



THE BELGIAN
FEDERAL PARLIAMENT

Published by : The Belgian House of Representatives and Senate

Edited by : The House Department of Public and International Relations
The Senate Department of Protocol and External Relations

Printed by : The central printing office of the House

II. 2004

THE BELGIAN FEDERAL PARLIAMENT

VISITOR'S GUIDE

This guide contains a concise description of the rooms that you will be visiting. The numbers shown in the margins refer to points of interest that you will see alongside the circuit.

INTRODUCTION

The Palace of the Nation is the seat of the Federal Parliament. It is divided into two chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House and the Senate are different in terms of their composition and competences.

150 representatives elected by direct universal suffrage sit in the House of Representatives.

The Senate is composed of 71 senators as well as Prince Philip, Princess Astrid and Prince Laurent who are senators by right.

The House and the Senate share competences on an equal footing in matters relating to:

- the revision of the Constitution;
- the elaboration of legislation concerning the structure, functioning, and institutions of the State;
- the organisation of Justice;
- the ratification of international treaties;
- the setting up of enquiry committees.

The House of Representatives has the following exclusive competences:

- to examine the government political statement and subsequently to pledge its confidence in the government by voting (= vote of confidence);
- to control government policy by means of interpellations addressed to government members and concluded by a vote of confidence or no confidence;

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate are competent in all other areas of legislation.

The Senate can:

- send its own bills for the approval of the House of Representatives;
- examine and amend the bills adopted by the House of Representatives.

However, the House of Representatives has the last word.

In conclusion :

- the House of Representatives is **the political Chamber** of Parliament «par excellence»: the federal government must answer to the House of Representatives for its policy (for more explanations see p. 29);
- the Senate is a «**reflection**» **assembly** on legislation and major society issues. It is also **the meeting place** for the communities (for more explanations see p. 45).

THE BUILDING

After the fire, which destroyed *the Palace of the Dukes of Brabant* in 1731, the surroundings of the Place royale and the Park of Brussels were rebuilt according to the plans laid down by architect B. Guimard. At the same time, it was decided to build *the Palace of the Nation*, which is now the seat of the Federal Parliament. The first stone was laid in 1779 under the government of the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, who ruled over Belgium at that time.

The palace was built in neoclassical style. This balanced and symmetrical style dates back to the second half of the eighteenth century and aptly represents the ideas, which were prominent during the Age of Enlightenment.

Initially, the palace was designed to house *the Sovereign Council of Brabant*, which was the supreme body of the Duchy of Brabant at that time in legal and administrative matters.

Under French rule (1796-1815), the palace was used as a courthouse. In the wing, which the Senate currently occupies, a «House for Foreigners» was run for several years.

Under Dutch rule (1815-1830), the Parliament of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, known as the States-General, alternated its sessions between the Hague and the Palace of the Nation in Brussels. This was the first time that the palace was used to house a parliament.

The provisional government (the government of the Belgian revolutionaries) and the National Congress (the first constituent “parliamentary” assembly) moved into the building in 1830.

The House of Representatives and the Senate have held their sessions in this building since 1831. It has been called the «*Palace of the Nation*» since then.

The palace was devastated by fire in 1820 and 1883. Following these fires and as a result of the various changes of use of the palace, the interior constantly underwent renovations. The exterior of the palace, however, remains practically the same as it was when it was first built. Nevertheless, the front of the palace, which had been painted white according to neoclassical tradition, was roughcast during renovation in 1920.

THE TYMPANUM

As you enter the palace, you cannot help but notice the triangularshaped sculpture on the front of the palace above the columns. G. Godecharle sculpted this high-relief tympanum, which represents Justice, in 1781.

THE PERISTYLE

The peristyle is the central welcoming and meeting point of the Palace of the Nation. Visitors may already have recognised the decor of this vast vestibule due to the fact that a large number of televised interviews with representatives and senators have been held here.



On either side of the peristyle, there is a monumental staircase. The staircase to the right, covered in green carpet, leads to the House of Representatives; the staircase to the left, covered in red carpet, leads to the Senate. Green is the House of Representatives' colour; red is the Senate's colour.

The Doric columns are reminders of the fact that the neoclassical style was inspired by ancient times.

Immediately to the right of the main entrance we can see *two copper plates*: the first plate commemorates the laying of the first stone of the Palace of the Nation on August 24th 1779; the second plate commemorates the reconstruction of the Palace after the fire which destroyed the House of Representatives in 1883. **1**

To the left, we can see three statues, which represent famous figures in our history:

- *John I*, the duke of Brabant, who united the duchies of Brabant and Limbourg. The statue was sculpted by Ch. Geerts (1807-1855). **2**
- *Philip the Good*, who succeeded in uniting the Belgian provinces during his reign. For this achievement, Juste Lipse gave him the title of «Conditor Belgii» (Founder of Belgium). The statue was sculpted by J.-B. De Cuyper (1807-1852) from Antwerp. **3**

- 4 *Charles V*, wearing the great necklace of the Order of the Golden Fleece. In his right hand, he holds a parchment bearing the name of the city of Tunis. This evokes the capture of the city of Tunis in an attempt to prevent the Turkish invasion of the western side of the Mediterranean region. The statue was sculpted by J. -B. De Bay (1779-1863).
- 5 On *the television screen* to the right, we can see the meetings taking place in the House of Representatives. The agenda is elaborated by **the Conference of presidents** and adopted by the House of Representatives in plenary session.

A typical week in the House of Representatives

- Monday: Committee of enquiry (if need be) meetings
- Tuesday: Committee meetings
- Wednesday: Committee meetings, possibly plenary session
- Thursday: Political group meetings and plenary session which includes a question time from 2.15 p.m. to approximately 3.15 p.m. and the vote on Private Member's Bills and draft Bills
- Friday: Committee of enquiry (if need be)

The House of Representatives may change this standard agenda whenever it sees fit.



THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

THE MAIN STAIRCASE

At the top of the main staircase, visitors discover a great *stained-glass window* «Lex» (= law). The lions and the lictors' fasces with the birch and the axes symbolize the authority and power of the State, which must implement the laws adopted by the representatives of the Nation. The dates on the left and on the right of the stained-glass window refer to the beginning and to the end of the first world war. **6**

On both sides of this stained-glass window, we can see the busts of the two prime ministers who governed Belgium after World War I.

7



Léon Delacroix Prime Minister of the first Belgian government after World War I (also referred to as the Loppem government) held the first legislative election on November 16th, 1919. This election was important because it introduced universal suffrage for all men (one man, one vote) before this balloting system principle was written in the Constitution.

The Prime Minister Léon Delacroix (1867 - 1929)

8

Under the government of Henry Carton de Wiart, universal suffrage was written in the Constitution on February 7th, 1921. From that date forward, all men aged 21 and over were given the right to a single vote.



The Prime Minister Carton de Wiart (1869 - 1951)

The white marble busts of our former prime ministers adorn the hallways of the House. Traditionally, the bust of each prime minister is sculpted by a Belgian artist.

As you make your way down the hallway, you will see on your left hand side *a XIX century parliamentary gown* and further down the hallway, *the bust of King Leopold I*, sculpted by G. Geefs (1805-1883). **9**
10

The passages to the left and to the right of the bust of King Leopold I lead to *the Members' House* where the senators, representatives, and parliamentary groups have their offices and where one can find restaurants and parlours.

The Members' House is decorated with the works of (mostly Belgian) contemporary artists.

To the right of the bust of King Leopold I, we can see a painting by *J. Delahaut* and to the left, a work by artist *L. Peire*. **11**
12

These two Belgian painters, Peire and Delahaut, are famous for their work in the field of abstract geometrism.

- 13 At the end of the hallway to the left, we find *the screens*, which the representatives can read and print news items issued by the Belga agency in both official languages. To
- 14 the right, we find *telephone boxes*, which are used by representatives.

The representatives have more sophisticated sources of information at their disposal. They can follow more quickly the latest developments of the parliamentary proceedings via the databases and the Internet site of the House of Representatives.

Moreover, representatives have access to various national and international databases through the Library of Parliament.

Finally, representatives have an administrative aid and an assistant (a university graduate) who help them handle all of this information as well as carry out their various other tasks.

A bit further down, visitors can see the busts of the Prime ministers who governed Belgium during the period prior to and following World War II:

Jules Renkin (1862-1934) was Prime Minister during the Great Depression of the thirties; **15**

Paul-Henri Spaak (1899-1972), was the Minister of Foreign Affairs during many years and also became the Secretary General of N.A.T.O.; he presided the very first General Assembly of the United Nations in 1946; **16**

Hubert Pierlot (1883-1963), was the Prime Minister of the Belgian government in exile in London (from 1940 to 1944); **17**

Paul van Zeeland (1893-1973), was the Prime Minister who, in 1935, saved the country from the economic crisis caused by the Great Depression. He also ran as the only candidate representing the traditional parties and defeated the rexist Leon Degrelle in the famous partial elections held on April 1st 1937 (the rexist party was a walloon pro-nazi party before World War II); **18**

Achille Van Acker (1898-1975), was one of the fathers of an economy based on consultation and the Belgian Social Security system immediately after World War II; that system is basically financed and managed by thee actors: the government, the trade unions and the employers **19**

The bronze effigy of *Paul-Emile Janson* (1872-1944) who was Prime Minister from December 23rd 1937 to May 13th 1938. He died in the concentration camp of Buchenwald. **20**

THE COMMITTEE ROOMS

Most of the parliamentary activity takes place at the committee level.

Each *draft Bill* (that is new legislation introduced by cabinet ministers) and *Private Member's Bill* (that is new legislation introduced by one or more representatives or senators) is examined at the committee level first.

After the committees have discussed the proposed legislation, they vote and draw up a report which is printed in both official languages. The text that has been adopted by the committee is then submitted to the House of Representatives in plenary session.

The House of Representatives has **eleven standing committees** (for example: the Committee on Foreign Affairs) consisting of 17 members each. There are also various special committees (for example: the Committee on the Naturalisations, the Committee on Petitions). Finally, there are several advisory committees (for example: the Advisory Committee on European Issues).

The political composition of these committees matches that of the plenary assembly of the House of Representatives itself.

The organisation of committee tasks has changed in recent years.

Committee powers have been extended so as to enable committee members to question and interpellate ministers or set up hearings.

Each political group can call upon outside experts to help them in the committee works.

Most of the committee debates are open to the public.



The International Room.

THE FIRST ROOM

- 21** The bust that adorns this room is the work of A. Dupagne (1889-1980) and represents *Prince Charles* (1903-1983) who was Regent of Belgium from September 1944 to July 1950, replacing his brother King Leopold III (who was obliged to follow the German troops in their retreat in 1944 and who lived in exile in Switzerland after the capitulation of the nazi-regime).

Three paintings decorate this room.

- 22** The largest, painted by L. Devos and J. Maes shows *H.M. King Leopold III* taking the oath (February 23rd 1934). The King takes the oath before both chambers in joint session, pronouncing the words: «*I swear to abide by the Constitution and laws of the Belgian people, to maintain the independence of our nation, and to keep our territory united as one*».

For solemn events, like the taking of the oath by the King, members of the House of Representatives and senators meet in joint session in the plenary room of the House of Representatives.

- 23** The painting next to the chimney was done by J. Starck (1814-1884) and depicts *the last speech from the throne given by H.M. King Leopold I (1865)*. As it is still the tradition today in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, the King of Belgium read a speech from the throne to all the representatives and senators in joint session in the plenary room of the House of Representatives for the opening of Parliament. This practice was abandoned under the reign of H.M. Leopold II.

The painting to the left of «The King taking the oath» depicts a heated debate being held in the House of Representatives during the struggle between Catholics and liberals over the control of education which lasted from 1878 to 1884 (the «Schoolwar»).

Addressing the Assembly, the liberal Minister of Public Education, Pierre Van Humbeek, defends his education policy despite violent criticism from the Catholic opposition.

Standing between the benches, we can see the figure of *Walthère Frère-Orban* (1812-1896), who was Prime Minister of the liberal government. This painting was created by the artist E. Blanc-Garin.



THE SECOND ROOM

25 The large painting by J. Cran (1876-1926) shows *H.M. King Albert I taking the oath* (December 23rd 1909).

At the foot of the throne, we can see the cardinal Mercier who arrived too late to take the seat which had been reserved for him.

On either side of the chimney, there is a painting of a famous liberal figure:

26 *Paul Janson* (1840-1913)

27 and *Paul Hymans* (1865-1941).

Hymans, a renowned internationalist and honoured with the Nobel prize, contributed to the foundation of the League of Nations.

From the window, we have a view on a wing of the Members' House. This wing was built in 1891 by H. Beyaert to house the managers' offices of the Belgian National Railways Society.

The bust of *Willem I*, King of the Netherlands (Belgium was a part of this kingdom between 1815 and 1830) can also be admired in this room. The bust is sculptured by F. Rude (1784-1855), a French artist who for instance chisselled a bas-relief decorating the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

The statue of Willem I is a typical neoclassical portrait : Willem I is portrayed as a Roman emperor.

THE THIRD ROOM

The painting by J. Starck entitled *H.M. King Leopold II taking the oath* (December 17th 1865) occupies a central position in this room. The painting depicts the House of Representatives as it appeared in the first half of the XIXth century before it was damaged by fire in 1883. **28**

A portrait of *Emile Vandervelde* (1866-1938) painted by I. Opsomer, an artist from Antwerp, hangs on the sidewall of this room. Vandervelde was one of the founders of the Belgian Worker's Party (1885), which became later on the socialist party. **29**

The Bureau and the Conference of presidents meet in this room.

The **Bureau** is the management (executive) body of the House of Representatives; chaired by the President of the House of Representatives.

The **Conference of presidents** organises parliamentary proceedings and is made up of the President and vice-presidents of the House of Representatives, the presidents of the political groups as well as a member of the government.

Down the hallway leading to the hemicycle of the House of Representatives, visitors come face to face with *Charles Woeste* (1837-1922), an eminent Catholic conservative representative and co-founder of the Catholic Party (1884).

To the right, we can glance at an office where Bureau members and committee presidents welcome guests.

The painting on the left side of the hallway depicts the inner courtyard of *the Palace of the Dukes of Brabant*. This courtyard leads to what is now the "Place royale".

Along the walls of the hallway, we find the busts of the Prime ministers who governed the country during the fifties and sixties.

The bust of Prime Minister *Theo Lefèvre* (1914-1973) sculpted by O. Jaspers is an example of a modern portrait and daring interpretation of a model by an artist.

The one of *Pierre Harmel* by I. Ianchelevici strikes us by its original interpretation.

Outside, in the garden, we see *a fountain with sculptures of youngsters* by sculptor G. Minne (1886-1941). Minne, who was a close friend of the President of the House of Representatives, Camille Huysmans (1871-1968), donated this fountain to the Parliament in 1936.

Further down, on the left-hand side of the hallway, we find the busts of the most recent Prime ministers.



Leo Tindemans



Mark Eyskens

34

35

The busts of *Leo Tindemans*, by R. Poot, of *Wilfried Martens*, by J. Vermeersch, and of *Mark Eyskens*, by W. Peeters, are characteristic of the modern design with which official portraits are done. Rather than showing a physical resemblance, the artists have attempted to render an expression of the Prime ministers' personalities. The bust of Mark Eyskens is made of bronze due to the fact that more artists are used to working with this material. **36**

Do also notice our last acquisition : the bronze bust of the Prime minister *Jean-Luc Dehaene*. This bust is sculpted by R. Poot. **37**

THE PLENARY SESSION ROOM

This room was built in 1817 to house the Second House of the States-General of the Netherlands.

After the Belgian Revolution, of 1830, the 200 members of the National Congress held session here. It is in this very room that the Constitution for an independent Belgium was drawn up.

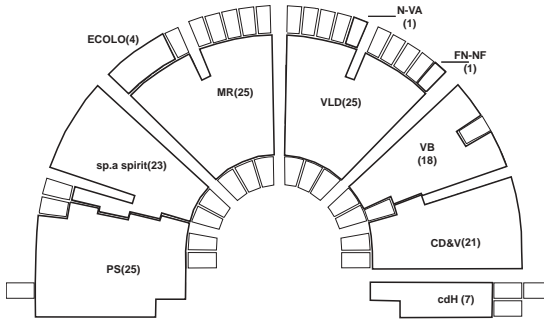
The House of Representatives has been meeting in this room since 1831. In 1883, the room was completely destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt by H. Beyaert and solemnly inaugurated in 1886 by King Leopold II.

In 1831, the House of Representatives had only 102 members. This number gradually increased as the population grew. Following the 1993 revision of the Constitution, the number of representatives was reduced from 212 to 150.

In order to become a representative, one must be a Belgian citizen and be at least twenty-one years old.

The 150 representatives are directly elected by universal suffrage in 11 constituencies (the number of seats in each constituency is proportional to its population. The seats are distributed to the party lists of candidates in proportion to the number of votes obtained). The representatives are divided into linguistic (88 Dutch speakers / 62 French speakers) and political groups. A political group is constituted when at least 5 members of the same party hold seats in the House of Representatives.

The political composition of the House of Representatives



PS:	Parti socialiste = French-speaking socialists
sp.a-spirit:	Socialistische Partij Anders/Sociaal Progressief Alternatief = Flemish socialists Spirit: progressive party born out of the former Flemish nationalist party sp.a and Spirit built a cartel for the elections of May 2003. Their representatives build now one political group in the House and the Senate.
ECOLO:	Ecologistes Confédérés pour l'Organisation de Luttes Originales = French-speaking green party
MR:	Mouvement Réformateur = French-speaking liberals
VLD:	Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten = Flemish liberals
N-VA:	Flemish nationalists
FN:	French-speaking nationalist party
VLAAMS BLOK:	Flemish nationalists
CD&V:	Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams = Flemish christian-democrats
cdH:	Centre Démocrate Humaniste = former French-speaking christian-democrats

On either side of the statue of King Leopold I, we find several important dates in the history of Belgium engraved on the wall:

September 26th, 1830

The formation of the Provisional Government;

November 10th, 1830

The first meeting of the National Congress;

November 18th, 1830

The solemn proclamation of the independence of Belgium;

July 21st, 1831

The taking of the oath of King Leopold I at the Place royale in Brussels; 21st July is the National Day of Belgium;

February 7th, 1831

The promulgation of the Belgian Constitution;

February 25th, 1831

The taking of the oath of Regent Louis Surlet de Chokier; the powers of the Provisional government were being passed over to the National Congress;

June 4th, 1831

Vote by the National Congress to choose Prince Leopold of Saxe Coburg Gotha as the first King of Belgium.

Under the statue of King Leopold I, which faces the room, we can see the *chair of the President*. **38**

The Secretary General of the House and the Deputy Secretary-General, who are in charge of helping the President during the plenary sessions, sit in the chairs behind the President. The Secretary General is the highest-ranking official of the House. **39**

Below the presidential bureau, we can see the *rostrum* (= the speaker's platform) from where the representatives address the Assembly. **40**

Below the rostrum, we can see *the bench of the question time* from which the representatives ask questions to the government each Thursday afternoon. **41**

To the right of the presidential platform, we find two long tables where the *writers* draw up a summary of the debates. **42** This summary will be published *in the summary report* and on the House's website only a few hours after the meeting.

Plasma screens are to be found forward, to the left and to the right of the presidential platform. Those screens indicate the item of the agenda which is being examined and the speaker's name. **43**

There are six «*broadcast-quality cameras*» in the plenary room which are operated from the control room. The pictures are at the disposal of the TV-stations, and this free of charge. **44**

There are also three *webcameras* which automatically move towards the speaker. This makes it possible to follow the debates in the plenary session directly from our website. **45**

46
47

To the left and to the right of the plasma screens, we can see *the voting panels*. The benches of the representatives are equipped with *voting keys*: green for yeas (affirmative votes), red for nays (negative votes), and white for abstention. The number corresponding to the representative's seat lights up on the voting panel in either green, red or white, according to his or her choice. In this way each citizen can precisely check the vote of his representative. The verbatim report, which is also published on the House's website, mentions these votes.



The visitor cannot help but be surprised by the soberness of the House of Representatives. The statue of King Leopold I, sculpted by Ch.-A. Fraikin (1817-1893) overlooks the room.

After each vote, the total results appear *on both voting panels* located on the left and the right of the room next to the platforms. **48**

At the other end of the plenary room, interpreters make simultaneous translations from French into Dutch or vice versa.

The galleries around the room all have *a very specific function*:

- the gallery to the right of the statue of King Leopold I, allows senators to keep up with the debates going on in the plenary room of the House of Representatives;
- the gallery to the left of the statue is reserved for the military commander of the Palace of the Nation and for the diplomatic corps;
- to the left of the diplomatic corps gallery, we find the royal gallery;
- to the left of the royal gallery the verbatim report of the meetings is drafted.
- the gallery located on the first floor is reserved for members of the press, the guests of the President and of the Quaestors, and the collaborators of the ministers.
- the debates held in the House of Representatives are primarily open to the public. The gallery on the second floor is reserved for the public.

As you leave the plenary session room, you can see the *refreshment stand* and the internal post for the representatives, and *the committee agendas*. You can also consult these agendas on our website. **49**
50

What is the role of the House of Representatives?

To find a majority (government making power)

Without a vote of confidence from the House of Representatives, the new government cannot work. After a debate on the governmental statement, the government must obtain the support of at least 76 representatives. The members of the House of Representatives who support the government constitute the *majority* whereas the others constitute *the opposition*.

To monitor government policy

The House of Representatives monitors the federal government. Only the House of Representatives can call the government or a minister to order and, if necessary withdraw its confidence in the government. *The interpellation* is one of the means of monitoring government policy. Approximately 400 interpellations are made each year.

To control public finances

The House of Representatives has the power to control the finances of the federal state. The Court of Auditors provides assistance to the House of Representatives in carrying out its task of controlling public accounts.

To make legislation

The House of Representatives and the Senate have equal powers regarding the Constitution; legislation concerning the State organisation (structure, functioning...); the judicial organisation; the ratification of international treaties...

The House of Representatives is competent in all other areas of the legislation.

The Senate may submit amendments to the bills that have been passed in the House of Representatives within a certain period of time. *The Senate* may also introduce its own legislation (= on its own initiative) to the House of Representatives.
However, the House of Representatives always has the final say.

To keep tabs on government affairs

The House of Representatives asks the government approximately 2.200 *oral* and 2.400 *written* questions every year. It creates committees of enquiry in order to study problems facing today's society. The enquiry committee on the disappearance of children was a typical example of this. On the basis of the conclusions drawn by the enquiry committee, the judiciary and police departments were reformed.

Any more tasks...

The House of Representatives nominates *the federal ombudsmen* whose task is to examine *complaints* from citizens. The House of Representatives votes on *the granting of Belgian nationality* and nominates *councillors to the Court of Auditors*.

THE CONFERENCE ROOM

This room is a sort of antechamber to the plenary room of the House of Representatives.

In this room, visitors can admire the busts of renowned Belgian politicians of the XIXth century.

Erasme Louis Surllet de Chokier (1769-1839): a moderate liberal, President of the National Congress and first Regent of Belgium. **51**

Etienne Constantin de Gerlache (1785-1871): a catholic, who was the head of the government for some days, President of the House, and the first President of the Supreme Court of Justice for 35 years. **52**

Auguste Beernaert (1829-1912): a catholic who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1909; during his term at the head of the Belgian government, plural universal suffrage for male adults was instituted in 1893. **53**

Walthère Frère-Orban (1812-1896): a liberal conservative who was one of the main opponents of universal suffrage and a defender of the system of vote based on property qualification. **54**

Visitors will also notice the portrait of *King Leopold I (1790-1865)* dressed in a Cuirassier colonel's uniform, and the portrait of his second wife, *Queen Louisa Maria d'Orléans*. Both portraits were painted by F. Geefs (1807-1883). **55**
56

THE READING ROOM

Representatives can read Belgian and foreign newspapers in the reading room of the House of Representatives.

This room is one of the oldest rooms in the Palace of the Nation.

57 After the revolutionary events of September 1830, *the Provisional Government* met in this room. This government took power and laid the foundations for an independent Belgian State. It set up a constituent committee, which drew up a very progressive Constitution for the times. The busts that we can see in this room are those of the members of the Provisional Government, which was a mixture of progressive young liberals and more conservative people.

The Senate held its sessions in this room from 1831 to 1849.

The wall on the right-hand side is entirely dedicated to the gallery of portraits of the former presidents of the House of Representatives. Each president of the House has his portrait painted.

58 Many of the portraits in this room were painted by renowned Belgian artists, for example, the portrait of *Prosper Poullet* painted by *G. Vande Woestijne (1881-1947)*.

The life-size portraits of the sovereigns hang on the wall to the left: **59**

Queen Maria Henrietta was painted by A. Stevens; King Leopold II pointing to a chart of Africa (he implemented the colonisation of Congo) was painted by S. Detilleux; Queen Elisabeth by H. Richir, King Albert I by J. Leempoels, Queen Astrid and King Leopold III by E. van de Winckel. On either side of the door that leads into the Senate, we can see the portraits of King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola. These paintings were done by J. Maes.



The massive Carrara marble chimney is flanked by two columns having a low relief design. The chimney was originally the work of F. Rude. After the fire, which devastated the House of Representatives in 1883, this chimney was replaced by a copy done by Ch.-A. Fraikin. A Louis XIV clock and two Chinese vases adorn the chimney. **60**

The function of the reading room is partly outdated. Nowadays, the representatives have their own office in the Members' House where they can prepare their parliamentary work with the assistance of an administrative collaborator and a collaborator with a university degree.



THE SENATE

THE GREEN ROOM

Although the House of Representatives is green and the Senate is red, the room in which we now stand is part of the Senate. Along the windows, we find the tables where the senators can put a final touch to their speeches. Senators often gather here in small groups to exchange ideas.



On either side of the door that leads into the Senate, you can see a portrait.

The portrait of the first President of the Senate, Goswin, Baron de Stassart (1780-1854) was painted by F. -J. Navez who was a pupil of the great French painter L. David, one of the masters of neoclassical art.

The portrait to the right shows *Goswin, Baron de Stassart*, the first President of the Senate. The Baron de Stassart was a firm believer in unionism. In fact, from 1830 to 1850, the Conservatives (Catholics) and the Liberals (progressives) buried their disagreements to join forces to build a new Belgian State in a unionist spirit.

61

The Liberal Party was not founded until around 1846. The organised Catholic and Socialist parties came into being at the end of the XIXth century.

The harmony between the design and colour which we find in this painting combined with the sharpness with which the Baron de Stassart stands out from the background are characteristic of the neoclassical style.



The portrait of the second President of the Senate, Baron Pierre de Schiervel (1783-1863) was painted by A. Chauvin.

62 The portrait that hangs on the wall to the left of the door follows the artistic style used in the first portrait. The representation of the second President of the Senate, *Baron Pierre de Schiervel*, may be considered as a characteristic painting of Romanticism. This can be seen in the mysterious background of the painting.

In agreement with the House of Representatives, which holds a collection of portraits of the sovereigns, the Senate sees to it that their busts are sculpted in white marble.

To the right of the door, we find the busts of *King Albert I* **63**
and his consort, *Queen Elisabeth*. Both busts were **64**
sculpted by V. Rousseau.

Towards the right, we find the bust of *King Leopold III* **65**
against the outside wall. The traces of visible points are not
the result of deterioration! These points were used by the
sculptor E. Rombaux to create an exact marble replica of
the plaster model. The bust was never completed.

Next to her spouse, we can see *Queen Astrid*. This **66**
sculpture is by Georges Minne, one of the masters of the
Symbolist movement in our country.

At the other end of the room, we can see the busts of *King* **67**
Leopold II and his wife *Maria Henrietta*, both carved by the **68**
sculptor Thomas Vinçotte.

The busts of *Leopold I*, the first King of Belgium and his
consort, Queen *Louisa Maria d'Orléans*, can be found in
the plenary room of the Senate.



King Baudouin



Queen Fabiola

69 Leaving the green room, you can see the busts of King
70 Baudouin and Queen Fabiola.

The bust of *King Baudouin* was carved directly out of the marble by I. Ianchelevici. The bust of *Queen Fabiola* was also carved by the hand of this Rumanian-born sculptor.

THE SMOKING ROOM

Through the open doors to your right, you will find the smoking room, splendidly decorated with tapestries. These tapestries were specially designed for this room by W. Geets in the XIXth century and woven according to the traditional methods in the Bracquenié workshop based in Malines.



Of these XIXth century tapestries that depict various turning points in our national history, we shall describe one: *The Compromise of the Nobles*. Here we can see various Catholic and Protestant nobles from the north and the south of the Netherlands presenting a request for freedom of conscience to the governess Margret of Parma who administered our provinces in the name of King Philip II of Spain in 1556. These nobles were not granted the freedom they sought to obtain but were instead branded as «beggars», a name which they proudly adopted for their revolutionary movement.

71

THE READING ROOM

72 The newspapers, periodicals and an *on-line connection with the Belga press agency* help the senators keep well-informed about the latest developments in Belgium and around the world. On the wall, visitors can see the portraits of the former presidents of the Senate who seem to be reading the day's current events along with their fellow senators.

Of course, senators also have access to the Internet and to the Parliament's modern and well-equipped library.



As you leave the Senate reading room and head towards the Senate plenary room, you cannot miss the elegant white marble statue of the *Duke of Brabant* as a child, the future **73** King Leopold III.



The Duke of Brabant, the future King Leopold III, a statue sculpted by P. Dubois.

THE PLENARY SESSION ROOM

You are now entering the prestigious plenary session room where the 71 senators hold session. The composition of the Senate has been adjusted to take into account the reality of a federated Belgium.

40 directly elected senators:

15 senators are elected by the French Electoral College and 25 by the Flemish Electoral College. They are elected on the same day as the representatives and hold office for a term of four years.

21 senators designated by the Community Parliaments from among their members:

10 senators chosen by the French-speaking Community Parliament,

10 senators chosen by the Flemish Parliament, and

1 senator chosen by the German-speaking Community Council.

These senators have a double mandate, which means that they remain members of their respective Community Parliaments while holding seats in the Senate. The Senate is therefore the meeting point for the federated bodies and the federal government.

10 co-opted senators chosen by the two groups of senators mentioned above: 4 French-speaking senators and 6 Flemish-speaking senators.

In addition to the 71 senators mentioned, there are three senators whose titles are conferred upon them by right: H.R.H. Prince Philip, Duke of Brabant (the King's eldest son and Crown Prince), H.R.H. Princess Astrid (the King's daughter)

Political groups		Directly elected senators	Community senators	Co-opted senators
sp.a-spirit	12	7	3	2
PS	12	6	4	2
VLD	12	7	3	2
MR	10	5	4	1
CD&V	9	6	2	1
VL. BLOK	8	5	2	1
cdH	4	2	2	-
ECOLO	2	1	1	-
FN	2	1	-	1
	71	40	21	10

Political composition of the Senate
(71 elected members + Crown Prince Philip,
Princess Astrid and Prince Laurent)

and H.R.H. Prince Laurent (the King's second son). They took their oath of office respectively on June 21st 1994, on November 20th 1996 and on May 31st 2000.

The work done by the Senate is regulated by **the Bureau**, which is made up of the president of the Senate, the three vice-presidents of this assembly, the presidents of the various political groups, and the three senators-administrators (the «Quaestors»).

As is the case for the House of Representatives, most of the preparatory specialised work is carried out by various committees established in proportion to the composition of the Senate itself. There are **six standing committees** made up of 17 senators each.

Originally in 1831, there were only 51 seats in the Senate and only 500 citizens were eligible to stand for these seats: one had to pay very high taxes to be allowed to run for a seat. Furthermore, in order to have the right to vote at the legislative elections, one had to pay a poll tax. At the time, there were no more than 46,000 citizens for approximately 4 million inhabitants. The purpose of the Senate was, in fact, to act as a conservative check to the House of Representatives, which was composed in a more democratic fashion.

By 1893, the Senate had grown to only 54 members, the majority of which were aristocrats. The gradual democratisation of the electoral system began to diminish the class distinctions between senators and representatives. **At present, the conditions for eligibility are the same for both the Senate and the House of Representatives:** one must be a Belgian citizen, enjoy full civil and political rights and be at least twenty-one years old.

What is the role of the Senate?

After the revision of the Constitution in 1993, the Senate underwent the most radical change in its history. Not only its composition, but especially its powers were fundamentally altered. Here is a breakdown of the changes made.

A. Legislation

1. Purely bicameral matters

The House of Representatives and the Senate **have equal powers** with respect to basic federal legislation. A bill will therefore not pass unless both Chambers agree on an identical text.

This rule applies namely to the revision of the Constitution and to basic institutional legislation (example: law designed to prevent discrimination against individuals on the basis of ideology or philosophy or the laws concerning the courts).

2. Attenuated bicameral system

Senators may submit Private Member's bills. The government, however, is obliged to introduce its draft bills to the House of Representatives.

If at least 15 senators request it within 15 days, the Senate can examine a bill, already adopted by the House of Representatives (power to evoke bills). The Senate can then propose amendments (= changes) to this bill within a period of 60 days.

3. Major society issues

The Senate studies **major issues facing today's society** and debates on these issues (examples: research on unemployment and social exclusion, discussion of the relations between the law and the press, the enquiry committee on organised crime, research on euthanasia and palliative care). The Senate also dedicates much of its time towards improving or elaborating **basic legislation**. The senators are helped by the Service on the Evaluation of legislation, which checks existing or proposed legislation according to quality standards such as legibility, legal security and equality, necessity, ...

B. Competence for international matters

The Constitution states that it is the Senate, which has the priority to examine the bills concerning the **ratification of international treaties**.

The Senate may therefore hold in-depth debates on international politics.

The Senate also wants to be informed of on the positionstands taken by Belgian delegates from the very beginning of **preparatory negotiations** in the case of a multilateral treaty.

C. Meeting point between the federal government and the communities and regions

Whenever one of the assemblies in Belgium (federal, regional or community) fears that a bill introduced by another assembly may seriously harm its interests, it is the Senate, which tries to settle this **conflict of interests**.

D. Monitoring Role

The Senate has the right to put oral or written questions to the government, but may also make **requests for explanations** from the government. These take the form of detailed questions that may lead to a debate and the adoption of a motion.

The Senate may also create committees of enquiry. For instance, the committee enquiring into the legal and illegal exploitation of natural resources and their trade in the region of Great Lakes in the light of the current conflicts and Belgium's involvement in that. There was also a special committee to examine Belgium's participation in humanitarian and military missions abroad. These committees have the same competence as an examining magistrate.

E. Nominations

The lists of **candidates** to become a member of the Council of State or a judge in the Court of Arbitrage are presented in turn by the House of Representatives and by the Senate.

74 In the front of the room you can see the *Presidential platform*, from which the President of the Senate chairs the debates, with at his left the Secretary General, the highest ranking civil servant of the Senate, who assists the President during the plenary session.

75 Four “*broadcast-quality cameras*” have been deployed in the plenary session room. The meetings are recorded and processed in the control room (near the plenary session room). Upon simple request, these pictures are at the disposal of the TV-stations, and this free of charge.

76 On the benches of the senators sit the *voting boxes*, with display of three coloured buttons (the green button for an affirmative vote, the red button for a negative vote and the white button for abstention).

77 The two *voting panels* display the individual voting behaviour of each senator through green, red and white lights. You can find these voting panels, hidden behind golden screens, on the left and the right side of the room.

This voting panel provides an overall view of the votes cast by the senators: the green lights show all of the votes «in favour», the red lights show all of the votes «against», and the white lights indicate the number of abstentions.





All around this gallery, L. Gallait painted portraits of historical figures who have been credited with having laid the symbolic foundations of independence of the future Belgian State. Looking from left to right (facing the portraits), we find warriors, defenders of communal liberties, and the princes who contributed to the development of the arts and industry.

The dome, which is decorated in gold leaf and adorned with the coat of arms of the nine original provinces, sheds a pleasant soft light on the gallery of portraits around the plenary meeting room.

The most important rulers of our regions from the Middle Ages until the XVIIIth century are immortalized here.



This painting by E. Blanc-Garin shows the room as it was before the alterations that were made to at the end of the XIX century, without the rostrum in front of the speaker's desk.

The Senate used to meet in what is now the House of Representatives' reading room until 1849. It then moved into the room where you are now standing, decorated in a mixture of Louis Philippe and Louis XVI styles.

The number of senators increased as the population grew and also because of the election of provincial senators following the 1893 revision of the Constitution.

The plenary meeting room thus became too small and had to be enlarged in 1903. To do this, the wall located on the side of the desk was moved back. The decoration on the new wall was done by Count Jacques de Lalaing, and depicts various turning points in the history of our regions:

On the left panel:

- to the left, the fierce resistance of the Flemish patriots against foreign (French) occupation;
- to the right, Charles the Bold, the last duke of Burgundy demonstrates the power of the dukes of Burgundy by forcing King Louis XI of France to witness the punishment of his allies in Liege.

On the centre panel:

- in the upper left-hand corner, the period of Spanish rule overshadowed by the Duke of Alva who was notorious for his cruelty;
- in the lower left-hand corner, the figures of Duke of Egmont and William I, Prince of Orange, two heroes of this tragic period, saying farewell to each other. William I would go on to fight against Spanish repression as head of an invasion army called the «beggar's army.»
- to the right, the terrible wars fought between the Sun King Louis XIV, wars which ravaged Brussels in particular.

On the right-hand panel:

- to the left, the revolutionary currents (the Statists and the Vonckists) which opposed the rule of the Austrian emperor Joseph II;
- in the centre, the French General Dumouriez charges into Belgium bringing with him the ideas of the French revolution and pushing back Austrian resistance;
- to the right, the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo.

78



After World War I, *two bronze plates* were placed under the busts of King Leopold I and Queen Louisa Maria d'Orléans to commemorate the patriots who were sentenced to death in this very room by a German war court.

THE LANDING AND THE MAIN STAIRCASE

To the right of the landing, within view of the main staircase, visitors can see *the marble bust of Philippe, Count of Flanders*, who was the brother of King Leopold II and the father of King Albert I. **79**

You leave the Senate by the main staircase.

Thank you for your visit

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONCERNING

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How to attend plenary sessions in the House of Representatives or in the Senate?

Parliamentary sessions automatically start on the second Tuesday of October and usually end in the middle of July.

The entrance to the House of Representatives: rue de Louvain, 13.

The entrance to the Senate: rue de Louvain, 7bis.

The plenary sessions and basically all Senate or House of Representatives committee meetings are **open to the public**. However, the number of available seats is limited.

All the information about plenary sessions and the House of Representatives committee meetings can be found by reading the weekly information bulletin issued by the House of Representatives, by consulting the webpages on the Internet Site of the House of Representatives (<http://www.lachambre.be>) or by calling 02/549 81 36.

All the information concerning the Senate plenary sessions and committee meetings can be obtained by consulting the webpages on the Internet Site of the Senate (<http://www.senate.be>) or by calling 02/501 78 49.

Visits to the Federal Parliament

Guided tours of the Belgian Federal Parliament are given from 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m., Monday through Saturday, for groups of 10 to 40 people.

The areas visited on the tour may vary due to parliamentary activity at any given time. The tours are **free of charge** and take approximately one hour. The required authorization must be requested, preferably one month ahead of time, either by phoning, faxing, mailing or writing to the House of Representatives, Department of Public and International Relations or to the Senate, Department of Protocol and External Relations.

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