

HANDOUT 8: Parliamentary Roles

Government Party (13-17 elected members sitting)

The ruling party has the responsibility of the day-to-day and long-term operation of the federal government. This party must plan, finance and run all aspects of our national government and is viewed as the 'face' of the nation, particularly the Prime Minister.

Prime Minister: The leader of the party that holds the largest number of seats in Parliament. The Prime Minister is the chairman of the cabinet, head of state and the leader of the ruling party. The Prime Minister appoints all cabinet posts, leads the government in Question Period and is held accountable for the government's legislative agenda in each Parliament.

Deputy Prime Minister: This is an honorary position in the cabinet, appointed by the ruling prime minister. It is a ministry 'without portfolio' but duties include: assuming the role of Prime Minister when he or she is absent or unable to carry on the duties, answering to the opposition in Question Period and working in cabinet.

Party Whip: The Party Whip has the responsibility of maintaining party discipline, ensuring that party members vote according to party beliefs and keeping party members in line during Question period.

Finance Minister: This is a critical role in Canada's Parliament because he or she must present the budget for each fiscal year and is responsible for keeping the nation's finances in check. The Finance Minister answers all questions of a financial matter in Question Period.

Cabinet Minister: Each department of the government has a cabinet minister in charge of that portfolio. The minister sets the agenda or direction for the department and is responsible in Parliament to answer all questions relating to issues coming out of the department and its activities.

Backbencher: All elected members of Parliament that are not assigned a specific portfolio or role are backbenchers. These members are frequently inexperienced, newly-elected or being punished for a lack of party discipline.

Roles to fill:

- Prime Minister
- Deputy Prime Minister
- Party Whip
- Minister of Finance
- Minister of Justice
- Minister of Natural Resources
- Minister of Citizenship and Immigration

- Minister of National Defence
- Minister of Transport and Infrastructure
- Minister of National Revenue

N.B. Total Government Treasury is \$30,000,000,000. The government may increase the GST to 8% for an additional \$475,000,000 but this must be done in Parliament and a vote taken to approve the increase.

Official Opposition (8-11 elected members sitting)

The Official Opposition is generally the party that elects the second largest number of seats in the House of Commons. This party has the important task of keeping the actions and policies of the government open and honest. The opposition will question, attack, delay or defeat legislation that is not in the interest of Canadians – or of the opposition party itself. As the ‘official opposition’ this party receives specific financial and procedural advantages over all other opposition parties.

Leader of the Opposition: The Leader of the Opposition is the elected party head that receives the second largest number of seats in Parliament. This person is responsible for keeping the government, particularly the Prime Minister, in line during Question Period and represents the interests of the party in Parliament and the public.

Party Whip: The Party Whip has the responsibility of maintaining party discipline, ensuring that party members vote according to party beliefs and keeping party members in line during Question period.

Finance Critic: The Finance Critic is a key member of the shadow cabinet because he or she must be aware of all government expenditures, the official budget, and the overall fiscal direction of the government. The Finance Critic asks critical questions of the Finance Minister and government about federal spending.

Shadow Cabinet: Each shadow cabinet member plays a role as the opposite, or shadow, of a government minister. For each government portfolio (ministry) there is an opposite critic or shadow cabinet position. The primary role is to keep the government open and honest about its legislative agenda. Critics lead Question Period with specific questions targeted at the legislation supported by the government.

Backbencher: All elected members of Parliament that are not assigned a specific portfolio or role are backbenchers. These members are frequently inexperienced, newly-elected or being punished for a lack of party discipline.

Roles to fill:

- Leader of the Opposition
- Party Whip
- Finance Critic

- Justice Critic
- Citizenship and Immigration Critic
- National Defence Critic
- Transport and Infrastructure Critic
- National Revenue Critic
- Natural Resources Critic

Third Party (2-4 elected members sitting)

This is any opposition party not considered the official opposition. All parties in opposition have a similar role in keeping the government open and honest about its legislative agenda and overall direction for the nation. However, these secondary opposition parties do not have the financial advantages or procedural benefits in Question Period and therefore the impact they may have on government policy is less substantial.

Party Leader: Like the other party leaders, this person has been chosen by party membership and would step into the Prime Minister's role if the party received a majority of seats. In Parliament, the party leader's role is similar to that of the official opposition's leader – he or she addresses the government in Question Period, sits on committees and meets all media relations obligations.

Party Member: A party member is an MP that has no portfolio or title, but sits on committees, addresses the government during debate and probes government policy during Question Period. A party member's loyalty is a balance between party interests and the needs of his or her constituents that elected him or her to office. The balancing of delegate interests (constituency) and trustee (national) interests is one of the challenges of our party system.

Roles to fill:

- Party Leader
- Finance Critic
- Justice Critic
- Citizenship and Immigration Critic
- National Defence Critic
- Transport and Infrastructure Critic
- National Revenue Critic
- Natural Resources Critic

N.B. The representation in Parliament of your party will be smaller than of the ruling party and official opposition therefore party members will take on more than one portfolio.