this stage
- after debate concludes, Speaker puts question on the motion for **Third Reading**



### **Royal Assent**

- Bill is presented to the Lieutenant Governor for assent
- Lieutenant Governor assents to Bill in the Queen's name (the power of the Lieutenant Governor to withhold assent or reserve assent has fallen into disuse)
- when Bill is given **Royal Assent** it becomes an Act and is given a statute number and is reprinted



### **In Force**

- statute is in force:
  - upon Royal Assent, *or*
  - when it is proclaimed by the Lieutenant Governor (by and with the advice of the Executive Council of Ontario), *or*
  - on a day specified in the Act
- different sections may come into force at different times

Last updated August 2, 2001. CB and LJ.