

# **The House of Representatives**

## **The Plenary Assembly**

The 150 directly elected deputies meet in the plenary session. It is held in the plenary assembly room of the House of Representatives<sup>(1)</sup>. This is the aspect of parliamentary proceedings that the public is most familiar with.

### **The composition of the plenary assembly**

Deputies can build political groups. Usually, it concerns deputies belonging to the same political party<sup>(2)</sup>. The recognized political groups are made up of at least five members.

The language groups: the deputies are divided into a Dutch language group and a French language group<sup>(3)</sup>.

### **When are the plenary sessions held?**

In principle the plenary sessions are held on Thursday afternoon. In busy periods, for example at the end of the year when the budget is discussed, there are also plenary sessions on other days.

### **Who chairs the plenary assembly?**

At the beginning of a new parliamentary term (or new session), the House of Representatives is chaired by the outgoing President or, for lack of him, the member with the greatest length of service in the House. He is assisted by the two youngest deputies.

After the election of the Definitive Bureau by the House of Representatives, which consists of a President, three vice-presidents and members of the Bureau, the new President chairs the plenary session.

### **What happens in the plenary session?**

The activities in the plenary session are highly varied. They are dictated by political events. Each week (generally on Wednesday morning), and more frequently if necessary, the Conference of presidents (consisting of the President and vice-presidents of the House, former presidents who are still members of the House, as well as the president and a member of the various political groups) meet to set the agenda for the plenary session. The plenary assembly generally approves the proposed agenda.

#### **» Political control**

##### **Government declaration**

The plenary assembly listens to the government declaration, debates it and then votes its confidence in the government.

##### **Interpellations**

An interpellation allows a deputy to ask one or more federal ministers to account for an act of policy, a given situation, general or specific aspects of government policy<sup>(4)</sup>. To close the debate about an interpellation the deputies can submit motions which are voted on later.

##### **Oral questions**

The oral questions asked in the plenary session must be topical and of a general interest.

In principle, question time is held on Thursday afternoon starting at 14.15.

##### **Topical debate**

When several oral questions are put on the same subject, the President of the House of Representatives, may, on the agreed advice of the presidents of the political groups or on the advice of the Conference of presidents, combine these questions to be dealt in the form of a topical debate.

(1) The plenary assembly room of the House was built in 1817. It was at the disposal of the second chamber of the States General of the Netherlands. The Belgian House of Representatives has sat there since 1831. A fire destroyed the plenary assembly room in 1883. It was rebuilt by H. Beyaert.

(2) See information sheet 10

(3) See information sheet 10

(4) See information sheet 11.02

## » Financial control

One of the essential roles of the House of Representatives is to approve the federal budget and accounts<sup>(5)</sup>.

## » Legislative work

The legislative work begins with the general discussion. This discussion is related to the underlying principle and the whole of a Bill or Private Member's Bill. The debate is generally preceded by a presentation by the rapporteur (the member who wrote the report of the committee discussion). All the deputies may take the floor during the debate. The minister generally takes the floor at the end of the debate to answer the observations made by the deputies.

When a number of deputies wish to speak, the President draws up a list of speakers. The speakers mandated by a group have priority. The President ensures that the advocates and opponents speak in turn.

At the end of the general discussion, the discussion on the articles and any amendments relating to it starts.

## Speaking time

The speaking time is set by the Standing Orders. It is 30 minutes for the general discussion and 15 minutes for the discussion on the articles. The author of an amendment has 5 minutes to speak. For important Bills or Private Member's Bills the Conference of presidents (see above) sometimes proposes to depart from these rules. Each member can ask to speak during the debate by order motion, provided that it is declared admissible by the President. A member can ask to speak because of a personal fact (e.g.: a personal attack).

## Vote<sup>(6)</sup>

After the closure of the debate, explanations for votes can be expressed. The Standing Orders stipulate that the House votes by a name call or by sitting and standing. In practice the vote is generally done electronically.

It is logical for the decisions to be taken by a vote, majority against opposition. The 150 deputies in fact represent the different convictions and trends within society. A consensus is consequently exceptional.

After the vote, a member who has abstained from voting can express the reasons for his (her) abstention.

## The public nature of the sessions

In principle, the plenary sessions are public. All and one may attend them. The visitors have access to the Parliament through the rear entrance, located Leuvenseweg 13. They have to show their identification card at the document desk.

The citizens can inform themselves through a large number of channels.

- They can follow the plenary meeting live via the House's website and also watch preceeding meetings.
- They can consult the integral report and the summary report of the meetings on the website. In the integral report, the debates are published in the language of the speaker. The summary report contains concise minutes of the debates in Dutch and French.
- They can inform themselves on the parliamentary activities via television, radio, newspapers and magazines.

On the request of the President or ten deputies, the House may decide to meet in camera.

## Reports of meetings

### » Integral report

Everything said in a plenary session is entered in an integral report. These reports, written only in the language of the speaker, are available at the website of the House two hours after the meeting. For public sessions of the House of Representatives, a copy of the integral report signed by the President and the clerk constitutes the record of the proceedings.

### » Summary report

During the session, writers make a summary of the discussions. The text of this summary is available on the House's website in French and Dutch on the day after a meeting.

(5) See information sheet 11.01

(6) See information sheet 13.02