

The House of Representatives

Bodies

The House determines the way in which it exercises its duties (article 60 of the Constitution). The workings of the House are determined by its Rules of procedure which are approved by the plenary session. The Rules of procedure provide for several bodies. There are:

- Political bodies: they carry out the parliamentary assignments (regulating, controlling government, etc)
- Management bodies: they allow the House to carry out parliamentary assignments as optimal as possible.

Political bodies

» Plenary session

The plenary session is the meeting of the 150 directly elected deputies who sit in the plenary assembly room of the House⁽¹⁾⁽¹⁾. The debates and votes on government declarations, Private Member's Bills (legislative initiative of members of the House of Representatives), Bills (legislative initiative of the Federal government), amendments and the budget are dealt with in the plenary session.

In the plenary session the members of the House may also interpellate ministers and ask them oral questions.

The organisation of the debates (eg. speaking time) is determined by the Rules of procedure or by the Conference of presidents (see below). The votes are sometimes done by standing and sitting, but mainly by electronically done call-over.

In principle, the session is public. This means that the public are admitted to the galleries. Exceptionally, the members of the House may meet in camera.

» The President

The President⁽²⁾⁽²⁾ is the representative of the House as an institution. He is elected by the plenary assembly for the duration of a session (from the second Tuesday of October to the second Tuesday of October of the following year). In practice, he stays in office for the duration of the parliamentary term (in principle 5 years unless the House is dissolved beforehand). In general, he is a member of the majority. In consultation with the presidents of the political groups, he manages the activities of the House and in order to do this he has considerable powers. He maintains order during the sessions, requests the advice of the Council of State regarding Bills, etc.

» Committees

Types

- Standing committees: their competences are to a large extent identical to those of the ministerial departments (eg. external relations, finance, social affairs, national defence, etc).
- Temporary committees: are set up to examine certain Bills or Private Member's Bills.
- Special committees: naturalisations, petitions, committee assisting the Standing Committee on monitoring Police Services and the Intelligence Services, etc.
- Advisory committees: these are committees that work in specific areas (eg. the advisory committee on European affairs consisting of ten members of the House of Representatives and ten Belgian members of the European Parliament).
- Enquiry committees: the House is entitled to conduct enquiries (article 56 of the Constitution). The enquiry committees are set up by the plenary assembly to solve problems arising in a sector of life in society.

1 The plenary assembly hall of the House was built in 1817 to house the second chamber of the States General of the Netherlands. The Belgian House of Representatives has sat there since 1831. A fire destroyed the hall in 1883. It was rebuilt by H. Beyaert in 1886.

2 The current President of the House is Mr Peter De Roover, who is part of the N-VA-group.

Composition

The standing committees consist of 17 members. The other committees have a variable number of members. The political composition of the committees is proportional to the number of seats the groups have in the plenary assembly. Members specialised in certain fields sit on them. The committees are chaired by a committee chairman. The chairmanships are distributed among the different groups proportionally, no matter whether they belong to the majority or the opposition.

Workings

The proceedings of the plenary session are prepared in the committees as the work can be done more effectively and quickly in this way. The Bills and Private Member's Bills are discussed, amended and then submitted to the plenary assembly with a report.

The committees are taking on an increasing amount of parliamentary work that used to be done in the plenary session. The committee members may put questions to the ministers and interpellate them (the votes on motions however take place in the plenary session). The centre of gravity of parliamentary work lies with the committees.

Generally the committee meetings are public. Exceptionnally, committees meet in camera.

» Conference of presidents

This consists of the President and vice-presidents of the House of Representatives, former presidents who are still deputies, and the president and a member of each political group. A minister responsible for the relations with the house attends these meetings.

Each week the Conference discusses the working rules of the plenary session (eg. speaking time) and the coordination between the different bodies of the House of Representatives. It also decides on the opportunity of all matters submitted to it (eg. sending parliamentary delegations abroad).

The Conference is one of the most important bodies of the House.

Management bodies

» The Bureau

Composition:

- A President appointed by the plenary assembly, three vice-presidents and members of the Bureau appointed on a proposal by the political groups
- The former presidents of the House
- As many "associated" members as necessary so that each political group has at least one representative within the Bureau
- The presidents of the political groups.

The Bureau has general authority for the management of the House. In this respect it determines the status of the personnel and the bodies of the House. It appoints and dismisses members of staff.

» The Management Committee

The Management Committee is an integral part of the Bureau, and consists of three vice-presidents and two members of the Bureau of the House. It is charged with preparing decisions by the Bureau and following-up the implementation of these decisions. It draws up the draft budget and the draft accounts of the House.

» The Accounts Committee

This committee, chaired by the President of the House of Representatives, consists of eleven members and is responsible for examining the accounts of the House funds.

On the proposal of the Management Committee, this committee determines the House of Representatives' budget and accounts and submits them to the plenary session for its approval.

» The clerk

The clerk, with the rank of secretary-general, is appointed for a period of indefinite duration by the plenary assembly. He is the adviser to the President. He has authority over all the departments of the House of Representatives and their personnel.