

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKERS

Every day, we are all affected by decisions the government makes – from going to school, driving at a speed limit and even having days off for Easter. It's important to understand how Parliament and government processes work, so you can have your say in political decision-making.

The Parliamentary system in New Zealand

The New Zealand Parliamentary system follows the Westminster system (a parliamentary system of government used in the United Kingdom).

It has three branches designed to ensure that no part of the system has ultimate power and that there are checks and balances on each.

THE LEGISLATURE is the House of Representatives with all the Members of Parliament, including select committees. The Legislature makes laws.

THE EXECUTIVE is the Government and is made up of Ministers who are responsible for running the country. The Executive (the Government) administers laws.

THE JUDICIARY are judges and the courts that apply the law through hearing and deciding cases and reviewing decisions of government.

The system also includes the Sovereign, the Queen, who is represented by the Governor-General.

The House of Representatives

When you hear on TV that something happened in Parliament, this means the House of Representatives. All the Members of Parliament (MPs) from around New Zealand come together in 'the House' and make decisions that affect all of our lives.

The House's role is to:

- provide the Government (Executive) from amongst its members
- make new laws and update old laws
- represent the people
- examine and approve Government taxes and spending
- hold the Government to account for its policies and actions.

Members of Parliament

There are usually about 120 MPs in the House, and most MPs belong to a political party. MPs are either electorate or list MPs.

New Zealanders 18 years and over get to vote for who will represent them in the House. Under New Zealand's voting system, voters have two votes – a party vote and an electorate vote.

ELECTORATE MPS: The electorate vote helps decide who will become your electorate MP. The candidate who gets the most votes in an area wins the seat and becomes the electorate MP for that area.

LIST MPS: A list MP is someone who has been elected from a political party's 'party list'. The party vote helps decide how many seats in Parliament each party will get.

You can find information about all of the current MPs at www.parliament.nz.

SELECT COMMITTEES

Select committees are groups of MPs that undertake work in certain areas for the House of Representatives. There are 14 'subject' select committees that focus on one or two big national topics, like health or justice. Each committee has about eight MPs from different parties in Parliament.

Through these committees, Parliament can get the opinions and advice of the general public, experts and organisations when making law. There are also five specialist select committees that deal with other business of Parliament.



HOW LAWS ARE MADE BY PARLIAMENT

The Government

WHO GETS TO BE THE GOVERNMENT?

Through our democratic system, New Zealand citizens aged 18 and older get to decide who will become the Government by electing MPs to the House of Representatives in the general election.

The Government in New Zealand is formed by either a party or groups of parties that have the support of the majority of the House of Representatives.

WHO'S WHO IN THE GOVERNMENT?

THE PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET

The Prime Minister is usually the leader of the party with the most seats in Parliament and is the head of Cabinet.

Cabinet is the central decision-making group of the Executive, which is separate to Parliament. A group of Ministers join the Prime Minister to make up the people in Cabinet.

You can find more information about what Cabinet does on the website of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet at www.dPMC.govt.nz.

MINISTERS

Ministers are given responsibility to look after particular areas (called Ministerial portfolios), e.g. the Minister of Health or the Minister of Education.

You will be surprised at how many Ministers there are, because we usually only hear about the large Ministerial portfolios. You can find all the portfolios and information about Ministers at www.beehive.govt.nz.

Laws (or Acts) are first proposed to the House of Representatives as bills. They have to go through a process of approval by the House and the Governor-General before becoming Acts.

The majority of bills are proposed by the Government of the day. Individual MPs can also promote their own bills, called member's bills. Local government individuals and organisations, with the support of an MP, may also bring forward legislation that only affects them.

THE LIFE OF A BILL

Bills get debated three times in Parliament.

After the first debate, Parliament votes on whether a bill should be examined further or be dropped. If the bill gets the vote to go ahead, it is usually sent to a select committee, which examines it in more detail. This is also where the people of New Zealand get the chance to have their say. The select committee process is an important part of Parliament's work.

When considering a bill, select committees often invite the public to make comments or submissions on the bill so that the committee members can take into account what the public, experts and organisations think about the bill and how it might be improved. In the past, select committees have suggested bills be completely rewritten and, on occasion, scrapped all together.

After it has examined the bill and heard any submissions, the select committee creates a report of its recommendations on the bill for the House.

The bill then goes to its second reading in the House, where it is debated and MPs may suggest changes to it. If the vote is lost, that is the end of the bill. Otherwise the bill is ready for debate by a committee of the whole House. Any MP can be a part of the committee of the whole House and can make short speeches, debate the bill and propose changes. Large or controversial bills may be before a committee of the whole House for several days.

Once the final form of a bill is agreed, it is ready for the final 'third reading'. This is the final stage before the bill becomes law, and MPs vote on it for the last time. If more MPs vote for the bill than against it, the bill is 'passed'. The Governor-General signs it, and the bill becomes an Act of Parliament and a law that governs New Zealand.