



# Proroguing Parliament

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## What does “proroguing” mean (and how do you pronounce it anyway)?

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It's pronounced “pro-rogue-ing” (yup, like Rogue One). When Parliament is prorogued, it means that the Governor General ends a session of Parliament. Prorogation typically happens at least once between elections. It allows the Government to reset its priorities and set a new agenda by opening a new session with a [Throne Speech](#), and introducing a new set of bills for deliberation in the House.

Four years is a long time in politics. Ideas that may have seemed great during an election may be less so now. Meanwhile, new priorities have moved to the forefront. So prorogation is a useful way to reboot the government's agenda.

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## What is the difference between prorogation, adjournment, recess and dissolution?

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Between elections Parliament is considered in session, and elected Members of Parliament and appointed Senators are in Parliament making laws and setting budgets. When they leave the houses even for the night, Parliament needs to be officially paused in a few different ways, so that laws can't be passed in the absence of legislators:

An **adjournment** separates one meeting, or sitting, of the House of Commons (or Senate) from the next. It can last a few hours, overnight or over the weekend. A longer adjournment is often referred to as a **recess**, such as over the summer. The House of Commons and Senate determine their own sitting schedule, and when they will adjourn or recess.

With **prorogation**, the Government alone decides on the timing, and it applies to both the House of Commons and Senate. Prorogation ends the parliamentary session by terminating all business (bills and committees) of both houses of Parliament. Bills in progress towards becoming a law then die on the order paper (a dramatic term meaning “are terminated”). At the start of a new session, the House of Commons may vote to reinstate some of the bills that lapsed, and to restart interrupted committee business.

**Dissolution** puts an end not only to the current session but to Parliament itself. It ends all business in both the House of Commons and Senate, and triggers a new election. The government shifts into a “caretaker” mode at that point, managing the daily business of government until after the election.

Prorogation can be thought of as a bigger break than an adjournment or recess, but less final than dissolution.

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#### Whose decision is it to prorogue Parliament?

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Under Canada's constitution, the Governor General has the power to prorogue Parliament. However, by constitutional convention, that decision is taken only on the advice of the Prime Minister, allowing the decision to remain with an elected representative of the Canadian people. The Governor General may ask questions or seek more information, but only in very exceptional cases should he or she refuse to follow the Prime Minister's advice. In the provincial legislatures, the Premiers and the Lieutenant Governors hold these roles.

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#### So the Prime Minister and Governor General can just stop Parliament without a vote by the elected Members of Parliament?

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In effect, yes. But this is because the Prime Minister enjoys the confidence of the House, in other words, he or she has the support of the majority of elected Members of Parliament. This support can be shown by the passing of confidence motions, such as the budget. If the confidence of the House is in doubt, as in a minority government situation, prorogation becomes more problematic.

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#### So it's a pretty uncontroversial part of the life of a Parliament?

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Not always. A few instances, federally and provincially, have provoked serious debate when it seemed like the Government was using prorogation to avoid losing power in the House. Prorogation can be used to avoid losing a confidence vote, to wait out a tenuous opposition coalition, to give the governing party time get their affairs in order or generally avoid a sticky situation. The ability of a prime minister to single-handedly control prorogation illustrates the growing concern about centralization of power in the Prime Minister's office.

The 2008 prorogation by Stephen Harper is one of the more famous examples of a controversial use of prorogation. If you are curious, a whole book was written on this moment in parliamentary history with different experts' perspectives—[Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis](#), edited by Peter Russell and Lorne Sossin.

By and large though, prorogation itself is a routine and accepted practice.

**5****When do governments normally decide to prorogue Parliament?**

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Prorogation is intended to ensure the continued good governance of the country, and its timing reflects this. In some cases, Parliament is prorogued at the start of a scheduled recess. This gives the Government time to sketch out its revised agenda during the break, and the Opposition can use the time to plan as well. On other occasions, the Government prefers to keep the session open during much of the recess to make it easier to recall the House of Commons from adjournment, or to allow important committee work to continue. Still other times, when prorogation occurs when there is no scheduled recess, it has made sense to open a new session soon thereafter—even on the same day.

**6****What is happening while Parliament is prorogued? Is everything on pause?**

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While new laws cannot be made during prorogation, cabinet and bureaucratic business continues, and officials from all parties work out plans for the next session. Whenever the House is not in session, including during prorogation, MPs have a number other tasks, like connecting with constituents in their home riding. (To learn about MPs' various roles and responsibilities, [watch this short video](#).)

**7****What happens if there's a crisis while Parliament is prorogued? Who's in charge?**

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The Prime Minister and cabinet continue to fulfill their respective roles during prorogation. If there's a crisis, they'll be the ones responding. If new legislation is required, or some matter arises that the Government believes needs parliamentary attention, Parliament might be recalled before the scheduled start of the new session. In that case, the Governor General issues a new proclamation fixing the revised date for the start of the new session.

**We know that Canadian politics can be confusing. Is there something that you would like Samara to explain? Send us your suggestions at [info@samaracanada.com](mailto:info@samaracanada.com). Include "Samara Explains" in the subject line.**

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Samara Canada is a national charity dedicated to strengthening Canadian democracy. Established in 2009, we have become Canada's most trusted, non-partisan champion of increased civic engagement and a more positive public life. Samara Canada's research and educational programming shines new light on Canada's democratic system and encourages greater political participation across the country to build better politics, and a better Canada, for everyone.

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