

Catholic Union Guide to Parliamentary Bills

A resource for the Catholic laity and others who want to engage in the public sphere and bring about meaningful change.



The work of Parliament takes place in two Houses: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. They both work to make laws, to scrutinise the work of the government, and to debate current issues.

House of Commons

The Commons is publicly elected, and members of the Commons (MPs) debate political issues and proposals for new laws. The Commons alone is responsible for making decisions on financial Bills, such as proposals for new taxes. The Lords can consider these Bills but not block or change them.

House of Lords

The House of Lords is the second chamber of Parliament. It scrutinises and revises draft laws and challenges the work of Government. The House of Lords consists of 26 Lords Spiritual (Church of England bishops), 92 hereditary peers (including the Duke of Norfolk as Earl Marshal), and hundreds of life peers chosen by the Government or recommended by the House of Lords Appointments Commission ("people's peers").

Introducing New Bills

A Bill is a proposal for a new law. If the Bill comes from the government it is called a **government-sponsored Bill**. Bills can also be proposed by MPs, these are called **private member's Bills**.

Usually, a Bill is introduced first in the Commons, but it can also be proposed first in the Lords. In both circumstances, the Bill must pass through all the stages of both Houses to become law. After this, it will go to the Queen for Royal Assent, which is official approval from the monarch. This Guide will look at a Bill starting in the Commons.

1. First Reading

This is when there is a formal announcement of a Bill to parliament. There is no debate at this stage.

2. Second Reading

At the second reading, the Bill is explained and it is the first opportunity for debate. The principles and themes of the Bill will be debated, and at the end of this debate, the Commons decide if the Bill should be given its second reading through a vote. If the Bill receives more than half the votes, the Bill will proceed to the committee stage.

3. Committee Stage

At this stage, a committee of MPs will be selected to look at the details of a Bill and suggest any necessary changes. In the Commons, the committee is able to take evidence from experts and groups that have an interest in the Bill from outside Parliament.

MPs at this stage will propose amendments to the Bill, which will be voted on. The Government may also propose amendments if they consider that the Bill needs improvement.

4. Report Stage

The committee will prepare a report on the Bill and will explain the suggested amendments. During this stage, MPs who were not members of the Committee can suggest any further amendments. Debates over the Bills may spread over a number of days.

5. Third Reading

The final stage. MPs can no longer suggest any further amendments and another vote is taken on the Bill. At the end of the debate, the House votes on whether to approve the third reading of the Bill. If it receives more than half the votes, it will then go to the House of Lords for its first reading.

House of Lords

The Bill will go through the same stages as it did in the House of Commons as it did in the House of Lords. The House of Lords may make amendments to the Bill, and if this happens it will go back to the House of Commons to be voted on again. The process of the amendments shuttling backwards and forwards between the Lords and Commons is known semi-officially as "ping-pong".

The House of Lords cannot permanently block a Bill, but if they do not vote in favour, it can be delayed for a year.

One difference that takes place in the Lords, is that when the Bill reaches the committee stage, the whole House will generally act as the committee.

Royal Assent

Once the Bill has been agreed by the House of Commons and the House of Lords, it then goes to the Monarch for approval. After this, it becomes an **Act of Parliament**.

