

LEGISLATIVE PRAYER ACROSS CANADA



 **BC HUMANIST
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Abstract

Canada is often viewed as a diverse and multicultural country. Multiculturalism and 'freedom of conscience and religion' are enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.¹ From this, the Supreme Court of Canada has established that Canada is a secular country through what has been called the state's duty of religious neutrality. Nevertheless, legislative assemblies across Canada continue to begin each day's sitting with a prayer, which is most often Christian in nature.

Here we provide an overview of the diverse practices that surround legislative prayer across Canada today.

Acknowledgements

This report was produced on the traditional territories of the WSÁNEĆ and Lkwungen-speaking peoples and on the traditional and unceded territories of the of the hənq̓əminəm and Skwxwú7mesh speaking peoples and the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation.

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Federal Parliament

Sittings of the House of Commons and the Senate begin with the speaker reading a standard ‘non-denominational’ prayer, followed by time for silent reflection.² The English wording of the prayer used in the House of Commons reads as follows:



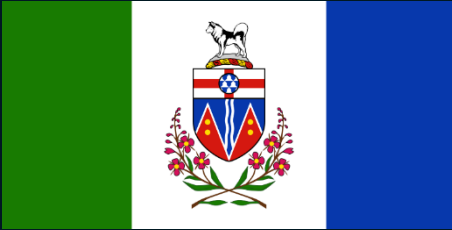
Almighty God, we give thanks for the great blessings which have been bestowed on Canada and its citizens, including the gifts of freedom, opportunity and peace that we enjoy. We pray for our Sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, and the Governor General. Guide us in our deliberations as Members of Parliament, and strengthen us in our awareness of our duties and responsibilities as Members. Grant us wisdom, knowledge, and understanding to preserve the blessings of this country for the benefit of all and to make good laws and wise decisions. Amen.³

The Senate recites the following prayer in both French and English:

Almighty God, we beseech thee to protect our Queen and to bless the people of Canada. Guide us in our endeavours; let your spirit preside over our deliberations so that, at this time assembled, we may serve ever better the cause of peace and justice in our land and throughout the world. Amen.⁴

Mirroring the British Parliament, this practice begins before the chamber is open to the public.⁵

Provincial Legislatures



Yukon

The Speaker reads one of four standard prayers. Video broadcasts of the proceedings are paused during the prayer and the content of the prayers is not recorded by Hansard.⁶

Northwest Territories

MLAs deliver prayer of their own devising, with occasional 'drum prayer' also being delivered. The prayer is broadcasted over video but the content is not recorded by Hansard.⁷



Nunavut

MLAs deliver prayer of their own devising. The name of the MLA delivering the prayer is recorded by Hansard but the content of the prayer is not.⁸

British Columbia

MLAs deliver a prayer of their own devising or read one from a list of sample prayers provided by the Clerk. The name of the MLA is recorded by Hansard but not the content of their prayer or reflection.⁹

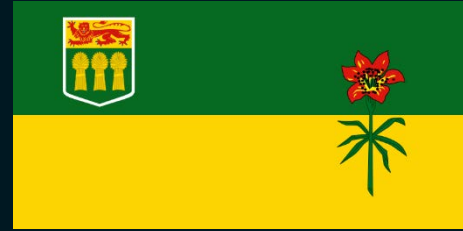


Alberta

The Speaker reads a prayer of their own devising. The previous speaker wrote a different prayer for each sitting. The current speaker delivers a 'non-denominational' prayer. The content of the prayer is recorded by Hansard.¹⁰

Saskatchewan

The Speaker reads a standard ‘non-denominational’ prayer. This is delivered while the public is present and is broadcasted by Hansard.¹¹



Manitoba

The Speaker reads a standard ‘non-denominational’ prayer. This is delivered while the public is present and is broadcasted and recorded by Hansard.¹²

Ontario

The Speaker reads the Lord’s Prayer, after 2008, this has been followed by the reading of a prayer from a rotating schedule “reflecting Indigenous, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Baha’i and Sikh faiths.”¹³ Prayers are not recorded by Hansard.



Quebec

Sittings begin with a quiet ‘moment of reflection.’ The practice of opening sittings with a prayer ended in 1976.¹⁴

New Brunswick

MLAs read Christian prayers for the Queen, the Legislature and the Lord’s Prayer. Prayers are read in French and English (or blended). The prayers are broadcasted by Hansard.¹⁵

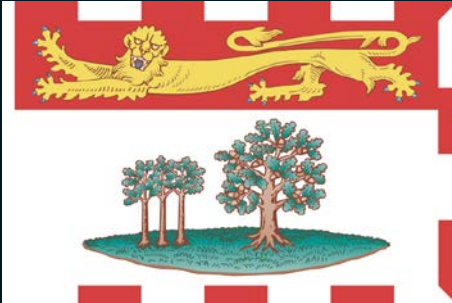


Newfoundland and Labrador

Has never opened sessions with a prayer.¹⁶

Nova Scotia

The Speaker reads a shortened version of the Lord's Prayer, which was written by Speaker Mitchell in 1972. Prayers are not recorded by Hansard.¹⁷



Prince Edward Island

The Speaker reads Christian prayers for the Queen, the Legislature and the Lord's Prayer. The public is excluded from the chambers during this time.¹⁸ Prayers are not recorded by Hansard.

Municipal Councils

The 2015 Supreme Court of Canada ruling in *MLQ v Saguenay* found that the recitation of a prayer by the mayor before council meetings was a violation of the state's duty of religious neutrality. The court found that the 'state must not interfere in religion or beliefs', nor favour nor hinder any and that it has a 'democratic imperative' to ensure that all citizens can participate in public life equally regardless of their beliefs.¹⁹ The ruling has created a legal precedent barring municipalities across the country to perform prayers before council meetings.

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- ¹ Section 2, *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, s 7, Part 1 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982, being Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982 (UK)*, 1982, c 11.
- ² The Senate adopted a non-sectarian prayer in 1994, and the House of Commons moved to a standard ‘non-sectarian’ prayer in 1994 and formally adopted this prayer in 2004. See Fizet, C. 2010. Reopening the discussion on the use of ‘the Lord’s Prayer’ in the Ontario Legislature. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. Available from <https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2010/Fizet.pdf> [Accessed March 25, 2020], p.2; and see Rau, K. (2008, March 17). “Take God out of the legislature.” *DailyXtra.com*, Retrieved from <https://www.dailyxtra.com/take-god-out-of-the-legislature-38464> [Accessed August 26, 2020].
- ³ A French version is also available. Parliament of Canada. (n.d.). “Compendium of procedure: prayer.” Retrieved from https://www.ourcommons.ca/About/Compendium/TypicalSittingDay/c_d_prayer-e.htm [Accessed August 26, 2020].
- ⁴ Canadian Senate. (2013, November). “Companion to the rules of the Senate of Canada.” 2nd Ed. *Government of Canada*. Retrieved from <https://sencanada.ca/media/106242/companion-rules-senate-2nd-nov13-e.pdf> [Accessed August 26, 2020]; and Canadian Senate. (2015, June). “Senate procedure in practice.” *Government of Canada*. Retrieved from <https://sencanada.ca/media/93509/spip-psep-full-complet-e.pdf> [Accessed August 26, 2020], Chapter 4.
- ⁵ Fizet 2010:2; and see MacMinn, EG. 2008. *Parliamentary practice in British Columbia* (4th Ed). Government of British Columbia, p. 56.
- ⁶ Nils Clarke, Speaker Yukon Legislative Assembly and MLA for Riverdale North, correspondence with author; Linda Kolody, Deputy Clerk, Yukon Legislative Assembly, correspondence with author; and see Yukon Legislative Assembly. (2018, April 23). “Standing Orders of the Yukon Legislative Assembly.” Retrieved from http://www.legassembly.gov.yk.ca/pdf/standing_orders_print.pdf [Accessed March 25, 2020]; Yukon Legislative Assembly. (n.d.). “Coverage of proceedings.” Retrieved from <http://www.legassembly.gov.yk.ca/house/cop.html> [Accessed August 26, 2020]; and see Ronson, J. (2015, April 17). “Yukon Legislative assembly prayers to continue.” *Yukon News*. Retrieved from <https://www.yukon-news.com/news/yukon-legislative-assembly-prayers-to-continue/> [Accessed August 26, 2020].
- ⁷ Standing Order 34, Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly. (2019 August). “Rules of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories.” Retrieved from https://www.ntassembly.ca/sites/assembly/files/images/rules_of_ntla_december_2019.pdf [Accessed August 26, 2020]; for example of ‘drum prayer’ see Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly. (2019, October 25). “Official Report of Debates of the Legislative Assembly (Hansard).” 19th Assembly, 1st Day 1, at 1.
- ⁸ Standing Order 32, Legislative Assembly of Nunavut. (2016, February). “Rules of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut.” Retrieved from <https://assembly.nu.ca/sites/default/files/Rules%20of%20the%20Legislative%20Assembly%20of%20Nunavut%20-%20February%202016.pdf> [Accessed August 26, 2020], p.22.
- ⁹ Standing Order 25, as outlined in Ryan-Lloyd, K., Sogomonian, A., Sourial, S. & Wall E. (Eds.). 2020. *Parliamentary practice in British Columbia* (5th ed.). Victoria, BC, Canada: Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, p.97; and for a detailed analysis of these prayers see Phelps

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- Bondaroff, Teale; Bushfield, Ian; Marshall, Katie E.; Prasad, Ranil & Laurence, Noah (2019, September). "House of prayers: An analysis of prayers in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2003-2019." BC Humanist Association, 1-138. Available at https://www.bchumanist.ca/house_of_prayers_report [Accessed August 26, 2020].
- ¹⁰ Standing Order 6, Legislative Assembly of Alberta. (2020, February 26). "Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta." Retrieved from https://www.assembly.ab.ca/pro/standing/standing_orders.pdf [Accessed August 26, 2020], p.4; and Lianne Bell, (2020, March 31), Chief of Staff to the Speaker, Legislative Assembly of Alberta, correspondence with authors; and correspondence with Ibid. (2020, April 1).
- ¹¹ Rule 13, Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. (n.d.). "Rules and procedures of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan." Retrieved from https://www.legassembly.sk.ca/media/1008/current_rules.pdf [Accessed August 26, 2020], p.4.
- ¹² Rule 22, Province of Manitoba. (2018, November 20). "Rules, orders and forms of proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba." Retrieved from https://www.gov.mb.ca/legislature/business/rulebook_full.pdf [Accessed August 26, 2020], p.22.
- ¹³ Bueckert, C., Hill, R., Parisotto, M., & Roberts, M. 2017. Religion, faith and spirituality in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, (spring), 25-29, p.25; Standing Order 9(c), Legislative Assembly of Ontario. (2020, February 18). "Standing orders of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario." Retrieved from <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/standing-orders> [Accessed August 26, 2020]; and see Lanouette, M. 2009. Prayer in the Legislature: tradition meets secularization. *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, (winter), 1-7.
- ¹⁴ Bueckert *et al.* 2017:25; and see Lanouette 2009:6; Standing Order 31, Assemblée Nationale du Québec. (2018, November). "Standing orders and other rules of procedure." Retrieved from <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/en/abc-assemblee/fondements-procedure-parlementaire/reglement-assemblee.html> [Accessed August 26, 2020].
- ¹⁵ Standing Order 35, Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick. (2019). "Standing rules of the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick." Retrieved from <https://www.gnb.ca/legis/publications/rules-reglement.pdf> [Accessed August 26, 2020]; and see National Post. (2019, April 8). "N.B. debates Christian legislature prayer: 'Not inclusive enough.'" Retrieved from <https://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/green-legislator-calls-for-replacement-of-n-b-legislature-prayers-with-silence> [Accessed August 26, 2020].
- ¹⁶ Bueckert *et al.* 2017:25; and see Lanouette 2009:6.
- ¹⁷ Fizez 2010:2; Standing Order 16, House of Assembly of Nova Scotia. (2018, September). "Rules and forms of procedure of the House of Assembly." Retrieved from <https://nslegislature.ca/sites/default/files/legc/Rules.pdf> [Accessed August 26, 2020].
- ¹⁸ Rule 22(1)(a), Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island. (2019, June). "Rules of the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island." Retrieved from <https://www.assembly.pe.ca/sites/www.assembly.pe.ca/files/rules-April-2018.pdf> [Accessed August 26, 2020], p.5, and p.51; and see Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island. (2011, Fall). "Member's handbook." Retrieved from http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/leg_MLAhandbook.pdf [Accessed August 26, 2020].
- ¹⁹ *Mouvement laïque québécois v. Saguenay (City)*, 2015, SCC 16 [2015] 2 S.C.R. 3, Para. 71-72, 75.