



The House of
Representatives

The House of Representatives Bodies: the Committees

General

An important part of parliamentary work is done in committees. The committees are to a large extent responsible for the preparatory legislative work and for monitoring the government.

Each committee is competent for a well defined field (for example justice, national defence, etc) and its members are specialised in the area in question. Consisting of a limited group of parliamentarians, the committees allow work to be done in a more effective manner.

Because of this specialisation, the importance of the committees has grown in recent years. They are currently taking on a certain number of tasks that used to be given to the plenary assembly.

Composition

After each renewal of the House of Representatives (i.e. after the legislative elections) it appoints the standing committees from among its deputies.

The standing committees consist of 17 members. The other committees consist of a variable number of members. The appointments are done by proportional representation of the political groups within the plenary assembly.

The number of seats allocated to each group in the standing committees is as follows:

<i>VLD</i> ⁽¹⁾ :	3
<i>PS</i> :	3

<i>MR</i> :	3
<i>sp.a-Spirit</i> :	3
<i>CD&V</i> :	2
<i>Vlaams Belang</i> :	2
<i>cdH</i> :	1

Deputies who do not form part of a group or who form part of a small group may also participate in the work of one or more committees, but without being entitled to vote.

In addition to the permanent members, the committees also have substitute members.

Role

► Preparatory legislative work

The committees examine and perhaps amend the Bills and Private Member's Bills. The Bills and Private Member's Bills are put to the vote. The rapporteur (or rapporteurs) draws up a report of the proceedings. The rapporteurs are appointed by their colleagues on the committee. The report and the text adopted by the committee are submitted to the plenary assembly which takes the final decision.

► Government control

The committee members may send requests for explanation to members of the federal government. Since 1997 most of the oral questions and interpellations have been held in the committees.

Only the most important interpellations and oral questions are still done in the plenary session.

⁽¹⁾ See information sheet 10 - Meaning of the Parties acronyms.

The committees may organise hearings or meetings in order to inform other members. The committee may also request the presence of a minister.

Workings of a committee

In principle the committee meetings are public. A certain number of committees meet in camera: Committee on prosecution, naturalisation Committee, Committee on revision of the Constitution, Committee on bookkeeping.

The meetings are managed by a chairman. Each committee appoints a chairman from among its members, in compliance with the advice of the President of the House of Representatives. The chairmanships are distributed in proportion among the largest groups.

The committee chairmen have the same competences at the committee level as the President of the House of Representatives at the plenary session level: order, observance of the Standing Orders, admissibility of texts. Convening the committee is one of the specific competences of the chairman. He is assisted by one or more civil servants, called administrative secretaries.

The committee's agenda is set by the committee and its chairman. The conference of presidents may issue directives. With regard to the legislative work, priority is given to Bills and budgets. A quorum is not required to start a meeting or to examine the Bills and Private Member's Bills. It is however required for adopting a report.

Committees in the House of Representatives

There are different types of committee:

► The standing committees:

The standing committees were only introduced in 1920. There used to be a system of sections in which the members were appointed by drawing lots. The system of sections continued until well after 1920.

There are nine standing committees:

- Committee on economy, scientific policy, national, scientific and cultural institution and agriculture.
- Committee on internal affairs, general affairs and administration.
- Committee on foreign affairs.
- Committee on public finances and budget.
- Committee on infrastructure, traffic and public companies.
- Committee on justice.
- Committee on defence.
- Committee on social affairs.
- Committee on public health, the environment, and the renewal of society.

► The special or temporary committees:

These committees are created for the purpose of examining a specific Bill or Private Member's Bill. Their role is limited to a well defined assignment (for example a committee on constitutional revision and institutional reform, naturalisation committee, special committee on the regulation and reform of parliamentary work, committee on petitions)

► Committees of enquiry

The House has a right of enquiry (article 56 of the Constitution) and may create enquiry committees. These committees enquire about problems that arise in our society (for example sects, the disappearance of children, the bankruptcy of Sabena).

► Advisory committees:

- The advisory committee on European affairs

This committee consists of 10 members of the House of Representatives and 10 Belgian members of the European Parliament. It is chaired by the President of the House. The advisory committee organises the work between the European Parliament and the House of Representatives and gives advice on European affairs.

- The advisory committee on social emancipation.

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