

DIGGING DEEPER

Tools of Members of Parliament (MPs)

Understanding Levers of Change

EVERY DAY
ADVOCATES



**Environmental
Leadership
Canada**

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Objective

To work with your MP to achieve environmental victories in the House of Commons, it helps to understand the ins and outs of the tools they have at their disposal to advance change.

This resource compiles some ways that you can work with your MP to bring forward asks that are strategic and viable for you both.



Unpacking Private Members' Bills Panel

Top Left to Bottom Right: Lynn Jones, Lenore Zann, Richard Cannings, Tyjana Connolly

1 Private Members' Business

Private Members' Business are bills and motions put forward by individual Members of the House of Commons who are not cabinet ministers or parliamentary secretaries. This includes MPs from both the governing party and opposition parties. An MP can use bills and motions to raise awareness about an issue at the federal level and even have their ideas adopted into law.

Private Members' Bills (PMBs)

Private Members' bills (PMBs): Are bills introduced into the legislature by individual Members of the House of Commons.

Private Members' bills are typically drafted with the support of the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, non-partisan support staff who can ensure that a PMB is written correctly. During the drafting of this legislation, they consider "existing laws, drafting conventions and constitutional and formal requirements" (Our Commons). **PMBs generally cannot require the use of additional federal funds, but they can *reduce* taxes or spending.**

How are PMBs brought forward?

The opportunity to have a PMB debated in the House runs on a **lottery system**. A random draw is done shortly after each election to determine the order that MPs will bring forward their bills or motions. **Being one of the first 30 is the best chance of having your PMB debated and voted on**, but as this first batch of bills is passed (or defeated) additional PMBs are brought forward for debate.

Private Members' bills can also originate in the Senate and go through to the House after. When a PMB originates in the Senate, the bill is given **priority** for debate.

Therefore, an MP may sponsor a bill from the Senate when it arrives in the House as a way of jumping the queue to the Order of Precedence. Each MP may sponsor only one Senate public or private bill during a session of Parliament.



"It [private members' bills] got people talking around the water coolers about it, and for the first time, we started to have good debates about what is environmental racism?"

Lenore Zann, Unpacking Private Members' Bills Panel

How do you get involved with your MP to draft a Private Members' Bill? And what are some indicators of success?

MPs often find their inspiration for Private Members' bills from issues in their riding, concerns brought forward by their constituents and, from PMBs that have previously been brought forward.

During our panel: [Unpacking Private Members' Bills](#) we spoke with MP Richard Cannings, Former MP Lenore Zann and Community Activist Lynn Jones about working with the community on drafting a Private Members' Bill. **They highlighted the importance of community buy-in and participation when it comes to gaining support in the House around a specific bill.**

Here are some indicators that could result in a successful PMB:

- Collaboration with the community and securing grassroots buy-in
- Having the right ask, bringing forward bills that are easier to implement and are specific

Approximately 100 PMBs are introduced per year and only 1-2 are likely to be passed

Benefits

Private Members' bills can help to create momentum, awareness and support around environmental issues. Even if a bill or motion does not get passed, it can still produce some victories for the MP and their constituents:

- **Raise awareness of an issue and its importance:** PMBs can raise national awareness about the issues they address and generate support for their proposed solutions.
- **Influence future legislation:** PMBs can generate momentum for similar bills to be brought forward by other parties and/ or for the bill's main policies to be adopted into government legislation or regulatory fixes.
- **Democratic participation:** PMBs allow MPs to focus the attention of Parliament on an issue that is important to their riding and contribute to legitimating Parliament in the eyes of the electorate.
- **Community Organizing:** PMBs provide the chance to build community and organize support on a national scale. They can inspire people to learn about the issues affecting their local communities and encourage people to work with their MPs and MLAs.

Challenges

It can often be an uphill battle to get a PMB passed. Here are just some of the barriers in choosing this route for political advocacy:

- **Time-Consuming:** Private Member's bills can be a very lengthy process with rare success (as in a bill becoming law).
- **Financial Constraint:** PMBs cannot force the government to spend money, requiring local MPs to be creative with their bills.
- **Content:** If a bill becomes law, the bill itself can be drastically altered or watered down when put into policy.
- **Procedural:** The lottery system poses some barriers if your MP are outside the order of precedence. PMBs are often delayed until they die on the Order Paper at the next dissolution of Parliament. PMBs receive limited time for consideration in the House.
- **Political:** PMBs can be mired by Issues with toxic partisanship, especially with bills focused on the environment. Party discipline impacts MPs' flexibility to support certain bills.

1 Private Members' Business

Motions

A motion is a request to bring forward a proposal by a Member of Parliament (MP) in order to get a decision from the House of Commons. The proposal typically asks the House to: “Do something, order something done or express an opinion regarding some matter” ([Our Commons](#)).

Compared to bills, motions have fewer restrictions on their content. For instance, they can endorse spending additional money or express an opinion on something outside of federal jurisdiction.

However, unless a motion is directly related to the day-to-day operations of the House of Commons, motions are not binding and there is no requirement that the House or the government take any action after a motion is adopted.

Why Motions?

Motions are a good tool because **they can bring visibility to an issue.** A Private Member’s Motion is debated twice in the House, giving MPs the opportunity to speak on the issue raised by the motion. **These debates can raise the profile of an idea, and spark broader discussion on an issue.** An eventual vote on a motion also enables MPs to go on the record about their support or opposition to the motion. In this sense, while a bill can be seen as a legal tool, a motion can serve as a political one.

Highlight!

While a bill can be seen as a legal tool, a motion can serve as a political one.

Key Pieces - Private Members' Business

Private Members: private members are members of the House of Commons who are not cabinet ministers or parliamentary secretaries

Private Members’ Business: proposals that can be bills, or motions

Public Bill: deals with national interest and public policy matters under federal jurisdiction

Private Bill: grants special powers, benefits, or exemptions to an individual/group/corporation

Lottery System: Is the random draw that takes place at the beginning of a session of a Parliament, where all members' names are randomly drawn to establish the order for the consideration of Private Members’ Business.

Order of Precedence: the names of the first 30 eligible members from the list of consideration

Outside the Order of Precedence: the names of the eligible members after the first 30 from the list of consideration

Helpful Links

[House of Commons: Order Paper and Notice Paper](#)

[Report: Environmental Leadership in Canada’s Parliament: Realities, Opportunities & Constraints](#)

2 Petitions

A petition can be used to present an issue of public interest to the Government of Canada and request that they take action in response ([Parliament of Canada, 2022](#)). Petitions can be brought to a Member of the House of Commons or a Minister of the Crown. Petitions brought forward by individuals are presented to the House by a Member of Parliament. MPs don't necessarily have to support the petition they are presenting.

Any individual can bring forward a petition (known as a petitioner), either as an e-petition or a paper petition. A petitioner can only bring forward one petition at a time.

E-petitions

Petitions created online and require the support and signature of at least 5 Canadian citizens or residents of Canada. Petitioners can choose to have their E-petition open for signature on the petitioner's website for either 30, 60, 90 or 120 days as outlined by the [Our Commons website](#). The length of time the E-petition is open for cannot be modified once submitted. All petitions must be authorized by an MP in order to be heard in the House of Commons.

After a petition has received enough support, the petitioner can request the authorization of up to five MPs of their choice (one at a time). The MP has 30 days to review the petition and decide whether or not to authorize the petition for publication. If the petition has received at least 500 valid signatures, as verified by the Clerk of Petitions, it will receive a certificate allowing the authorizing MP to present the petition to the House of Commons.

Paper Petitions

Paper petitions require the signatures of at least 25 Canadian citizens or residents. Our Commons has templates and guidelines for creating petitions. Once a paper petition has received the required amount of signatures, a member of parliament must agree to present it on the petitioner's behalf. This member of parliament will send the petition to the Clerk of Petitions to certify it to be heard in the House.

An MP can present a petition to the House of Commons to represent their constituents and their concerns by making statements and asking questions to the House. Grassroots organizations and individuals can help petitions come to life by asking their local MP to support the petition. Unfortunately, the government does not legally need to take action or change anything.

Highlight!

[Learn more about e-petitions here!](#)

2 Petitions

Benefits

Although a successful petition does not always lead to policy-level changes, it can be effective by helping advance a cause. By raising awareness, signaling public opinion to decision-makers, making the media aware of the issue, helping grassroots organizations gain supporters and providing an accessible method of advocacy, petitions can still make lasting changes.

Many individuals and environmental advocacy groups choose petitions as the first step in mobilizing supporters for environmental causes and find success in impacting legislation and policy-making.

Challenges

Unfortunately, a lot of petitions don't have a direct impact on policy and legislation compared to other parliamentary tools. This is because even a petition with millions of signatures still **does not require policymakers to act on it**. Petitions normally attract much less media coverage and engagement from civil society groups. They may still be useful tools for rallying public support around a specific idea.

Indicators for Success?

- Ensure the text of your petition is **clear and concise** - a **specific request** must be included
- Try to keep the request as short as possible - you are only allowed 250 words
- For federal petitions, ensure that the issue is under federal jurisdiction
- E-petitions are typically easier to gain supporters and signatures as they're more accessible and shareable
- Try to gain the support and attention of larger organizations that can help mobilize a larger audience
- Keep your objective in mind when campaigning for signatures
- **Remember!** Third-party petition sites **CANNOT** be tabled in the House of Commons, so be sure to mobilize signatures on a legitimate government platform

Helpful Links

- [Creating a Petition - Format & Content](#)
- You can find a list of current and past Environmental Petitions, how to submit a petition, templates and more here: [Environmental Petitions](#)
- [What To Consider Before Signing A Petition](#)

3 MPs in Caucus

Aside from their formal Parliamentary activities, MPs can also seek to influence other MPs and Senators. For instance, during caucus meetings, MPs discuss policies and parliamentary strategy with members of their own party. Within the caucus, MPs can often openly express their opinions and debate issues and party priorities. The caucus acts as a forum where MPs can discuss their policy differences, providing a platform for MPs to bring forward concerns within their community (Parliament of Canada, 2022). Outside caucus, MPs can also directly engage with other Parliamentarians, including Ministers and members of other parties. These less formal channels for MPs' influence also shape government policies.

What Can You Do?

In these meetings, MPs have the opportunity to talk about what issues are affecting their constituents most. If several MPs are discussing an issue and emphasizing its importance, it will have more weight and could lead to action. Make sure your MP knows what's important in your communities!

You can let your MP know what's going on by:

- Writing a letter
- Sending an email
- Calling their office
- Requesting meeting

Helpful Links:

- [Addresses for Current MPs](#)

4 MPs on Parliamentary Committees

The House of Commons has 24 standing committees, each with a defined policy area, such as Natural Resources or Agriculture and Agri-Food. Within their mandate area, standing committees can review bills, planned government spending, and certain government appointments. Committees can consider issues in more depth than they are able to in the House. While a committee is not a final decision-making body, they can amend bills before they are voted on for the third and final time in the House (Parliament of Canada, 2022).

Committees and individual committee members are also able to launch studies of specific policy issues relevant to their mandate. In the second reading stage of the legislative process of a bill, MPs have the opportunity to amend a motion to refer the subject matter of the bill to a committee for study. It is important to note that a minister has the opportunity to move that a government bill be referred to a committee before second reading. Committees are empowered to hear testimony from subject matter experts, request documents from the government and private entities, publish reports of their findings and make recommendations to the government. Again, while committees cannot directly control government policy, they have the ability to raise the profile of issues and create political pressure for a particular action. Moreover, a Committee's review of a bill can lead to recommendations to change it based on what member's hear from witnesses - for the better or worse.

Helpful Links

- [Committees: Examining Bills and Issues in Depth](#)
- [Current Committee Meetings](#)

Did you know?

You can look up your MP [here](#) to see which committees they sit on!

4 MPs on Parliamentary Committees Cont'd

Standing committees usually have 12 members each. Every party *recognized with official party status* is entitled to at least one member seat on each committee, with larger parties being able to name more members to each committee. As a result, most MPs who are not Ministers are members of at least one committee.

MPs can play important roles on standing committees of the House of Commons, which review and amend bills and can undertake hearings on vital issues. For example, the House Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development recently completed its review of Bill S-5, which amends Canada's overarching pollution law, the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. The bill represents the first significant changes to the law since it was passed in 1999. The Committee passed several amendments to strengthen the bill, with opposition and government MPs working together on many of these amendments.

The contents of the meetings are presented in the House of Commons in a report and can impact policy-making. Some reports include a request that the government respond to its recommendations within 120 days.

Helpful Links

- [Committees: Examining Bills and Issues in Depth](#)
- [Current Committee Meetings](#)

Did you know?

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5 MPs in their Constituency

Along with representing their constituents to Parliament in Ottawa, MPs typically maintain a strong presence in their local communities. While they cannot enact local laws for environmental protection (this responsibility falls to municipal and/or provincial authorities), they can support grassroots environmental leadership in other ways through their community profile, office resources and connections.

MPs have the power to amplify environmental messages and engage members of the community on specific issues. This can happen, for example, through:

- Correspondence with constituents through blogs and newsletters
- Hosting town halls, community meetings or panel events on environmental issues
- Participating in local festivals and/or ceremonies (i.e. a ribbon cutting on a new waste reduction initiative)

MPs are also a valuable resource for environmental advocates in terms of information and connections. For example, advocates can request assistance from an MP's office in identifying federal funding opportunities for local projects.

Lastly, MPs are well-placed to foster connections between various stakeholders and different levels of government. For instance, MPs have been able to use these connections to spur initiatives that require inter-jurisdictional buy-in but that have direct local impact, such as the development of a new national park within their riding's boundaries.

Helpful Links:

- [Addresses for Current MPs](#)