



*The Speaker of the House
is the Member of the
Legislative Assembly
(M.L.A.) in charge of the
Legislature.*

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Legislative Assembly of Manitoba

The Role of the Speaker

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The Speaker's job is to preside over events in the Legislative Assembly, acting as a kind of referee to ensure that everyone obeys the rules. The Speaker also helps conduct the business of the House—the making of laws. It is a big job because the rules are complex, but every Speaker has a staff of procedural advisors. These advisors work under the direction of the Clerk of the Assembly.

Here's one example of how the rules of the House work. Before a Member may speak in the House, he or she must stand and be "recognized" by the Speaker. The Speaker might say "the Honourable Member for 'Red River'." Once recognized, that Member can then speak in debate.

A Speaker's greatest challenge is often Question Period. Question Period happens every day the House is in session. It lasts 40 minutes and is a time for MLAs to ask the Government questions on a wide range of subjects. These questions are usually asked by Opposition MLAs, and sometimes the discussion gets intense. At those moments, a Speaker often needs to get more involved in the discussion to ensure all Members respect each other and follow the rules.

A Speaker's Other Duties

The duties of the Speaker do not end in the Chamber. They also include managing the operations of the Legislative Assembly, serving as the Chairperson of various Committees, and serving as the President of Manitoba Parliamentary Associations. The Speaker also acts as the official ambassador of the Legislative Assembly, meeting with visiting elected officials from all over the world and representing Manitoba in other provinces and countries.



Why are they called the "Speaker"?

The title "Speaker" refers to the fact that the Speaker "speaks" on behalf of the entire Assembly to the "Head of State" (the formal leader of our country). Canada's Head of State is the Queen or King of England, represented in Ottawa by the Governor General, and in Manitoba by the Lieutenant Governor. The tradition of the Speaker "speaking" on behalf of the Assembly can still be seen during a Royal Assent ceremony in the Legislative Chamber, when the Speaker addresses the Lieutenant Governor on behalf of all MLAs.

The Traditions of the Speaker

Many traditions relating to the job of the Speaker have developed over the centuries. Most of them are still followed today across Canada and the Commonwealth.

One interesting tradition relates to the way people viewed the job of Speaker hundreds of years ago. Then as now, part of the Speaker's job was to "speak" to the King or Queen on behalf of the entire assembly. Six hundred years ago in England, if the King or Queen didn't like what the Speaker had to say, the Speaker could literally lose his head! For that reason, the job of Speaker has not always been a desirable one. No one wants to suffer for being the bearer of bad news. Today, out of respect for the days when people really had to be forced to take this job, a Speaker is taken to the Speaker's Chair the first time by the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition. The new Speaker will pretend to resist as they approach the Chair. This is because of tradition, not because the Speaker does not want the job.

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The Speaker's Uniform

Another important tradition surrounding the Speaker is the "uniform." The tricorne hat and black robes serve as a constant reminder of the Speaker's special role. The Speaker is an elected member like any other MLA. However, the unique nature of the job sets the Speaker apart from his or her colleagues. So do the robes and the hat.

The Mace

The Mace is a large, heavy and richly ornamental rod used in the Legislative Assembly. It is the symbol of the authority of the House. The Mace is carried into the Chamber each day by the Sergeant-at-Arms. When the Speaker takes the Chair at the beginning of each session, the Sergeant-at-Arms places the Mace on the Table. This signals that the House is in session. At the end of each day, the Sergeant-at-Arms carries the Mace out of the Chamber, which means that the day's business is over.

