

# eXplore PARLIAMENT



## What is Parliament?

If you've watched the news on television, you may have heard reporters say, "Today in Parliament ..." or "Parliament has passed a new law ...". You've probably seen photographs of Parliament Buildings in Wellington, or you may have even visited them. But do you know what happens there? Why do we have a Parliament and what does it do?

Our Parliament has two parts: the Sovereign (the King or Queen) and the House of Representatives. In New Zealand, the Sovereign is usually represented by the Governor-General. The House of Representatives is made up of about 120 elected members of Parliament (MPs). The members of Parliament represent the views and concerns of the people of New Zealand, which means we are a representative democracy.

As well as representing the people, some of the members of Parliament form the Government (or Executive) and are responsible for running the country. Parliament also has the job of making new laws, updating old laws, and approving decisions about how taxes will be spent for the benefit of all New Zealanders. Parliament also has opportunities to question the Government's actions, and to keep it "accountable" for the decisions it makes.

The Governor-General on behalf of the Sovereign acts as New Zealand's head of state. The Governor-General's role in the work of Parliament is to sign off new laws by giving them the Royal assent, open Parliament at the beginning of a new term, and close it when there is to be a general election. The Governor-General is chosen by the Prime Minister, appointed by the Sovereign, and carries out these responsibilities on advice from the Government.



*Bowen House*

*The Executive Wing*

*Parliament House*

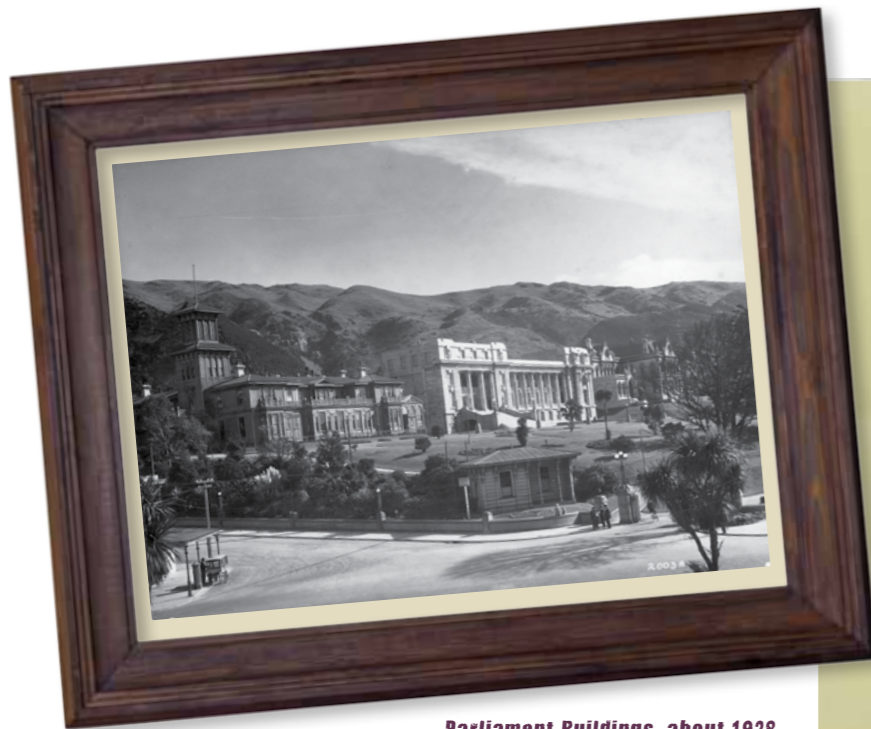
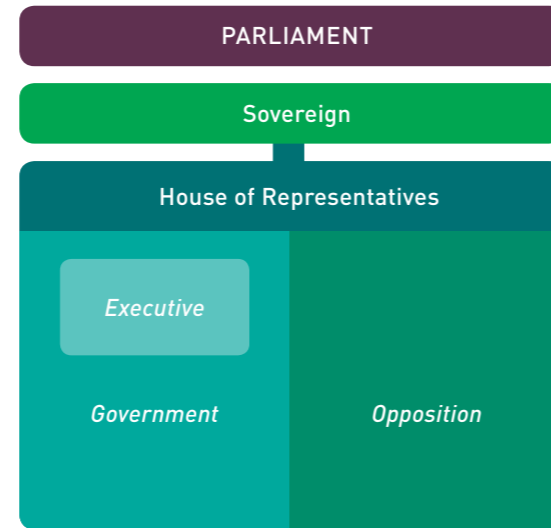
*Parliamentary Library*



## How is Parliament organised?

Our Parliament is modelled on the British Parliament, so our system of government is sometimes called the "Westminster" system. (Westminster is the part of London where the British Parliament is located.)

Under this system, some members of Parliament form the Government. They must have the support of over half the members of Parliament (the majority). The Government is led by the Prime Minister who appoints other members as Ministers. The members of Parliament who are not in the Government form the Opposition. Both the Government and the Opposition can consist of one or more parties.



**Parliament Buildings, about 1928**  
(Alexander Turnbull Library  
Ref: ½-068827-F)

### THAT'S INTERESTING!

*New Zealand's system of government is a constitutional monarchy. A constitution is a set of rules that determines how a country is governed and who exercises power. It also makes sure that there are checks and balances on those powers and it protects the rights of everyone. In New Zealand, our constitution is not written down in one document, but it does set out how we are governed and what the powers of Parliament are.*

### HISTORICAL FACTS

*The first Parliament in New Zealand opened in 1854. Parliament moved to Wellington in 1865.*

*Parliament originally had an Upper House, called the Legislative Council (which was modelled on the British House of Lords), and a Lower House, called the House of Representatives.*

*All laws had to be approved by both the Legislative Council (Upper House) and the House of Representatives.*

*Elections for the first Māori members of Parliament were held in 1868.*

*In 1951, the Upper House was abolished.*

*In 1854, there were 37 members of Parliament; today there are about 120.*

### DID YOU KNOW ?

*The word Parliament comes from the French word "parler", which means "to talk". Originally a "parlement" was a discussion, but the talking in Parliament is more than discussions. It includes argument, debate, and the presentation of alternative views. All this "talking" helps to make good laws and leads to decisions that affect our lives.*

## What does Parliament do?

### It passes new laws

Laws are necessary for a fair and safe society. Parliament carefully considers new laws and laws that need changing. Some laws are repealed because they are no longer needed.

### It represents the people

New Zealand's system of government is representative. This means that the members of Parliament are elected by the people, and Parliament needs to represent the views and concerns of all New Zealanders.

### It keeps the Government accountable

Parliament has ways of checking that the Government makes wise and responsible decisions for the people of New Zealand. The Government must show it is behaving responsibly by answering questions about what it does.

### It approves how tax money is spent

Parliament must approve the Government's plans for how taxes are to be spent. Every year, the Government sets out a Budget. This is a detailed plan of how it intends to use tax money for such things as education, health, and social welfare. Parliament must approve the Government's plans before any money is spent.



### THAT'S INTERESTING!

*In New Zealand, public power is shared between Parliament, the Government, and the courts. Each of these is separate and independent. This separation of powers ensures that each branch acts as a check and balance on the power of the others. The courts (the judiciary) are not located in Parliament.*

### DID YOU KNOW ?

*Originally New Zealand's Parliament had two debating chambers, one for the House of Representatives (with green carpet) and one for the Legislative Council (with red carpet). These colours are part of the Westminster tradition.*

*The Sovereign (King or Queen) and Governor-General can enter the chamber where the carpet is red but are not allowed to enter the House of Representatives when it is sitting. During the State Opening of Parliament ceremony, a red carpet runs up the steps of Parliament and leads into the red-carpeted chamber. This is where the Sovereign (King or Queen) or Governor-General opens our Parliament after an election.*



**The debating chamber**  
(Becker Fraser Photos)

# Discussion and activities



## 1. Quick quiz

Work in pairs or small groups to answer these questions. All the answers can be found in the information you have just read.

1. What is New Zealand's head of state called?
2. Who leads the Government?
3. Why is our system of government sometimes known as the "Westminster" system?
4. What is the House of Representatives?
5. Who represents the Sovereign in New Zealand?
6. What are the key functions of Parliament?
7. Where does the word "Parliament" come from?
8. Why isn't the Sovereign allowed into the House of Representatives?
9. When were the first elections for Māori members of Parliament?
10. Who puts forward the plan for how taxes should be spent?

## 2. Building understanding of the vocabulary and concepts

Copy the grid and add more rows. (If you are working in pairs or a group, you could copy it onto big sheets of paper.)

Identify words in the information that were new to you or that you didn't understand. Write what you think each word means, find the definition, and then explain how the word relates to your own life.

Use the example to help you.

New word	What I think it means	Definition	My explanation
Legislative	It is something to do with laws.	Having the power to make laws.	Parliament makes the laws. The laws it makes are final. Many of these laws affect our lives and our parents' lives.

Here are some words to get you started: *Government, representative, state, accountable, taxes.*

## 3. Try this

Do some research to find out where the concept of Parliament came from, including where the word "Parliament" originates. Find out what the word for a Parliament is in other countries, for example, in Japan it is called the Diet.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

[www.parliament.nz](http://www.parliament.nz)  
[education.services@parliament.govt.nz](mailto:education.services@parliament.govt.nz)  
Phone: +64 4 817 9565  
Fax: +64 4 472 8206  
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