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The Federal Parliament

The Belgian House of Representatives
and Senate

This guide contains a concise description of the workings
of the House of Representatives and the Senate,
and the rooms that you will be visiting.

**The numbers shown in the margins refer to points of interest
that you will see on the tour.**



INTRODUCTION

The Palace of the Nation is the seat of the federal parliament.

It is composed of two chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate.
The House and the Senate differ in terms of their composition and competences.

150 representatives elected by direct universal suffrage sit in the House of Representatives.

The Senate has 60 members. 50 senators are appointed by the regional and community parliaments, and 10 senators are co-opted.

The House of Representatives and the Senate are above all legislators. They make laws.

The **House** is **competent for laws of every kind**.

The **Senate** is **competent on an equal footing with the House** for:

- Constitutional reform
- Basic laws relating to the structure, the workings and the institutions of the State, which have to be adopted by a special majority
- Laws concerning political party financing and laws concerning the control of electoral expenditure.

In a limited number of matters, the **Senate** can **evoke** and **amend** certain bills which the House adopted, but the **House** always has the **last word**.

The House and the Senate also have other competencies:

The House:

- Examines the governmental declaration and grants its confidence to the government
- Checks and challenges the work of the government and can pass a motion of no confidence
- discusses the budgets
- Can set up committees of inquiry
- Takes part in international parliamentary meetings.

The Senate:

- Drafts information reports about transversal matters, i.e. subjects where the powers of the federal government, the regions and communities overlap
- Takes part in meetings of international parliamentary organizations
- Mediates in the event of conflict between the country's parliaments.



The House of Representatives is the assembly to which the federal government must answer for its policy (for more explanations see p. 32 onward); the Senate is the assembly representing the regions and linguistic communities of the Belgian federation. Via their senators, the regions and linguistic communities have their say in federal policy (for more explanations, see p. 36 onward). Almost all federal states in the world have a bicameral system.

THE BUILDING

After the fire which destroyed the Palace of the Dukes of Brabant in 1731, the surroundings of “Place Royale” and the Park of Brussels were rebuilt according to the plans laid down by architect Barnabé Guimard. At the same time, it was decided to construct the building, which is now the seat of the federal parliament.

The first stone was laid in 1779 under the government of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, who ruled over what was later to become Belgium.

The palace was built in neoclassical style. This balanced and symmetrical style dates back to the second half of the eighteenth century and aptly represents the ideas which were prominent during the Age of Enlightenment.

Initially, the palace was designed to house the Sovereign Council of Brabant which was the supreme body of the Duchy of Brabant at that time, in legal and administrative matters.

Under French rule (1796-1815), the palace was used as a courthouse. In the wing, which the Senate currently occupies, a «House for Foreigners» was run for several years.



Under Dutch rule (1815-1830), the Parliament of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, known as the States-General, alternated its sessions between the Hague and the Palace of the Nation in Brussels. This was the first time that the palace was used to house a parliament.

After the Belgian Revolution in 1830, the provisional government (the government of the Belgian revolutionaries) and the National Congress (the first constituent “parliamentary” assembly) settled into the building.

The House of Representatives and the Senate have held their sessions in this building since 1831. It has been called the «Palace of the Nation» since then.

The palace was devastated by fire in 1820 and 1883. Following these fires and as a result of the various changes of use of the palace, the interior constantly underwent renovations. The exterior of the palace, however, remains practically the same as it was when it was first built. Nevertheless, the front of the palace, which had been painted white according to neoclassical tradition, was roughcast during renovation in 1920.

THE TYMPANUM

The most striking element on the front of the palace is certainly the triangular-shaped sculpture above the columns. Gilles-Lambert Godecharle sculpted this high-relief tympanum, which represents Justice in 1781.

THE PERISTYLE

The peristyle is the central welcoming and meeting point of the Palace of the Nation. Visitors will certainly recognize this vast hall due to the fact that numerous television interviews with representatives and senators are being held here.

On either side of the peristyle, there is a monumental staircase. The staircase to the right, covered in green carpet, leads to the House of Representatives; the one to the left, covered in red carpet, leads to the Senate.

Green is the House of Representatives' colour; red is the Senate's colour.

The Doric columns are reminders of the fact that the neoclassical style was inspired by Greco-Roman elements (columns, porticos, harmonic proportions, golden section, ...).



- 1** Immediately to the right of the main entrance, there are **two copper plates**: the first plate commemorates the laying the first stone of the Palace of the Nation on 24th August 1779; the second plate commemorates the reconstruction of the Palace after the fire which destroyed the House of Representatives in 1883.
- Statues representing famous figures in our history:**
- 2** **John I**, duke of Brabant, who united the duchies of Brabant and Limbourg. The statue was sculpted by Charles Geerts (1807-1855).
- 3** **Philip the Good** who succeeded in uniting the Belgian provinces during his reign. For this achievement, Juste Lipse gave him the title of «Conditior Belgii» (Founder of Belgium). The statue was sculpted by Jean-Baptiste De Cuyper (1807-1852).
- 4** **Charles V**, wearing the great necklace of the Order of the Golden Fleece. In his right hand, he holds a parchment bearing the name of the city of Tunis. Charles V took the city of Tunis in order to prevent the Turkish invasion of the western side of the Mediterranean region. The statue was sculpted by Jean-Baptiste De Bay (1779-1863).



The House
of Representatives

A typical week in the House of Representatives	
Monday	Committee meetings (if need be)
Tuesday	Committee meetings and sometimes plenary session
Wednesday	Committee meetings and sometimes plenary session
Thursday	Political group meetings and plenary session which includes a Question Time from 2.15 p.m. onward, followed by the vote on private member's bills and draft bills
Friday	Committee meetings (if need be)

THE MAIN STAIRCASE

- 5
- At the top of the main staircase, **the stained-glass windows** draw the attention. The lions and the lictors' fasces with the birch and the axes symbolize the authority and power of the State, which must implement the laws («Lex» = law) adopted by the representatives of the nation.

The date on the left stained-glass window refers to the beginning of World War I ; the date on the right one, refers to its end.

Busts of our former prime ministers adorn the hallways of the House. Traditionally, the bust of each prime minister is sculpted by a Belgian artist. **The one-time Presidents of the House** are immortalized in a **painting**.

On both sides of the stained-glass windows, stand the busts of the two prime ministers who governed Belgium after World War I.

6

Léon Delacroix, prime minister of the first Belgian government after World War I held the first legislative election on 16th November 1919. This election was important because it introduced universal single suffrage for all 21-year-old men (one man, one vote) before this balloting system principle was written into the constitution.



Premier Léon Delacroix
(1867-1929)



Premier Henry Carton de Wiart
(1869-1951)

7

Under the government of **Henry Carton de Wiart**, on 7th February 1921, the constitution was adapted in that sense.

8

In the display cabinet on the left hand side: a XIXth century parliamentary gown.

9

The screen lists the meetings taking place in the House of Representatives.

10

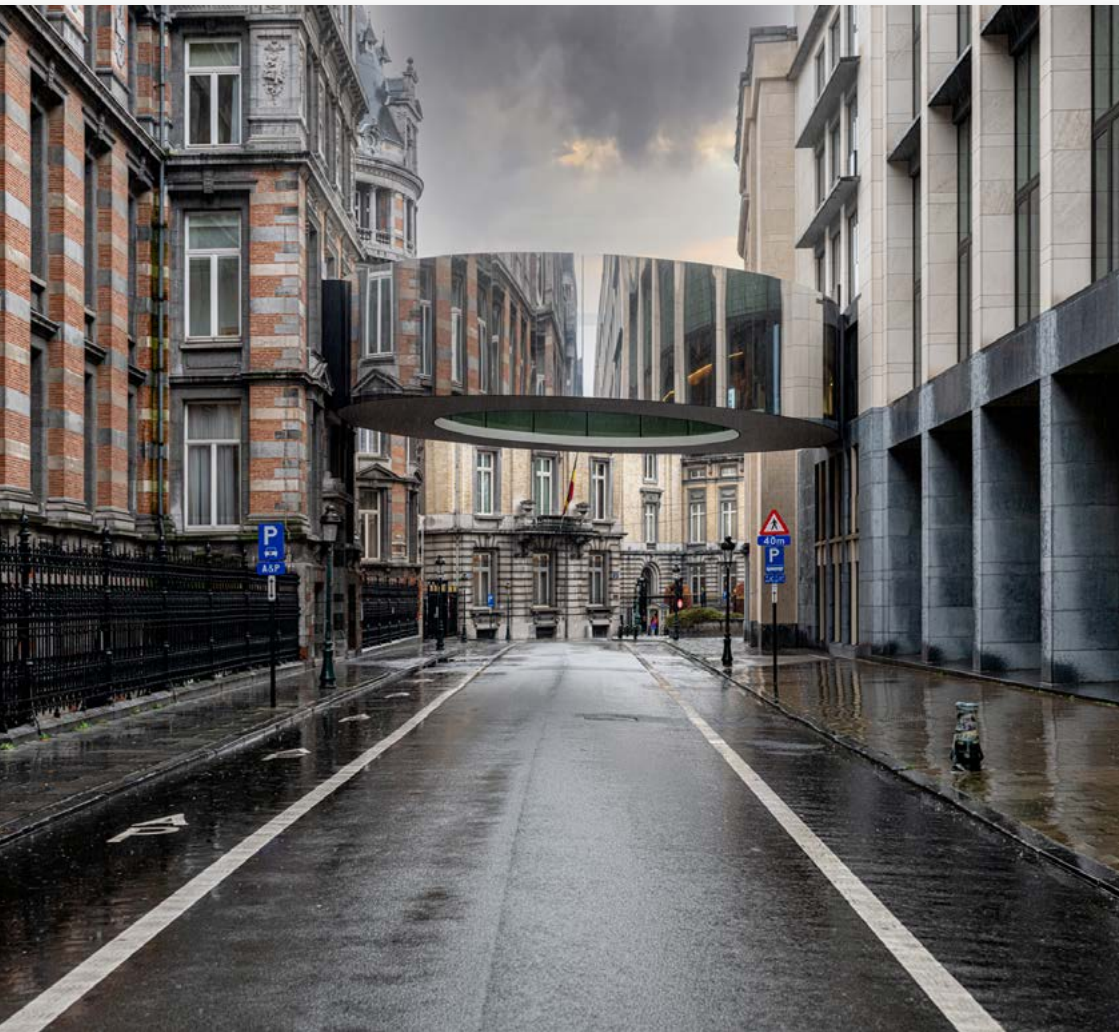
The bust of King Leopold I, sculpted by Guillaume Geefs (1805-1883).

11

Behind it, on the left, hangs a painting by **Jo Delahaut** (1911-1992) and on the right, a work by **Luc Peire** (1916-1994). These two Belgian painters are famous for their work in the field of abstract geometrism.

**OPTIONAL: VISIT TO THE TONDO AND THE FORUM BUILDING VIA THE
HOUSE OF THE PARLIAMENTARIANS**

If you want to continue without that option, go straight to page 17



The passages to the left and right of the bust of Leopold I give access to the House of the Parliamentarians. Architect Hendrik Beyaert (1823-1894) had it built in 1891. For a long time, it housed the Ministry of Railways, Posts and Telegraphs and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs. Around 1985 the parliament moved the offices of the members of parliament and their staff there.

- A On the footbridge between the historic building and the House of Representatives there is a work by the Brussels artist Bert De Keyser (b. 1937): "3 x Brussels". The interaction between past, present and future, between tradition and modernity, between reflection and movement, is one of the characteristics of this installation.
- B In the corridors of the House of Representatives, there are works of art from the second half of the 20th century.
- C The 'Tondo', inaugurated in 2021, is the footbridge connecting the House of the Parliamentarians with the Forum building. The Brussels design office Kersten Geers David Van Severen won the competition organised for the selection of an architectural firm with a project that excelled by "its originality, its appearance and its coherent architecture". The Tondo distinguishes itself from the buildings it connects by its round shape and its transparency on the inside. The outer wall is made of polished aluminium. This creates the appearance of a mirrored facade in which the buildings of the Leuvensweg are reflected.



- D. In autumn 2016, the House moved into a new building, the 'Forum'. It houses new committee rooms, the library of the House and many offices.
- E. Marie Popelin and Marguerite Yourcenar rooms are two of the six spacious committee rooms in the Forum building. These rooms are equipped with the latest IT and multimedia infrastructure.
- F. The large photographs of King Albert II and Queen Paola from 2002 are by photographer Dirk Braeckman (b. 1958) who, in a different medium, continues the tradition of the painted portraits of the monarchs (print edition for the House from 2016).
- G. In the lobby in front of the Popelin and Yourcenar rooms are the most recent busts of prime ministers: that of Yves Leterme by Willy Peeters (°1957), that of Herman Van Rompuy by Wilfried Pas (1940-2017) and that of Elio Di Rupo by the French sculptor Gérard Lartigue (°1963).



- 12** The members' **cafeteria**
- 13** The former phone booths of the members have been kept.
- The busts of the prime ministers who governed Belgium during the period prior to and following World War II:
- 14** Jules Renkin (1862-1934) was prime minister during the Great Depression of the thirties.
- 15** Paul-Henri Spaak (1899-1972) was Minister of Foreign Affairs during many years and also became Secretary General of N.A.T.O.; he presided the very first General Assembly of the United Nations in 1946.
- 16** Hubert Pierlot (1883-1963) was prime minister of the Belgian government in exile in London (from 1940 to 1944).
- 17** Paul van Zeeland (1893-1973) was the prime minister who, in 1935, saved the country from the economic crisis caused by the Great Depression. He also ran as the only candidate representing the traditional parties and defeated the rexist (pro-nazi) Leon Degrelle in the famous partial elections held on 11th April 1937.
- 18** Achille Van Acker (1898-1975) was one of the fathers of an economy based on consultation and the Belgian Social Security system immediately after World War II; that system is basically financed and managed by three actors: the government, the trade unions and the employers.
- 19** The bronze effigy of Paul-Emile Janson (1872-1944) who was prime minister from 23rd December 1937 to 13th May 1938. He died in the concentration camp of Buchenwald.

THE COMMITTEE ROOMS



Most parliamentary activities take place at committee level.



Each draft bill (that is new legislation introduced by cabinet ministers) and private member's bill (that is new legislation introduced by one or more representatives or senators) is examined at the committee level first.

After discussing the proposed legislation, the committees vote and draw up a report. The text that has been adopted by the committee is then submitted to the House of Representatives in plenary session.

The committee members can also question and interpellate ministers or set up hearings in the course of which outside experts can be called upon.

Most of the committee debates are open to the public.

The House of Representatives has eleven standing committees consisting of 17 members each. There are also various special committees and several advisory committees.

The House can also set up committees of inquiry.

The political composition of these committees matches that of the plenary assembly of the House of Representatives itself.

The first room (room 3)

20

The bust is the work of Arthur Dupagne (1889-1980) and represents **Prince Charles** (1903-1983) who was Regent of Belgium from September 1944 to July 1950, replacing his brother King Leopold III.

21

The largest of the three paintings in this room was done by Léon Devos (1897-1974) and Jacques Maes (1905-1968). It shows **H.M. King Leopold III taking the oath** (23rd February 1934) before both chambers in joint session, pronouncing the words: «I swear to abide by the constitution and laws of the Belgian people, to maintain the independence of our nation, and to keep our territory united as one». For solemn events, like the oath taking by the King, members of the House of Representatives and senators meet in joint session in the plenary room of the House of Representatives.

22

The painting next to the chimney was done by Jules Starck (1814-1884) and depicts **the last speech from the throne given by H.M. King Leopold I** (1863). As it is still the tradition today in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, the King of Belgium read a speech from the throne to all the representatives and senators in joint session in the plenary room of the House of Representatives for the opening of parliament. This practice was abandoned under the reign of H.M. King Leopold II.

23

The painting to the left of «The King taking the oath» depicts a heated debate being held in the House of Representatives during the struggle between Catholics and Liberals over the control of education which lasted from 1878 to 1884 (the «School War»). Addressing the assembly, the Liberal Minister of Public Education, Pierre Van Humbeek, defends his education policy (in favour of state schools) amidst violent criticism from the Catholic opposition. Standing between the benches, we can see the figure of Walthère Frère-Orban (1812-1896), who was prime minister of the Liberal government. This painting was done by Ernest Blanc-Garin (1843-1916).



The second room

- 24 The large painting by Jules Cran (1876-1926) shows **H.M. King Albert I** taking the oath (23rd December 1909).
- 25-26 The three portraits of human rights defenders **Paul Janson**, **Paul Hymans** and **Edward Anseele** were painted by Marie Terlamen (1895-1991). The President of the House, Camille Huysmans, wanted to pay tribute to them with these portraits around 1955.
- 27 The bust of **Willem I**, King of the Netherlands (Belgium was a part of this kingdom between 1815 and 1830) sculpted by François Rude (1784-1855), a French artist who also chiseled a bas-relief decorating the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.
It is a typical neoclassical portrait: Willem I is portrayed as a Roman emperor.



The third room (room I)

- 28 The painting by Jules Starck (1814-1884) entitled **H.M. King Leopold II taking the oath** (17th December 1865) occupies a central position in this room. The painting depicts the House of Representatives as it appeared in the first half of the XIXth century before it was damaged by fire in 1883.
- 29 A portrait of **Emile Vandervelde** (1866-1938) painted by Isidore Opsomer (1878-1967), an artist from Antwerp. Vandervelde was one of the founders of the Belgian Worker's Party (1885), which later became the Socialist Party.



The **Bureau** and the **Conference of Presidents** meet in this room.

The Bureau is the management (executive) body of the House of Representatives. It is chaired by the President of the House of Representatives.

The Conference of Presidents organises parliamentary proceedings and comprises the President of the House of Representatives and the leaders of the political groups.

- 30 A portrait of **Charles Woeste** (1837-1922), an eminent Catholic conservative representative and co-founder of the Catholic Party (1884).
- 31 To the right, the “**Salon des ambassadeurs**”, an office where Bureau members and committee presidents welcome guests.
- 32 The painting on the left side depicts the inner courtyard of the **Palace of the Dukes of Brabant**. This courtyard leads to what is now “Place Royale”.
- The busts of the prime ministers who governed the country during the 1950s and 1960s
- 33 The bust of prime minister **Theo Lefèvre** (1914-1973) sculpted by Oscar Jaspers (1887-1970) is an example of a modern portrait and daring interpretation of a model by an artist.
- 34 The one of **Pierre Harmel** by Idel Ianchelevici (1909-1994) strikes us by its original interpretation.
- Outside, in the garden, stands a **fountain with sculptures of youngsters** by sculptor George Minne (1886-1941). Minne, who was a close friend of Camille Huysmans (1871-1968), former President of the House of Representatives, donated this fountain to the parliament after the world exhibition in 1935. The sculptures were restored in 2022. At that time, the vase of Charles Brunin (1841-1887) was also restored, which symbolises the parliamentary elections of 1883 (by means of the census suffrage system).
- 35 **Busts of more recent prime ministers**
- The busts of **Wilfried Martens**, by José Vermeersch (1922-1997), of **Mark Eyskens**, by Willy Peeters (°1957) and of **Jean-Luc Dehaene** by Rik Poot (1924-2006) are characteristic of the modern design with which official portraits are done. Rather than showing a physical resemblance, the artists have attempted to express the prime ministers’ personalities. The most recent busts, namely those of Herman Van Rompuy, Yves Leterme and Elio Di Rupo are made of bronze and are located in the Forum building.



Fountain with sculptures of youngsters



Herman Van Rompuy



*Sculptor Gérard Lartigue next to the bust of
Elio Di Rupo*

The hemicycle

The plenary session room was built in 1817 to house the Second House of the States-General of the Netherlands.

After the Belgian Revolution of 1830, the 200 members of the National Congress held session here. It is in this very room that the constitution for an independent Belgium was drawn up.

The House of Representatives has been meeting in this room since 1831. In 1883, the room was completely destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt by Henri Beyaert and solemnly inaugurated in 1886 by King Leopold II.

In 1831, the House of Representatives had only 102 members. This number gradually increased as the population grew. Following the 1993 revision of the constitution, the number of representatives was reduced from 212 to 150.

In order to become a member of the House, one must be Belgian, not have had one's civil and political rights withdrawn, and be at least 18 years old.

The 150 representatives are directly elected by universal suffrage in 11 constituencies. The representatives are divided into linguistic (89 Dutch speakers / 61 French speakers) and political groups. A political group is constituted when at least 5 members of the same party hold seats in the House of Representatives.

Several important dates in the history of Belgium on either side of the statue of King Leopold I:

26th September 1830	Formation of the Provisional Government
10th November 1830	First meeting of the National Congress
18th November 1830	Solemn proclamation of the independence of Belgium
21st July 1831	Oath taking of King Leopold I at "Place Royale" in Brussels; 21st July is the National Day of Belgium
7th February 1831	Promulgation of the Belgian Constitution;
25th February 1831	Oath taking of Regent Louis Surlet de Chokier; transfer of power by the Provisional government to the National Congress
4th June 1831	Election of Prince Leopold of Saxe Coburg Gotha as the first King of Belgium.

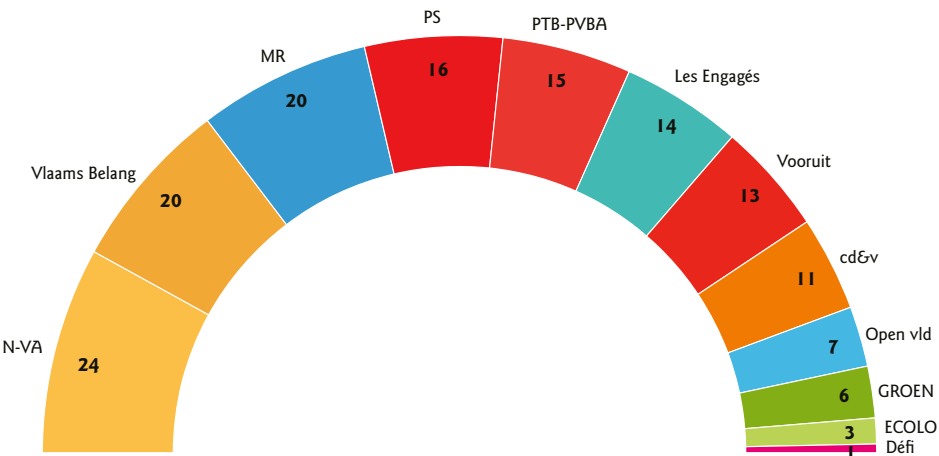
The plenary session room of the House of Representatives is undeniably sober.

The sculpted portrait of King Leopold I, by Ch.-A Fraikin (1817-1893), overlooks the room.





Composition of the House of Representatives based on the results of the 9 June 2024 elections



N-VA	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie
Vlaams Belang	Vlaams Belang
MR	Mouvement Réformateur
PS	Parti Socialiste
PTB-PVDA	Parti du Travail de Belgique - Partij van de Arbeid van België
Les Engagés	Les Engagés
Vooruit	Vooruit
CD&V	Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams
Open Vld	Open Vlaamse liberalen en democraten
Ecolo-Groen	<i>The French-speaking ecologists (ecolo) and the Flemish ecologists (Groen) have formed one political group in the House</i>
DéFi	Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant

- 36 The **President** of the House takes place in the chair under the statue of King Leopold I, which faces the room.
- 37 The **Secretary General** and his deputies, who assist the President during the plenary sessions, sit in the chairs behind the President. The Secretary-General is the highest-ranking official of the House.
- 38 The representatives address the assembly from the **rostrum** (= the speaker's platform) below the Presidential bureau.
- 39 The representatives ask questions to the government each Thursday afternoon from the **Question Time bench**.
- 40 Seated at the table to the right of the Presidential platform, the **writers** draw up a summary of the debates. The reports of the plenary session will be published on the website of the House only a few hours after the meeting.
- 41 The two **screens** at the front, on either side of the Presidential platform indicate the agenda item which is being examined as well as the speaker's name.
- 42 The room is equipped with cameras, some of which are webcams that automatically move towards the speaker. This allows you to follow the debates in plenary sessions live on our website **www.lachambre.be – www.dekamer.be** or to view the archived images of previous sessions. The House of Representatives also makes the images available free of charge to the media.
- 43 To the left and to the right of the screens, the **voting panels** display the representatives' votes. The benches of the representatives are equipped with **voting keys**: green for yeas (affirmative votes), red for nays (negative votes), and white for abstentions. The number corresponding to the representative's seat lights up on the voting panel in either green, red or white, according to his or her choice.
In this way each citizen can precisely check the vote of his representative. The verbatim report (also to be consulted on **www.lachambre.be – www.dekamer.be**) mentions these votes.

44

After each vote, the total results appear on the two **voting panels** located on the left and on the right of the room next to the platforms.

In the gallery in front, above the left voting panel, **interpreters** translate simultaneously from French into Dutch or vice versa.

The **galleries** around the hemicycle all have a very specific function:

- The gallery to the right of the statue of King Leopold I allows senators to keep up with the debates going on in the hemicycle of the House of Representatives.
- The gallery to the left of the statue is reserved for the military commander of the Palace of the Nation and for the diplomatic corps.
- To the left of the diplomatic corps gallery, we find the royal gallery.
- To the left of the royal gallery, the verbatim report of the meetings is drafted.
- The gallery located on the first floor is reserved for members of the press, the guests of the President and the collaborators of the ministers.
- The debates held in the House of Representatives are primarily open to the public. The gallery on the second floor is reserved for the public.

The conference room

In this room, journalists meet representatives and ministers on days of plenary meetings.

The busts of famous XIXth century politicians

45

Auguste Beernaert (1829-1912): a Catholic who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1909. During his term at the head of the Belgian government, plural universal suffrage for adult men was instituted in 1893.

46

Walthère Frère-Orban (1812-1896): a Liberal conservative who was one of the main opponents of universal suffrage and a defender of the system of vote based on property qualification.

- 47 Erasme Louis Surlet de Chokier (1769-1839): a moderate Liberal, President of the National Congress and first Regent of Belgium.
- 48 Etienne Constantin de Gerlache (1785-1871): a Catholic who was the head of the government for some days, President of the House, and First President of the Supreme Court of Justice for 35 years.
- 49 Portraits of **Queen Louise-Marie** (1812-1850) and **King Leopold I** (1790 - 1865) by Fanny Geefs-Corr (1807-1883). These are the first works of art in parliament that were made by a woman..





What is the role of the House of Representatives?

To make legislation

The House of Representatives, together with the Senate, has powers regarding the constitution and the fundamental legislation about the structure, workings and institutions of the State which must be adopted by a special majority. In some matters, the Senate may propose amendments within certain timescales to texts that have been adopted by the House. In this case, however, the House has the final say. The House has competence in all other areas of legislation, to the exclusion of the Senate.

To form a governing majority (government making power)

Without a vote of confidence from the House of Representatives, the new government cannot work. The members of the House of Representatives who support the government constitute the majority whereas the others constitute the opposition.

To monitor government policy

The House of Representatives monitors the federal government. Only the House of Representatives can call the government or a minister to order and, if necessary, withdraw its confidence in the government. Interpellation is one of the means of monitoring government policy available to members of the House. In addition, Members of the House submit dozens of oral and written questions each week to members of the federal government.

To control public finances

The House of Representatives has the power to control the finances of the federal State. The Court of Auditors provides assistance to the House of Representatives in carrying out its task of controlling public accounts.

To investigate social issues

The house may set up commissions of inquiry and special committees to investigate social issues. Based on this information, legislative initiatives and policy measures are taken. The most recent example is the Commission of Inquiry into Sexual Abuse. It heard victims of sexual abuse, church institutions, the police, the judiciary and social workers. It identified needs and shortcomings. The final report with over 130 recommendations is available at www.dekamer.be.

Any more tasks...

The House of Representatives nominates the federal ombudsmen whose task is to examine complaints from citizens; The House also nominates councillors to the Court of Auditors ...



The reading room

This room is one of the oldest rooms in the Palace of the Nation. After the revolution against Dutch rule in September 1830, the Provisional Government met in this room. This government took power in 1830 and laid the foundations for an independent Belgian State. It set up a Constituent Committee, which drew up a very progressive constitution for the times. The hemicycle of the Senate was only completed in 1849. From 1831 to 1849, the Senate met in the reading room of the House.

50

On either side of the room stand the busts of the members of the Provisional Government.

The wall on the right-hand side is entirely dedicated to the gallery of portraits of former Presidents of the House of Representatives.

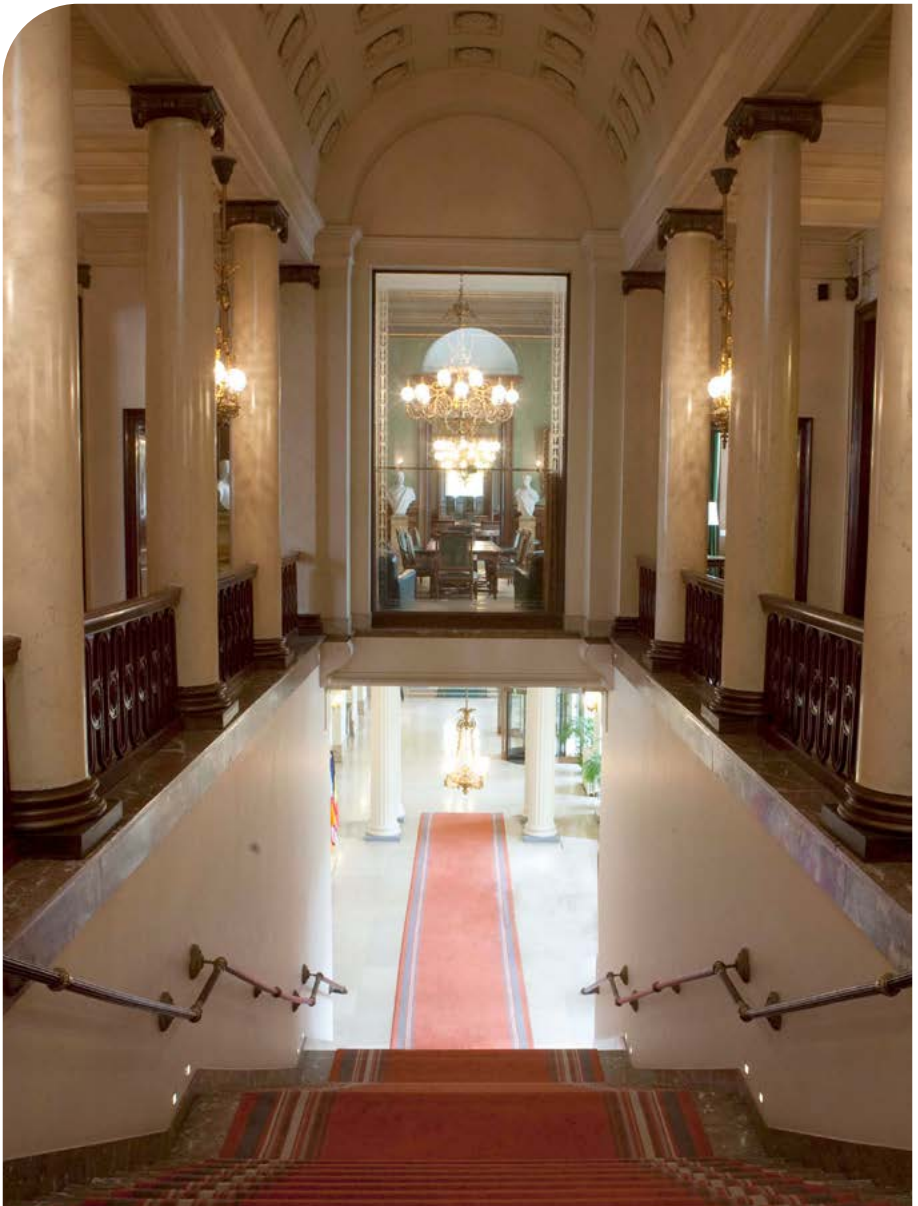
Many of the portraits in this room were painted by renowned Belgian artists, as for example, the portrait of Prosper Poullet painted by Gustave Van de Woestyne (1881-1947).

The life-size portraits of the sovereigns hang on the wall to the left:

- Queen Maria Henrietta was painted by Aimé Stevens (1879-1951), King Leopold II pointing to a chart of Africa (he implemented the colonisation of Congo) was painted by Servais Joseph Detilleux (1874-1940)
- Queen Elisabeth by Herman Richir (1866-1942), King Albert I by Jef Leempoels (1867-1935)
- Queen Astrid and King Leopold III by Emile van de Winckel. (1879-1953)

On either side of door to the senate:

- the portraits of King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola. These paintings were done by Jacques Maes (1905-1968).



The Senate



What is the role of the Senate?

1. The constitution and the basic laws

The Senate is competent, on an equal footing with the House of Representatives, for the **constitution and the basic laws** about the structure, operation and institutions of the State which have to be adopted by a special majority.

2. Other legislation

For some other laws, the Senate can intervene via the **evocation procedure**. At the request of a majority of senators (and at least one-third of the senators in each linguistic group), the Senate may examine a bill adopted by the House of Representatives. The Senate may amend (change) the draft. After amendment by the Senate, the House decides whether it accepts the Senate's amendments.

3. Information reports

A substantial proportion of the work of the Senate consists of drawing up **information reports** about "transversal matters". These are issues that have interfaces with the powers of various policy levels (Federal State, Communities and Regions). In the Belgian federal structure, in which the powers are distributed but in which federal laws and the decrees and ordinances of the federated entities have the same force, this kind of coordination is important.

Therefore the Senate has examined the need for intra-Belgian cooperation in the field of:

- improving public procurement procedures
- the fight against interference by foreign powers aimed at undermining the democratic rule of law
- the evaluation of the effective results of the 'drugs law' of 24 February 1921
- bodily self-determination and the countering of obstetric violence
- the ideological and philosophical alarm bell procedure
- the fight against fake news
- supplementing representative democracy with more citizen participation
- art theft

4. Conflicts of interest

If a parliamentary assembly fears that it will suffer serious detriment due to a bill or private member's bill put forward in another assembly, the Senate can act as a mediator in this **conflict of interest**.

5. International dimension

Via their senators, the parliaments of the federated entities take part in meetings of **international parliamentary organisations**.

Just like other parliaments, the Senate ensures that the European Union does not take any initiative on a theme that would be more appropriately handled at another level. This is the **test of the subsidiarity principle**.

6. Composition of high judicial bodies

Candidates for the function of State Councillor or Assessor of the **Council of State** or judge in the **constitutional Court** are proposed alternately by the House and by the Senate. Furthermore, the Senate appoints the non-magistrate members of the **High Council of Justice**.

The green room

Traditionally, green is the colour of the House of Representatives and red the colour of the Senate. That said, both chambers contain exceptions that prove the rule. The “green room” is in fact part of the Senate.

This room, like all the others on this floor, was refurbished in the style of Louis XVI by the architect Henri Beyaert (1823-1894) after the fire in 1883.

The fireplace is made of red Campan marble, which was much used in Versailles and was very popular in Belgium in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The fireback bears the S of the Senate.

The Senate has a collection of portraits of its former Presidents painted by artists chosen by those sitting for their portrait.





Portrait of Eugène de Ligne.



Portrait of M.C. Joseph d'Ursel.

1

Facing the door you have just entered, on the left you will see the portrait of **Prince Eugène de Ligne** (1804-1880). The son of a great old family, he began his career as a diplomat before being elected senator in 1849. Elected President of the Senate in 1852, he remained in office for a record 27 years. In 1879, although he belonged to the Liberal family, he refused to follow his party down the path of anticlericalism and voted against the School Bill on primary education, before resigning as a senator.

Eugène de Ligne is represented in the uniform of a senator, wearing the collar of the Order of the Golden Fleece, having the gavel and bell for calling a meeting to order within reach. Behind him, the monogram (double L) of the sovereigns Leopold I and Louise-Marie and the lions on his armchair recall his loyalty to Belgium.

The painter, Alexandre Robert (1817-1890), was a pupil of François-Joseph Navez and a friend of Jan-Frans Portaels. He specialised in portraits.

2

To the left of the mantelpiece you can see the portrait of **M.C. Joseph d'Ursel** (1848-1903), who was President of the Senate from 1899 until his death. He was known by his contemporaries especially for his social engagement. In his book, "Politique sociale" [Social Policy], he pleaded for improving the situation of workers by drawing up a contract of employment. The painter of this portrait, Emile Wauters (1846-1933), painted historical scenes, portraits and exotic subjects.



The plenary session room of the Senate is adorned with the busts of King Leopold I (1790-1865) and his Consort Queen Louise-Marie (1812-1850), carved by Guillaume Geefs (1805-1883).



The busts of King Philippe and Queen Mathilde created by Hans Op de Beeck.

The Senate holds a collection of **busts of the Belgian sovereigns**.

- 3-4** Between the windows are the new busts of **King Philippe** (°1960) and **Queen Mathilde** (°1973). They were inaugurated in July 2023 to mark the 10th anniversary of King Philippe's reign. Contemporary visual artist Hans Op de Beeck (°1969) coated his hyper-realistic sculptures with his signature light grey coating.
- 5-6** On the right of the door through which you entered the room, you can see the busts of **King Leopold II** (1835-1909) and his wife **Queen Marie-Henriette** (1836-1902), both sculpted by the artist Thomas Vinçotte (1865-1954).
- 7-8** On the left of that door are the *Art Nouveau* busts of **King Albert I** (1875-1934) and **Queen Elisabeth** (1876-1965), sculpted by Victor Rousseau (1865-1954).
- 9-10** On both sides of the mantelpiece stand the busts of **King Leopold III** (1901-1983) and **Queen Astrid** (1905-1935). The black "chisel marks" on the bust of King Leopold III were deliberately applied by sculptor Egide Rombaux (1865-1942) to achieve a "non finito" effect. Such marks usually serve to accurately chisel the plaster model into the marble. The bust of Queen Astrid, the young deceased mother of King Baudouin and King Albert II, was modelled after her death by the famous symbolist George Minne (1866-1941) and carved by his practitioner Bert Servaes.
- 11-12** To the left of the mantelpiece are bronze busts of **King Albert II** (°1934) and **Queen Paola** (°1937). The busts were created by the neo-expressionist artist Wilfried Pas (1940-2017).
- 13-14** As you leave the green room, you will walk by the marble busts of **King Baudouin** (1930-1993) and **Queen Fabiola** (1928-2014), carved by the Rumanian-born sculptor Idel Ianchelevici (1909-1994).

The landing and the main staircase

15

Right in front of you, you can see the marble bust of **Philippe, Count of Flanders** (1837-1905), who was the brother of King Leopold II and the father of King Albert I sculpted by Pierre Theunis (1883-1950).

The former smoking room

Straight through the open door to your right, you will see the former smoking room, decorated with beautiful **tapestries, depicting tableaux from our history**. These tapestries were specially designed for this space by the Malinois painter Willem Geets (1838-1919) at the end of the XIXth century and woven according to traditional methods in the Bracquenié workshop based in Malines.



16

Of these tapestries one calls for attention: *The Compromise of the Nobles*. Here we can see various Catholic and Protestant nobles from the north and the south of the Netherlands presenting a request for freedom of conscience to the governess Margaret of Parma who administered the Spanish provinces in 1556 (during the Inquisition).

These nobles were not granted the freedom they sought to obtain but were instead branded as «beggars», a name which they proudly adopted for their revolutionary movement.

The reading room

Before the digital era, Belgian and foreign newspapers were at the disposal of the senators in the reading room.

17

This **uniform** belonged to Henri Carton de Tournai, senator between 1919 and 1925 and from 1936 to 1946. It is an example of the function uniform as it was worn during special ceremonies until about 1920. Like the other ceremonial function uniforms of the time, it was richly decorated.

With the democratisation of the right to vote and the relaxation of the conditions for eligibility, this custom disappeared.



18

As you leave, you will see the white marble statue of a **young prince**, the future **King Leopold III**, sculpted by Paul du Bois (1859-1938).

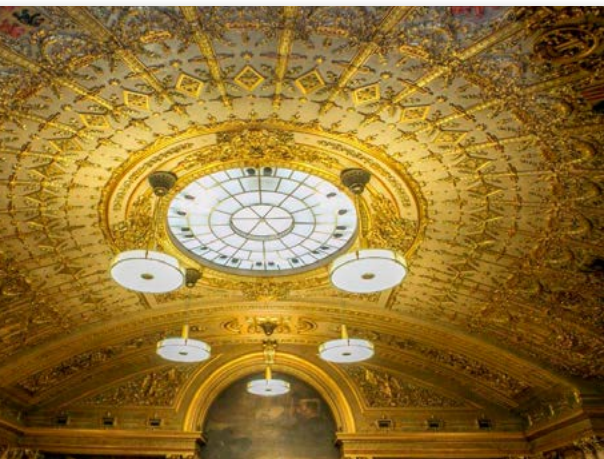
The plenary Chamber

The plenary sessions of the Senate take place in this debating chamber.

Brought to use in 1849, this room was clearly designed as an assembly room for the “Upper House” of a new and rich country, as exemplified in particular by the solid mahogany panelling placed right around the room and the comfortable armchairs. Although the room has changed to keep pace with the changing composition of the Senate and technical developments, the warm atmosphere and rich combination of Louis XVI and Louis-Philippe styles have remained intact.

The décor of the plenary chamber reflects the proud past of what is still a young nation. Historian Joseph Kervyn de Lettenhove (1817-1891) selected a number of **historical figures** from the early Middle Ages to the end of the 18th century, who have left their mark on the territories that would later become Belgium.

From left to right, you can see first the warlords who united these territories (in particular Charlemagne), in the middle those who had to grant freedoms to cities and municipalities and had to accept a primary form of participation by the population; further to the right, the Spanish and Austrian monarchs who stimulated the arts and industry. Louis Gallait (1810-1887) painted these symbolic figures in masterly fashion against a rich, golden background.



The dome, which is decorated in gold leaf and whereon the coat of arms of the nine original provinces and the first pages of the Constitution alternate with the monogram of our first sovereigns Leopold and Louise-Marie, sheds a pleasant soft light on the plenary meeting room. The five large, round chandeliers were designed specially for this room in 2000.



This painting by Ernest Blanc-Garin (1843-1916) shows the room as it was before the alterations that were made to it at the end of the XIXth century, without the rostrum in front of the President's desk; please note also the absence of women.

19

Bronze plaque with the names of executed resistance members sentenced to death in this very room by a German court martial during the First World War.







In 1903 the wall behind the President's desk had to be moved back in order to enlarge the room. That was necessary because the number of senators increased as the population grew, and also because of the addition of provincial senators after the revision of the Constitution in 1893.

The decoration for this wall was entrusted to the painter and sculptor Jacques de Lalaing (1858-1917). It depicts various key moments in the history of our regions, the emphasis being placed on the popular revolts against successive invaders.

Left panelling

The Battle of Golden Spurs (1302), a symbol of the victory of the Flemish municipalities over French rule, and their defeat at Westrozebeke in 1382.

Charles the Bold demonstrates the power of the Dukes of Burgundy by forcing King Louis XI of France to witness the punishment of his allies in Liège (1468).



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Central panelling

The Spanish Duke of Alba casts a sombre shadow over our regions with his reign of terror (1567-1573).

The terrible wars of the French "Sun King" Louis XIV, which wrested large parts of Flanders to France and ravaged Brussels.



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The farewell, in 1567, of two protagonists from this period, the Count of Egmont and William the Silent, who would later lead the revolt against Spanish oppression.

Right panelling

The invasion by the French general Dumouriez who crushed the Austrian armies and introduced French republican ideas (1792).



© IRPA-KIK, Brussels

The Brabantine revolution of 1789 against the rule of the Austrian "Emperor-Sexton" Joseph II, led by Van der Noot and Vonck.

Napoleon's defeat in Waterloo, which led to the attachment of our territories to the Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815-1830) as a buffer against any new French imperialism.

Evolution of the composition of the Senate

Originally, in 1831, there were 51 senators and 400 citizens were eligible to stand for these seats. This strict restriction reflected the wish to have the Senate constitute a sober and conservative check to a potentially too impulsive House of Representatives. This explains the minimum age limit of 40 and the high financial threshold (i.e. the payment of high taxes) to be eligible for office. The electorate, composed on the basis of the census suffrage, was limited: only 46,000 citizens (only men, “naturally”) out of a total population of 4 million.

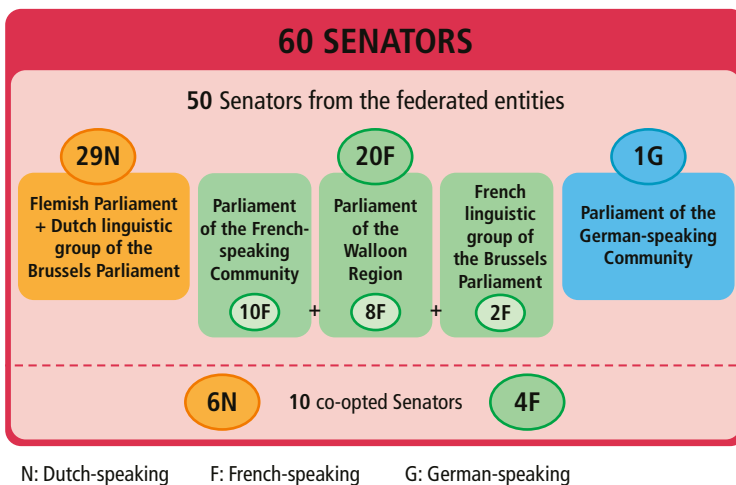
The rules for election to the Senate and the House of Representatives were gradually relaxed, as were the requirements for being a voter. The general multiple voting right in 1893 (all men could vote, but the rich and highly educated men were entitled to cast two or three votes) was followed by the general single vote for men (one man, one vote) after World War I, the universal suffrage for women in 1948, and the lowering of the voting age to 18 in 1981.

In 1993, the conditions for standing for election as a senator were further relaxed. All that was required was to be Belgian, reside in Belgium, enjoy civil and political rights and be at least 21 years of age.

In 2014, the minimum age for becoming a senator was lowered to 18 years. Since 2014, no more than two-thirds of the senators may be of the same gender. Out of a total of 60 senators, at least 20 women and at least 20 men must have seats in the Senate.

Current composition of the Senate

Today, the Senate is chiefly the assembly of the regions and linguistic communities. Its composition reflects the federal reality. Most senators are members of the parliaments of the region or linguistic community for which they have been elected by the population. This parliament appoints them to represent this region or linguistic community at the federal Senate. This happens based on the election results in that regional parliament. These senators therefore hold more than one mandate, but do not receive additional parliamentary pay for their mandate as senators.



The Senate has 50 members appointed by and from the parliaments of the Regions and linguistic Communities:

- 29 appointed by the Flemish Parliament from the Flemish Parliament or from the Dutch-speaking group of the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region;
- 10 by the Parliament of the French-speaking Community,
- 8 by the Parliament of the Walloon Region,
- 2 by the French-speaking group of the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region and
- 1 by the Parliament of the German-speaking Community.

The 50 senators appointed by the parliaments of the Regions and Communities in turn appoint 10 senators (6 Dutch-speaking and 4 French-speaking). These are the **co-opted senators**. This allocation of seats mirrors the election results in the House of Representatives.

After elections to the regional or community parliaments or for the House, the Senate is only partially renewed. Only when the elections for the regional parliaments and the House of Representatives coincide is the entire Senate re-elected.

After the adoption of a declaration concerning the revision of the constitution, the Senate and the House are dissolved. If the subsequent House elections do not coincide with the regional and community parliament elections, the seat allocation for the 50 regional Senators is maintained.

Political party	Total	Senators appointed by Regions and linguistic Communities	Co-opted senators
N-VA	10	8	2
Vlaams Belang	8	7	1
MR	8	7	1
PS	6	5	1
Vooruit	5	4	1
CD&V	5	4	1
Les Engagés	5	4	1
PTB	4	3	1
Open Vld	3	2	1
PVDA	2	2	-
Groen	2	2	-
Ecolo	1	1	-
ProDG	1	1	-
	60	50	10

The parties are listed according to voting results.

The senators are divided into **two linguistic groups**, a Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking group. The Dutch-speaking group has 35 senators (29 regional and community senators and 6 co-opted senators). The French-language group has 24 (20 regional and community senators and 4 co-opted senators). The senator designated by the Parliament of the German-speaking Community does not belong to a language group. The division into language groups is important, among other reasons, for the votes on laws requiring a special majority. These laws must be adopted by a majority within each language group, and by a two-thirds majority within the Senate as a whole.

The Senate's day-to-day business

The **Bureau** of the Senate sets the Senate's agenda. The Bureau consists of several members elected by the Senate, including the President and two Vice-Presidents, and also the Presidents of the political groups that are represented in the standing committees.

Committees conduct in-depth work, which is reflected among other things, by legislative texts, resolutions and information reports. These reports represent an important part of the work. The Senate has several permanent committees, each composed of 20 senators appointed by the various groups, according to political balance of forces within the House.



A committee room

The committees examine the draft bills, private member's bills and any other matter referred to them by the Senate, and report to the plenary session. The committees can also seek advice from organizations and experts from outside the parliament, or arrange hearings and seminars. In addition to the permanent committees, the Senate can also create special committees.

During the **plenary meetings** in the debating chamber, the senators build on the work and the conclusions of the committees. They vote on the texts or conclusions adopted by the Committees.

Besides the legislative work, the information reports (see p. 36) are assuming an ever more important role.

The layout of the plenary chamber

In the front of the room you can see the **Presidential platform**, from which the President of the Senate chairs the debates. On the President's right sits the Clerk (Secretary General), the highest ranking civil servant of the Senate, who assists the President during the plenary session. In the middle of the room are the staff who record the proceedings (minutes of the deliberations). The interpreters' booths are located above, in the gallery. Each senator speaks his own language and has simultaneous interpretation via headphones.

Since recently, senators cast their votes via a tablet that is installed on their desks before the plenary session. The result of the votes now appears immediately on the TV screens to the left and right, just below the galleries.

On the desks, you can still see the old voting boxes with their three buttons: one green for a yes vote, one red for a no vote and one white for an abstention. On the two voting panels the green, red and white illuminated numbers showed each senator's vote. The result of the vote immediately appeared on the electronic panels above these voting panels.

Senate debates are public in principle. You are welcome to attend the sessions from the galleries or to follow them live on the website (www.senate.be). Behind the President's seat, facing the meeting room, two galleries are reserved for the Press. The camera recordings of the sessions are available free of charge.



Near the plenary chamber, to the right of the ceremonial staircase, this corridor leads to the official quarters of the President of the Senate.

20 On the left is the office of the **Clerk** (Secretary General), the highest ranking Senate civil servant, who provides assistance to the President, ensures the smooth running of parliamentary activities and directs the services of the Senate.

21 On your right, you pass the meeting room of the Senate Bureau.

You have now reached the Presidency wing, located in a former town house with views over Rue de la Loi and Place de la Nation. Before the Senate was established here in 1958, it housed the office of the Foreign Minister.

On your left, you come to the grey room where the President organises working sessions.

22-23 The explosion of colours in the *Garden Party*, by the abstract impressionist artist Jean Milo (1906-1993), is in contrast to the white marble bust of Joseph Lebeau (1794-1865), a member of the National Congress and of the House of Representatives and head of government, sculpted by Louis-Eugène Simonis (1810-1882).

You have now reached the office of the President.

24 The large abstract painting, *Farandole or Conflict*, by Louis Van Lint (1909-1986) catches your eye.

25 At the bottom of the white marble ceremonial staircase, you can see a sculpture by the Liege artist Mady Andrien (°1941), *The Debate*.



You are now entering the state rooms of the Presidency. In 2004, these rooms were restored in their original style with some modern touches.

This beige room is mainly used as a dining room. Meals vary from light buffet-style lunches for those participating in public activities at the Senate to official formal dinners in honour of major dignitaries.

26 Between the windows, you can see *The Waterspray*, a painting by Henri-Victor Wolvens (1896-1977). Behind the exuberant fountain in the Park of Brussels, the façade of the Palace of the Nation can be seen, joyfully adorned with flags. Brussels had just been liberated in September 1944. The real fountain is located behind the painting in the park.

From the beige room, you move into the red room. This is where special guests and delegations from across the world are formally received.

As you enter, immediately on your right you will see the sofa where the Senate's President and the principal guest sit during their meeting. The other members of the delegation and Belgian senators take their seats on either side of them.

27-28 Above the sofa is a portrait of **King Leopold I** by the Antwerp portrait artist Nicaise De Keyser (1813-1887). De Keyser also painted the portrait of King Leopold's second wife, **Queen Louise-Marie**, who watches him from the opposite wall. The Senate commissioned these portraits to mark 25 years of their reign.

29-30 Portraits of the first two Presidents of the Senate, **Goswin de Stassart** (1780-1854) and **Louis de Schiervel** (1783-1866), hang on the left, painted by François-Joseph Navez (1787-1869) and Auguste Chauvin (1810-1884) respectively.

Special guests can sign the Senate's visitors' book placed on the large round table in the middle of the room.



You are now leaving the Senate.

—

Thank you for your visit.

How to attend plenary sessions in the House of Representatives or in the Senate?

The entrance to the House of Representatives:

- rue de Louvain, 13 / Leuvenseweg 13 for plenary meetings
- n° 48 for committee meetings.

The entrance to the Senate: rue de Louvain, 7 / Leuvenseweg 7.

The plenary sessions and almost all Senate or House of Representatives committee meetings are open to the public. However, the number of available seats is limited. You will find the agendas on our websites.

Visit the Federal Parliament

Guided tours of the Belgian Federal Parliament are given by appointment from 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m., Monday through Saturday, for groups of 10 to 20 people. It is advisable to reserve well in advance.

The areas visited on the tour may vary due to parliamentary activity at any given time. The tours are **free of charge** and take approximately one hour and a half.

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