

It is government that has the executive power and resources to intervene in a community and improve matters. A parliament is the channel by which people can communicate with government and ensure that they are being heard.

**IS IT NOT THE GOVERNMENT THAT REALLY MATTERS, NOT PARLIAMENT?**

**IF PARLIAMENT IS BUILT ON TOLERANCE AND RESPECT, WHY DO MEMBERS NOT ALWAYS AGREE?**

People do not always agree in parliament, and that should be recognized and not smothered. The rules are designed to allow conflicting opinions, including unpopular ones, to be heard and considered. As each member has been elected by thousands of citizens, each member is entitled to be heard. This freedom and openness is what enables a parliament to represent your views and mine at the centre of power.

You can respect your opponent's point of view without necessarily agreeing with it. In parliament you recognize that your opponent is not your enemy and is entitled to a different point of view, but you are usually doing your utmost to prove him or her wrong and support your own cause. That is why parliament is not always a quiet and orderly place.

Remember that parliament is a political institution, not an administrative office. Parliament is not just about facts and procedures; it is also about people and emotions. Therefore vibrant and energetic debate in parliament is a sign that the system is working.

Matters of local concern may often be resolved at local government level by approaching your local government representative. In many countries consultation is also possible at regional or provincial level. But if your concerns are national, you could do one of the following:

- If you do not already belong to a civil organisation, pressure group or political party, you can join (or even start) such a group and unite with others to lobby parliament and advance your cause.
- Approach parliament by contacting your local member of parliament, and put your case as effectively as you can.
- Visit your parliament to see and understand how it works.
- If there is a committee of parliament investigating your concern, make a submission. This may be in writing, or in some cases public hearings are held to gauge opinion about a matter. Use the opportunity.

**HOW CAN I GET PARLIAMENT TO LISTEN TO ME? HOW CAN I GET IT TO HELP WITH WHAT IS WRONG IN MY COMMUNITY?**

# Q & A on parliaments

**A PARLIAMENT DOES NOT GUARANTEE A DEMOCRACY BUT THERE CAN BE NO DEMOCRACY WITHOUT A PARLIAMENT.**



## What do **citizens** expect from their **parliament**



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## WHAT IS A PARLIAMENT?

It is a part of government – the part that represents you, me and all the people of the country. When important decisions are taken, parliament speaks with the voice of all the country's citizens.

As our representative in government, parliament has strong powers. It makes laws that must be obeyed by all. As representative of the people, it calls the government to account and publicly debates what government is doing. It serves as a national forum for debating important national issues. In doing so, it ensures that all our voices are heard at the centre of power.

Much of parliament's work falls into two categories. The first is the consideration of laws. Here, parliament has the responsibility of examining draft laws to ensure that when passed, those laws are adapted to our needs in a changing society. The second main category of work comes from parliament's responsibility to ensure that the government of the country is accountable to its people and that information about government activities is open and accessible to all of us. Finally, parliament is a forum for the debating of important national issues.

## SO HOW DOES PARLIAMENT WORK?

Besides sitting in plenary (this is when all members sit in one large chamber) a parliament appoints committees of its members to deal with the large volume of detailed work which cannot easily be handled by a large body. Like the plenary, such committees represent a spectrum of views. Committees report back to the plenary, which then takes a decision on the matter. In the process of doing their work, such committees may hold hearings and consult the public.

Parliament is a powerful institution. As the representative of all the people of a country, a parliament has different kinds of power. It has the power to make laws that bind us all – that includes the government. It has the power to call the government to account and show what it is doing. These are constitutional powers. But above all, a parliament has moral power, because it speaks with the voice of all the people, including you and me.

## WHY DO WE HAVE A PARLIAMENT?

To answer that question, ask yourself: What if we did not have a parliament? What kind of government would we have instead? Would it be a government that made decisions for us without consulting anyone? Or would we have competing groups seeking power and control in our society by whichever means?

We have a parliament because it allows the people of this country to take part in major decisions on issues of national importance. By giving everyone a say, parliament provides a way to settle differences in a fair and peaceful way. Through our representatives in parliament, we have a say in how we are governed. It is the link between citizens and government.

## PARLIAMENT MAY BE THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE, BUT WHAT POWER DOES IT HAVE?

As our representative, parliament has responsibilities towards all, namely, to:

- truly represent the range of interests and opinions in society. This requires fair and equal treatment of all men, women and children, and respect for their points of view;
- be open and transparent in conducting its activities, and ensure that its proceedings and documents are freely available to all;
- actively involve the public and civil society in its proceedings as much as possible;
- be accountable to the citizens of the country through regular communication between members and their voters and through members performing their duties effectively and ethically; and
- be effective in the performance of its many tasks at national, international and local levels.

## WHAT CAN I EXPECT OF MY PARLIAMENT?

Democracy functions best when people get involved. Parliaments and democratic systems thrive when people stand up for the democratic values of fairness, human dignity, consultation and tolerance. The best guarantee of domestic values is people, not laws and constitutional safeguards. The system depends on participation by as many people as possible.

## WHAT ARE THE FEATURES OF A PARLIAMENT?

Parliament is made up of men and women elected on a regular basis by the citizens to be their representatives in government. Each member represents many thousands of citizens, and together the members represent the various shades of opinion in the country.

The rules of parliament are designed to afford all members fair and equal treatment. Members may speak out in the interests of the communities they serve. Decisions are taken by majority vote.

A parliament is a way of ensuring that major decisions are taken only after hearing a range of views and interests from all sectors of the community. In this way decisions affecting all can be taken on a fair basis. Parliament enables conflicting interests to be resolved through dialogue, in a context of fairness and respect.

## I'M NOT INTERESTED IN POLITICS AND WE ALREADY HAVE A PARLIAMENT, SO WHY SHOULD I THINK ABOUT IT?