

# The House of Assembly at Sessions House



Hamilton



Bermuda

## The Sessions House

Standing on the highest eminence within the boundaries of the City of Hamilton, the Sessions House with its clock tower is the most conspicuous building on the city's skyline (although the Seon Building is higher).

The original building was a simple two-storey edifice built about the year 1819. The clock tower and Florentine façade were proposed in 1887 to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, but work started late and the alterations were not completed until 1893.

A terracotta medallion of the Queen's head can be seen under an arch on the southern side.

The large chamber in the upper storey houses the elected House of Assembly. Entrance to this chamber is gained by the front stairway or by elevator. Immediately below this chamber, on the ground floor of the Sessions House, the Supreme Court of Bermuda meets. Through the years there have been many additions to the building, the most recent of which was the provision of elevator access on the eastern side of the building.



## A Message from the Speaker



On February 8, 2013 my colleagues in the House of Assembly duly elected me to be their Speaker. Having served as a Member of Parliament since 1998, it is indeed a distinct honour to assume this prestigious and challenging role.

Bermuda's Parliament is the oldest in the Commonwealth outside of the British Isles and dates back to 1st August 1620, when Governor Nathaniel Turner summoned a General Assembly to convene at St. Peter's Church in the town of St. Georges, Bermuda's first Capital and now a World Heritage Site.

Situated prominently on Parliament Street, The Sessions House welcomes visitors to the City of Hamilton. The Sessions House has been part of Bermuda's historical landscape since Parliament moved from the original St. Georges site in 1826. The Florentine Facade which decorates the exterior sets the tone for the wood-paneled Chamber with the Government seated on the Speaker's right, and the Opposition and Independent Members at the Speaker's left. The Clerk to the Legislature sits just below the Speaker. A gold plated Mace, the symbol of the Speaker's authority, rests on the Clerk's table. When the Speaker leaves the

Chamber, the Mace is placed into brackets at the front of the table. The information contained in this brochure describes the responsibilities of MP's, the role of Parliament in scrutinising the Government and the procedures for debate. Bermuda's franchise from a historical perspective is also summarised.

It is our desire that this brochure will assist you in gaining some understanding of our Parliament and the Westminster System.

I extend a hearty welcome and an enjoyable visit to Bermuda's Parliament.

**The Honourable  
Kenneth Howard Randolph Horton, JP, MP**

# THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

## What Members of Parliament Do

Under the bi-cameral Westminster system on which Bermuda's Parliament is founded, the House of Assembly is the lower House where the elected members serve; while the Senate is the upper House where the Government, the Official Opposition and the Governor appoint members according to an agreed procedure.

When Parliament is in session, the House of Assembly generally meets on a Friday from 10 a.m. until the business is done.

The work of the House is regulated by rules known as Standing Orders which have been drafted and adapted by members themselves. The Government determines the business and the order in which it is taken. The day's business always begins with prayers followed by announcements, messages, communications and petitions. Then there are statements by Ministers or Junior Ministers and reports of committees, followed by Question Period. There is time for congratulatory and/or obituary speeches in which members are permitted no more than three minutes each to make their remarks. The agenda continues with the Introduction of Bills, any Notices of Motion and the Orders of the Day - which is the main business of the day.

At the end of the sitting, the motion to adjourn gives Members another opportunity to speak on topical issues of their choosing. Members are allowed to speak for 20 minutes.

Members of Parliament, commonly known as MPs, have many duties that include different activities in the House of Assembly; such as participation on one of the House's select or joint select committees like the Public Accounts, Private Bills and Standing Orders and Privileges committees, duties in their political parties and duties in their constituencies. In Bermuda, MPs are part-time and many hold full-time jobs in the private sector.

Since Bermuda's Parliament meets once a week (except for the Budget debate) MPs spend most of their time doing constituency work and dealing with constituents' problems. They may give advice on how to address a particular issue; or intervene/or act on behalf of constituents. MPs regularly use Parliament to raise both national and local issues, and those of concern to their constituents.

During sessions, MPs examine and pass legislation generally in the form of Bills - presented to Parliament by the Government. Government cannot simply legislate on its own - it requires the approval of the House of Assembly and the Senate (although the Senate has no say in financial measures). Bills may be amended during their passage through both Houses. Bills that pass through all the required stages become Acts of Parliament.

## Progress of Bills: Main Stages

<b>First Reading</b>	Formal presentation
<b>Second Reading</b>	<b>House</b> - Debate on general principle <b>Committee</b> - Detailed examination of clauses and proposed amendments <b>Report</b> - Consideration of committee amendments and opportunity for further changes
<b>Third Reading</b>	Final debate on Bill as a whole

Most Bills go through the same stages in both Houses of Parliament. Bills can also start in either House.

## Scrutinising Government

A major role of the House of Assembly is pass laws and to subject the policies and actions of Government to public scrutiny. The Government runs the country, but Parliament holds the Government to account.

One of the most important features of parliamentary accountability is Question Period which occurs early in the agenda and can sometimes be lively. Members may ask Government Ministers questions on matters of urgent importance or about matters which have been brought to the attention of the Houses of Assembly that day by way of the ministerial statements. This is also the opportunity for asking written questions in advance and the answers may be requested orally or in writing. All answers are included in the published official report of proceedings otherwise known as the minutes. There is also an official Hansard of parliamentary proceedings, which can be viewed on our website at [www.parliament.bm](http://www.parliament.bm).

## Procedure in Debate

The Speaker sits in the Speaker's Chair at the end of the table of the House. The Government of the day sits on the Speaker's right and the Opposition on the Speaker's left. It is the Speaker's duty to keep order during debate and to recognise individual MPs to speak. The MP thus recognised, must address the Chair and must refer to other MPs by their constituency and to Ministers by their office. Thus MPs will refer to each other as "The Honourable Member for \_\_\_".

Debates in the House of Assembly are always based on a motion (for example "That the \_\_\_ Order be approved" or "That the Bill be read a second time"). At the end of the debate the Speaker (or in the Committee Stage of a Bill, the Chairman) will put the question. A division may follow which requires MPs to say "Aye" or "No" when their names are called.



View from the Clerk's table showing the Main entrance door, the public gallery and the members benches.



2010 saw the 390th anniversary of Bermuda's Parliament. The first elected Assembly was convened in St. Peter's Church, St. George's on 1 August 1620 and consisted of 36 members. While Parliament had the authority to pass legislation and monitor and control the island's finances, the Governor had the authority to veto any law passed.

When the capital of the island was moved from St. George's to Hamilton, Parliament followed and met in the Town Hall (the current site of Supreme Court No.3) from 1815 to 1826, when it moved to its current location.

Over the years, the Bermuda Parliament assumed more and more responsibility for governing the island. The most dramatic change took place in 1968 with universal adult suffrage and a new Constitution. As a result, the Bermuda Parliament was substantially strengthened and the elected government became almost totally responsible for running its affairs - although Bermuda remained a British colony.

The Bermuda Parliament is modelled on the Westminster system, with an Upper House and a Lower House - the Lower, being the elected House of Assembly and the Upper, the appointed Senate.

## THE FRANCHISE

Throughout most of Bermuda's history, the majority of Bermudians could not vote in general elections, or run as Parliamentary candidates. This was because only owners of property of a certain value and above had the right to vote and to offer themselves as election candidates. For a very long period of time, these privileges were limited to male property owners only.

In 1834, when slavery was abolished in Bermuda and throughout the British colonies, the property value qualification was increased. Changes in the franchise were slow, but after a long, hard struggle, women were finally enfranchised in 1944. Universal adult suffrage took longer.

The general election of 1968 was the first election in Bermuda in which everyone, 21 years old and over, could vote and in which the property vote did not play a role. It was not until the general election of 1989 that the vote was extended to all persons aged 18 years and over.



**Seated at Clerk's Table: Sergeant at Arms.** Mr. Albert Fox Jr., CPM (left) and **Clerk to the Legislature.** Mrs. Shernette Wolffe.

**In the Speaker's Chair: Speaker,** The Hon. K.H. Randolph Horton, JP, MP

**Standing beside Clerk's Table:** Youth Parliamentarian, Kimika Jackson

**Government** (The One Bermuda Alliance) [Left side]

**Back row: Left to Right:** Mr. Mark J. Pettingill, JP, MP, Mrs. Nandi Outerbridge, JP, MP, Mr. Kenneth Bascome, Mr. Glen Smith, JP, MP, The Ms. Leah K. Scott, JP, MP, Mr. Jeff Sousa, The Hon. L. Craig Cannonier, Ms. Susan Jackson, JP, MP, Mrs. Suzann Roberts-Holshouser, JP, MP

**Front row: Left to Right:** Mr. Nelson H. Cole Simons, JP, MP, Mr. Sylvan D. Richards, Jr., JP, MP, The Hon. Wayne R. Scott, JP, MP, The Hon. Jeanne Atherden, JP, MP, The Hon. Trevor G. Moniz, JP, MP, The Premier of Bermuda, The Hon. Michael H. Dunkley JP, MP, The Hon. Everard T. (Bob) Richards, JP, MP, The Hon. Patricia J. Gordon-Pamplin, JP, MP, The Hon. E.G. Grant Gibbons JP, MP, The Hon. Shawn Cockwell, JP, MP

**Opposition** (Progressive Labour Party) [Right side]

**Front Row: R to L:** Mr. Michael Weeks, JP, MP, The Hon. Zane De Silva, JP, MP, Mrs. Kim Wilson, JP, MP, The Leader of the Opposition, The Hon. Marc A. R. Bean JP, MP, Mr. David Burt, JP, MP, Opposition Whip, Ms. Lovitta Foggo, JP, MP, The Hon. Michael Scott, JP, MP, Mr. Glenn A. Blakeney, JP, MP

**Back row: R to L:** Mr. Lawrence Scott, JP, MP, Mr. Walter H. Roban, JP, MP, The Hon. Dennis P. Lister, JP, MP, Mr. Walton Brown, JP, MP, Mr. Rolf P. Commissiong, JP, MP, Mr. Jamahl S. Simmons (Not Pictured)

## THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

Until the General Election of 2003, there were 40 Members elected to the House of Assembly; representing the 20 dual-seat constituencies into which Bermuda's nine parishes were divided.

As a result of a 2001 Order-in-Council and a subsequent 2002 constitutional amendment, Bermuda now has 36 single-seat constituencies, all of which were designed, and are reviewed from time to time by the Constituency Boundaries Commission, to ensure they have equal numbers of voters.

In 1998, after 35 years in Opposition, the Bermuda Progressive Labour Party won an historic first term as Government. In 2003, under the new electoral rules of single-seat constituencies, the Progressive Labour Party won a second term.

The Bermuda Progressive Labour Party won a third term as government as a result of the 18 December 2007 General Election in which they won 22 seats to the Opposition United Bermuda

Party's 14 seats. The United Bermuda Party remained the official Opposition up until May, 2011. The majority of their elected members quit to form the One Bermuda Alliance, who were the official Opposition. Two members crossed the floor and joined the Progressive Labour Party.

The One Bermuda Alliance won their first term as government in the 17 December, 2012 General Election in which they won 19 seats, to the Progressive Labour Party's 17 seats.

The Premier, along with a maximum of 12 other elected members and/or a maximum of two appointed senators, comprises the Cabinet. The Cabinet must include one appointed member (that is, one member who represents the Senate). Under the Westminster system of collective responsibility, the Cabinet (or executive arm), runs the country while the ultimate authority rests with the Parliament, because Bermuda remains a British Dependant Territory, the Queen's representative, the Governor, retains responsibility for external affairs, defence, internal security and the police.

## Procedure

The mace is the symbol of the authority of the Speaker. It is carried by the Sergeant-at-Arms when the Speaker enters the Chamber at the commencement of a sitting and again when the Speaker leaves. While the Speaker is in the chair, the mace rests in brackets on the top of the Clerk's table.

The Speaker keeps order by means of a gavel, made from the remains of a cedar tree which had grown in St. Peter's churchyard, the site of the first Parliament in 1620.

In common with most legislative bodies, it is the practice of the House of Assembly to debate the detail of a measure in a Committee of the Whole House. When this is agreed by the adoption of an appropriate motion, the Speaker leaves his chair, after having appointed a chairman to preside over the committee. The chairman takes a seat at the Clerk's table in a chair provided immediately below the Speaker's chair and on the Clerk's right.

When the Speaker leaves the chair and the House is sitting in Committee of the Whole House, the mace is removed from the top of the table and placed on brackets on the face of the table. This is known as 'placing the mace under the table.' This is done to emphasise that the House, at these times, is not sitting in full session, but is in the committee stage of its proceedings.

The mace is also always carried in front of the Speaker in the procession from the House in response to the Governor's command at the convening of Parliament, and also on certain other ceremonial occasions. The mace was made in London by Garrard and Company in 1920 of silver gilt to commemorate the tercentenary of the institution of Parliamentary Government in Bermuda.



Speaker, Deputy Speaker, Ms. S. Roberts-Holshouser and the Clerk of the House, Mrs. S. Wolffe



## Officers of the House

The Speaker of the House is chosen from among the elected Members of the House of Assembly. The election of Speaker takes place during the first meeting of Parliament following a general election. Once elected, the Speaker sheds all party allegiance and conducts the meetings of the House impartially. The Deputy Speaker of the House is also chosen from among the elected Members of the House of Assembly. This election also takes place during the first meeting of Parliament following a General Election.

The Clerk to the Legislature, together with two Assistant Clerks, is the Speaker's right hand and is responsible for ensuring that all procedural and administrative aspects of the Legislature run smoothly and efficiently.

The Sergeant-at-Arms sits between the public gallery and the Members of the House of Assembly to ensure proper order at all times and is largely charged with seeing to the safety and security of members. In addition, the Sergeant-at-Arms leads the opening procession with the Speaker, carrying the mace, the Speaker's symbol of authority and is responsible for opening and closing the House of Assembly.



## Interior

The public entrance to the ground floor of the Sessions House is from the eastern end of the building. The appointments of the room are simple in keeping with the atmosphere of dignity commonly associated with British Courts of Justice.

On Fridays when the House meets public access to the upper storey is gained through the southeastern tower and via a handsome oak staircase. Inside the entrance, visitors are faced with two sculpted figures, carved by John Thomas, a Welsh stonemason, out of magnesium limestone in the 1840s. The sculptures were part of the exterior decoration of the Palace of Westminster and were a gift to Bermuda from the Houses of Parliament at Westminster.

The figure on the left depicts King William II holding in his hand a model of Westminster Hall and the one on the right is an unidentified companion figure which adjoined that of King John. The heraldic lion in the corner niche has the same origin.

At the top of the stairs, situated on the western wall are three portraits. On the left, is a portrait of Mrs. Hilda Aitken, Bermuda's first woman Parliamentarian (1948). Her portrait was unveiled by the Rt. Hon. Baroness Blatch, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the passing of the Women's Suffrage Act in 1944. On the right, is a portrait of Dame Lois Browne-Evans, DBE, JP, the first black woman elected to Parliament (1963) where she served in various capacities (including Opposition Leader, House Leader, Attorney General, and Minister of Legislative Affairs) for 40 years. She unveiled the portrait (in honour of her long and dedicated service) on 19 February 2007. Situated in the middle is a portrait of Mrs. Edna Watson, that was unveiled in a ceremony by the Paget Parish Council at the House of Assembly. She was elected along with Mrs. Hilda Aitken as the first women parliamentarian in 1948.

To the left is the main entrance to the large upper storey chamber which is home to the House of Assembly. The room, which was panelled in wood around 1890, is well-proportioned and of rectangular shape. Inside the main door is the public gallery, with seating for visitors on either side of the aisle. The front row on the right side is reserved for members of the media.

The other end is dominated by large portraits of King George III and Queen Charlotte which flank the Speaker's Chair. These portraits are most likely contemporary copies of originals painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds. They were presented to Bermuda by Lt. General Sir James Cockburn in 1819, shortly after his retirement as Governor. Behind the speaker and directly above his chair is the Royal Coat of Arms with Bermuda's crest below.



The Speaker's beautifully carved chair sits on a raised dais above the Clerk's Table. This chair, as well as the Members' carved wooden desks, was constructed around 1890 of English oak. Members sit - Government on the left facing the door and the Opposition on the right - in two rows, the two on the one side facing the two on the other with a central aisle leading from the Clerk's Table to the main entrance.

The Clerk's table was built to commemorate the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to the House of Assembly on 23 November 1953. Three enamelled plaques decorate the face of the table. They depict the Coat of Arms of the Virginia Company (Bermuda's former seal) and the insignia of Virginia, while still a British colony.

Around the walls of this air-conditioned chamber hang portraits of previous Speakers, dating back to 1864.

The door to the left of the Speaker's Chair leads to the Speaker's Chambers, while the door to the right leads to various offices and to the Members' coffee room and committee rooms.



Speaker's Chair



Public Gallery

## THE SENATE

The members of the Senate are appointed to their offices by His Excellency the Governor - five on the recommendation of the governing party; three on the recommendation of the opposition party; and three independent persons in his own discretion.

The Senate meets in the Cabinet Building which is located directly in front of the Sessions House facing the harbour. Geographically speaking the upper House is lower and the lower House is above. The terms 'upper' and 'lower' refer to the protocol whereby the Senate is similar to Britain's House of Lords as a second Chamber wherein legislation is once again scrutinised before becoming law.



### Outstanding Female Parliamentarians

The Hon. Dame Lois Browne - Evans, DBE, JP

1927 - 2007

**1953** - Bermuda's first female lawyer

**1963 - 2003** - Member of Parliament

**1968** - First female Opposition Leader in the Commonwealth

**1998** - First PLP Minister of Legislative Affairs

**1999** - First Elected Attorney General

**1999** - Appointed Dame Commander of the British Empire (DBE)  
By Her Majesty, the Queen.



Ms. Hilda Aitken

1891 – 1987

**1948** – Elected to the House of Assembly  
**1948 - 1953** – Elected to represent Paget Parish

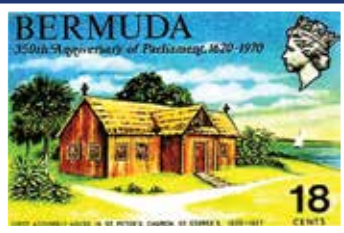


Ms. Edna Watson, M.C.P.

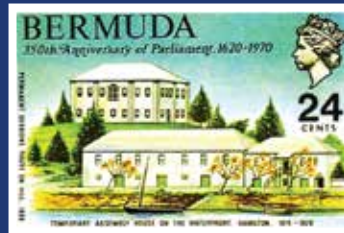
1895 - 1976

**1948** – Elected to the House of Assembly  
**1948 - 1953** – Elected to represent Smith's Parish

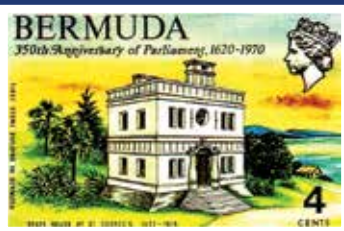
## History of Parliamentary Buildings



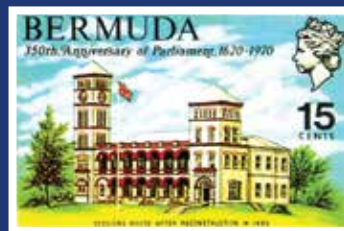
St Peter's Church, St. George's



Town Hall, Hamilton



State House, St. George's



The Sessions House, Hamilton

Built in 1612, St. Peter's Church, St. George's, was the only public building large enough to serve as the meeting place for Bermuda's first Parliament in 1620.

Concerned about the destruction of cedar trees and damage from hurricanes, Governor Butler oversaw the construction of Bermuda's first stone building, the Sessions House, now known as the State House. Bermuda's Parliament met in this one – room building from 1622 to 1815.

In 1815, Hamilton became the capital of Bermuda and with this change, the Bermuda Parliament moved to Hamilton, meeting in the Town Hall on Front Street. The Town Hall was on the upper floor of a long waterfront building that housed the Customs warehouse on its bottom floor.

In 1826, Bermuda's Parliament moved from the Town Hall to the Sessions House on Parliament Hill, its current location. The Florentine Clock Tower was added in 1887 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.



Clock Tower showing the Bermuda Jubilee Clock

## The Bermuda Jubilee Turret Clock

Has been housed in the tower of the Sessions House (figure 1) since 1891 when its four faces were illuminated by oil lamps. The clock has four dials, each seven feet in diameter, cast in one piece. The hands are of copper, strengthened behind with brass. The dials are faced with opal glass and the hands and figures are painted black. The hours are struck on a bell weighing 1,750 pounds and measuring four feet across the mouth. The hammer is cast iron and weighs 35 pounds. The wheels are gun metal. The 6-foot pendulum weighs 90 pounds.

The clock itself has a solid cast iron flat bed movement; with a frame upright (figure 2). Although the clock had a single three-legged gravity escapement, this was converted to an electric drive. The manufacturer's name and date (figure 3) can be clearly seen cast into the bed.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3