



DISCOVER *Parliament*

How does Parliament give people a voice in lawmaking?

Giving everyone opportunities to have a say is an important part of democracy. Parliament recognises that when it is making decisions, there must be ways that people affected by those decisions can make their opinions and ideas heard. This is particularly important when new laws are being put forward. One way that people can be heard is by making submissions to Parliament committees.

Before any Bill becomes law, it needs to be looked at carefully to make sure that it will work as it's meant to and that it will be fair to all Fijians. This job is too big to be carried out in the parliament, so it is given to a smaller group of MPs who are selected for the purpose: a "Standing Committee or Special Committee".

When considering the Bill, the members of the committee invite other people (from inside and outside Parliament) to give their views, knowledge, and expertise. Any member of the public who has something to say can put forward a submission.



A Standing Committee's work in progress

What are Committees?

There are 3 types or categories of committees. Firstly, there are 6 Standing Committees for reviewing Bills; 4 Select Committees for managing the business of Parliament; and Special Committee(s) may be established by resolution of Parliament to carry out specified task(s). Much of Parliament's detailed discussion and scrutiny happens in Committees.

Each Standing Committee consists of members from across the Parliament. The number of seats each party has across all committees is proportional to the number of seats it has in the Parliament. Some of the Select Committees, however, have equal membership.

Committees are set up at the beginning of each Parliament. There are six Standing Committees that cover major areas of the Government's work. These are Standing Committee on Economic Affairs; Standing Committee on Social Affairs; Standing Committee on Natural Resources; Standing Committee on Public Accounts; Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence; and Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. For example, any Bill related to changes to rights of children would be given to Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to review.

Other committees regulate how Parliament's work is done, for example, reviewing the Standing Orders (the rules of Parliament). Standing Committees allow people to have a say in Parliament and provide opinion and information that can affect the final draft of a law. Because the process is public, it helps to keep the work of Parliament open and transparent. Select Committees give all the people of Fiji the chance to work directly with Parliament. They make sure that a variety of points of view are heard and that laws are effective and representative.

What Do Standing Committees Do?

Standing Committees carry out the detailed work that can be done more easily by small groups of MPs. Mostly, this involves scrutinising Bills (looking very closely at what they say) and receiving submissions and advice. Committees then report back to the Parliament with their recommendations. Standing committees also:

- Review international treaties and make recommendations to Parliament;

- Review the finances and activities of Government and Departments and Public bodies;
- Look at petitions and report back to the Parliament; and
- Inquire into issues of public concern.

DID YOU KNOW ?

When Parliament first sat in October 2014 till the end of 2015, 38 Bills were tabled in Parliament, and 32 of these Bills were passed and enacted into law by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji.

What Happens in a Standing Committee?

After a Bill has been given its second reading, it is usually sent to a standing committee. For example, if a Bill is about a health issue, it will be sent to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs. The Committee then seeks the views of interested groups, Government organisations and members of the public. The Standing Committee must report on a Bill no later than 30 days unless the Parliament extends the time frame.

Advertisements in newspapers and online tell people that the Bill is being considered and invite them to have their say. Any person or group of people can have their say by writing to the Committee or by being invited to a Committee meeting. This is known as "making a submission". Submissions can provide information to the Committee or make suggestions about how the Bill could be changed to make it work better once it becomes law.

DID YOU KNOW ?

For the first time persons aged 18-20 years and above voted during the 2014 elections under the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji. In the past, the voting age was 21 years and over.

How Can People Have a Say?

Any person of any age can make a submission to a Standing Committee. Before doing so, he or she should:

- Know what the Bill is proposing and have an opinion about it; and
- Find out more by talking with others, exploring online resources, and reading media reports and comments.

When making a submission, a person or group should explain what they like about the Bill (why they think it's a good idea) or what they dislike about it (why they think it's a bad idea). If they wish, they can also suggest improvements to the Bill.

Written submissions may be sent to the Standing Committee.



THAT'S INTERESTING

Sometimes, Standing Committees recommend only small changes to a Bill. At other times, having heard what the public have to say and the advice from Government departments, they may recommend major changes. They may recommend that a Bill not be passed.



A Standing Committee of Parliament site visit

Hearing submissions and making recommendations

- 1. Submissions are received.*
- 2. The Standing Committee holds meetings, usually at Parliament. Sometimes the committee travels around the country to hear and discuss what people have to say. Anyone can attend public Standing Committee meetings, including the media. People can make submissions in writing and may be invited to speak to the committee at meetings known as hearings. The committee can ask a person to attend a hearing to answer questions about his or her submission. They can also ask people to attend when they have particular knowledge that may help the committee. The committee may also ask Government departments for information and advice about the Bill.*
- 3. After all the submissions have been heard, the committee meets in private. Members discuss the Bill and agree on whether they want to recommend any changes to Parliament.*
- 4. The committee reports to Parliament and explains its recommendations.*

DID YOU KNOW ?

A committee can hear evidence at a public hearing, in private, or in secret. Private evidence is confidential, meaning no-one else can hear or read it until the committee reports back to the House. Secret evidence remains secret even after the committee has presented its report (although the Parliament can order secret evidence to be released if it thinks the reasons for letting the public know about it are more important than the reasons for keeping it secret).



Discussion and activities

1. Complete the Statements

Read the first statement and then complete the second.

Number 1 has been completed for you.

1. Six standing committees deal with major areas of the Government's work. Other committees **consider other areas of Parliament's work.**
2. Standing committees spend most of their time examining Bills and dealing with submissions. Their other work includes ...
3. People can make submissions by ...
4. Standing Committees can hear private submissions. They can also hear submissions ...
5. Standing Committees seek the views of the public. They also seek advice from ...
6. Sometimes a committee recommends small changes to a Bill. Sometimes the Bill is ...
7. Submissions provide information. They can also make ...
8. A Standing Committee can invite a person to attend a meeting. It can also ...
9. Standing Committees are usually open to the public when they are hearing submissions. They are private when members ...
10. Before making a submission, a person should know what the Bill is about. He or she should also ...

2. Create a glossary for these words

Standing committee, submission, hearing, witnesses, evidence, scrutiny, confidential, secret evidence

Try This

Imagine that a standing committee is considering a Bill that would lengthen the primary school day by one hour. Share your views on this bill with others. Discuss the main points you would like to make to the standing committee. With your group, prepare a submission on this bill. If there is disagreement in your group, form two groups and prepare two different submissions.

PUBLISHED BY



PARLIAMENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF FIJI
2017

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SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



Assistance of the NZ Parliament
Education Services

This educational material has been developed through the UNDP, Fiji Parliament Support Project and supported by:

