



**PARLIAMENT**  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

## FACT SHEET **11** | GLOSSARY OF PARLIAMENTARY TERMS

**Act** – A law made by Parliament, i.e. legislation passed by both Houses of Parliament, assented to and signed by the President and published in the Government Gazette.

**Adjournment** – The closure of business of a sitting or session of the House or one of its committees.

**Amendment Bill** – A Bill introduced in order to change a particular provision or provisions in the principal or existing Act.

**Appropriation Bill** – A Bill granting authority to spend public money or to incur expenses for the requirements of the State.

**Announcements, Tablings and Committee Reports (ATC)** – In essence, this document forms part of the Minutes of Proceedings of both Houses of Parliament. It contains announcements by presiding officers in respect of both Houses, documents tabled in either or both Houses and committee reports submitted to either or both Houses.

**Arms of State** – Refers to the Executive, Judiciary and Legislature at national level which form the three arms of State.

**Assembly** – The National Assembly.

**Backbencher** – See “Frontbencher”

**Bells** – Electronic bells that ring throughout the parliamentary buildings to call members to the Chamber at the beginning of a daily sitting or to participate in a vote. They also ring to indicate the adjournment of a House.

**Bicameral Parliament** – A Parliament consisting of two Houses or Chambers, like the National Assembly and National Council of Provinces of the South African Parliament.

**Bill** – A legislative proposal for a new law that has been introduced in Parliament.

**Black Rod** – A gold staff symbolising the authority of the Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces. It is carried into the NCOP Chamber at the start of proceedings by the Usher of the Black Rod and placed in a drum adjacent to the Chair.

**Budget** – The government’s annual Appropriation Bill and Estimates of State Expenditure to give effect to its fiscal, economic and social policies. It is presented once a year in the National Assembly by the Minister of Finance when he/she delivers the Budget Speech.

**Budget Vote** – An individual item in the Budget, indicating the amount of money requested by the government for each State department.

**Candidate** – A person whose name appears on a party list for election to Parliament or generally a person who is nominated for appointment to a particular office.

**Caucus** – All members of Parliament belonging to a specific political party. Party caucuses meet privately, usually weekly.

**Chair** – The office-bearer presiding over a meeting of a House or committee.



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**Chamber** – The Chamber of the National Assembly or any other chamber in which the proceedings of the House and its forums are conducted.

**Chapter Nine Institutions** – Institutions listed in Chapter 9 of the Constitution as State institutions that have been created to support constitutional democracy, e.g. the South African Human Rights Commission, the Public Protector, the Auditor-General, the Commission for Gender Equality, and others.

**Chief Whip of the Majority Party** – Assisted by his/her deputy, manages the majority party's participation in Assembly business and by virtue of his/her party being the majority, also has certain duties in relation to the proceedings of the House.

**Chief Whip of the Opposition** – Appointed by the Speaker on the recommendation of the largest minority party. Chief spokesperson for that party on matters relating to the organisation of parliamentary business and the smooth functioning of Parliament.

**Clause** – An individually numbered provision in, or part of, a Bill. Once a Bill becomes an Act, its clauses are called sections.

**Coalition government** – An alliance or union between two or more parties for the purpose of governing the country, usually when one party does not obtain an outright majority of the votes in an election.

**Committee** – A structure of the House comprising a group of members, usually from different parties, formally assigned to consider and report on Bills and other matters referred to it.

**Constituency** – A geographical area assigned to a member by his/her party.

**Constituency office** – The office of a member in a geographical area.

**Constitution** – The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996. The supreme law by which the country is governed. No other law or government action can supersede the provisions of the Constitution.

**Constitution amendment Bill** – A Bill to which section 74 of the Constitution applies.

**Constitutional Assembly** – The National Assembly and the Senate, sitting jointly, to draft and adopt a new Constitution, as mandated by the Interim Constitution of 1993.

**Constitutional Court** – The highest/apex court in the country, dealing only with matters relating to the Constitution. All laws can be tested in the Constitutional Court to ensure that they are not in conflict with the Constitution.

**Constitutional principles** – A solemn pact of 34 principles, agreed by the negotiators of the Interim Constitution, according to which the elected representatives of the people of South Africa were mandated to adopt a new Constitution.

**Council** – The National Council of Provinces.

**Debate** – A formal discussion by members of Parliament during which different parties get an opportunity to put their views on any matter before a House.



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**Deputy Speaker** – A member of the Assembly elected to assist the Speaker and to act as Speaker when the Speaker is absent.

**Dissolution** - Ending the life of a particular National Assembly and making a new election necessary, either at the natural end of the House's five-year term or, if earlier, by a majority decision of the House provided that three years have passed since the Assembly was elected.

**Division** – Occurs when members of a House formally record their names in favour of or against a proposal on which a vote is taking place.

**Election** – The process through which the citizens of the country select their members of Parliament by voting. In South Africa, parliamentary elections must be held at least every five years.

**Electorate** – All citizens of the country who are legally entitled to vote.

**Estimates** – A statement of the amounts that the government departments propose to spend in a financial year.

**Evidence** – Information that is given either orally or in writing to a committee considering a particular matter.

**Executive** – The President of the Republic, Cabinet Ministers and Deputy Ministers. The Executive is the arm of State responsible for the formulation and execution of public policy, as well as implementing legislation.

**"First past the post"**– An electoral system in which the candidate who gets the largest number of votes wins the election.

**Floor crossing** – A legal provision that made it possible for a member of the National Assembly to change or form a new party, within a prescribed period ("window period") and subject to certain restrictions, without losing his/her seat in the Assembly (The floor-crossing legislation was repealed on 12 January 2009).

**Floor of the House** – The part of the Chamber reserved for members of the House. This may also refer to the central open space in the Chamber.

**Formal motion** – A motion of a procedural nature that in terms of the rules does not require notice.

**Free vote** – A vote in which members are free to vote according to their conscience and not necessarily according to the guidelines, policies or decisions of their political party.

**Frontbencher** – A member who holds office, either as a member of the Executive or as an office-bearer of Parliament for his/her party. Such members usually occupy the front benches in the House. The other benches are occupied by the "backbenchers".

**Parliamentary Counsellors (President & Deputy President)** – Two Members of the Assembly designated by their parties, after consultation between the Speaker and the chief whips of the parties of the President and Deputy President, to facilitate communication between the Assembly and the offices of the President and Deputy President.



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**Public gallery** – A demarcated area in the Chamber from where members of the public and visitors may observe the proceedings of the House.

**Government** – The party or a coalition of parties that governs by virtue of having gained the most seats in a parliamentary election. The term is sometimes also used more narrowly to mean the Executive and the State administration.

**Government Gazette** – The gazette of record of South Africa. The government uses it as an official way of communicating to the general public.

**Government of National Unity** – In terms of the Interim Constitution of 1993, the government after the first democratic elections in 1994 was a Government of National Unity, consisting of members of the African National Congress, the National Party and the Inkatha Freedom Party.

**Hansard** – The official, substantially verbatim record of the debates of Parliament.

**Head of State** – The President of the country and head of government.

**Hearing (as in committee hearing)** – A meeting of a parliamentary committee for the purpose of obtaining the viewpoints of members of the public or interest groups on a matter being considered by that committee.

**House** – The National Assembly or the National Council of Provinces.

**House Chairpersons** – Members elected to assist the Speaker and Deputy Speaker with their presiding duties in the House and other functions relating to the political management of the institution.

**Introduction (of a Bill)** – To bring before or formally present a Bill to the House for consideration.

**Joint Committee** – A committee made up of members of both Houses of Parliament. Some joint committees exist in terms of the Constitution, such as the Joint Standing Committee on Defence, and others are established by a decision of both Houses, for example, to monitor the government's commitments in respect of women, youth and the disabled.

**Joint Sitting** – The National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces sitting together for the purpose of conducting joint business.

**Joint Tagging Mechanism (JTM)** – A joint structure of Parliament consisting of the Speaker, Deputy Speaker, Chairperson and permanent Deputy Chairperson of the Council, advised by parliamentary legal staff, whose duty is to classify or tag all Bills and check whether they are constitutionally and procedurally in order.

**Judiciary** – The arm of State that is responsible, through the courts, for the administration of justice.

**Leader of Government Business** – A Cabinet member (usually the Deputy President) appointed by the President in terms of the Constitution to oversee and manage government business in Parliament.



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**Leader of the Opposition** – The leader of the largest opposition party in Parliament.

**Legislation** – A general term for laws, statutes or Acts.

**Legislative process** – The steps followed in Parliament in terms of the Constitution which result in a law being made.

**Legislature** – A law-making body of elected representatives. The arm of State with the power to make and change laws.

**Lekgotla** – A Setswana word describing a gathering of elders or advisers to the king. Nowadays it is commonly used to refer to a meeting of a group of decision and/or opinion makers.

**Mace** – The mace is a symbol of the authority of the National Assembly. It is carried into the Chamber by the Serjeant-at-Arms and announces the arrival of the Speaker of the National Assembly or other presiding officers. It signifies that the House is formally in session and that its proceedings are official

**Maiden speech** – The first speech given in the House by a member. Customarily a maiden speech is not controversial by nature and other members then refrain from making interjections and thereby interrupting the member.

**Majority party/governing party** – The political party that forms the government because it had more of its members elected to Parliament by the electorate than any other political party.

**Member of Parliament** – A person elected to the National Assembly or a delegate appointed to the National Council of Provinces. There are 400 members in the National Assembly and 54 permanent delegates and 36 special delegates in the National Council of Provinces.

**Mini-plenary** – A subordinate meeting of the House for debating purposes only and involving a reduced number of members, as provided for in the rules.

**Minister** – A member of the Executive who is politically in charge of one or more government departments or ministries.

**Minutes of Proceedings** – The official record of the business conducted in the House and Mini-plenaries.

**Minority party** – A party or coalition of parties which does not have a majority in the House.

**Misconduct** – A breach of the standing rules by a member, except a breach of the code of conduct contained in the schedule to the Joint Rules or conduct amounting to contempt of Parliament as defined in the Powers and Privileges Act.

**Money Bill** – A Bill imposing a tax or levy or proposing the spending of money for a particular purpose. The Appropriation Bill is a money Bill.

**Motion** – A motion is a proposal by a member in the form of a draft resolution that the House do something, order something to be done or express an opinion with regard to some matter. It could



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also be a proposal by a member that the Assembly discuss a subject presented by the member for that purpose. A motion, if adopted, becomes a resolution of the House.

**Move** – To make a formal proposal.

**Notice of motion** – An announcement by a member that he/she intends putting forward a motion for consideration by the House.

**Opposition** – Members of Parliament who are not members of the governing/majority party.

**Order Paper** – An approved programme or agenda setting out the items of business which the House is expected to deal with on a particular day.

**Order of the day** – An item of business which the House, through its Programme Committee, has ordered to be set down for discussion on a particular day.

**Organ of State** – Any executive organ of State in the national sphere of government as contemplated in section 55(2) and defined in section 239 of the Constitution.

**Out of order** – Something that is said or done that is not in accordance with the recognised parliamentary rules or practices.

**Parliamentary privilege** – A legal immunity enjoyed by members of Parliament, in which they are afforded protection against civil or criminal liability for anything said or done in the Houses or committees in the course of their duties as

the elected representatives of the people. These privileges and immunities which are prescribed in the Constitution grant members the freedom to raise important and contentious issues in Parliament without fear of prosecution.

**Parliamentary Protection Services** – Any employee authorized by Parliament to perform security and protection services within the precincts of Parliament, and includes all parliamentary staff members employed, appointed, assigned, delegated or contracted by Parliament to perform security and protection functions within the precincts of Parliament.

**Point of order** – A matter or question raised by a member to the Chair as to whether proceedings in a meeting are in accordance with the rules or practice. A point of order may be raised if the rules and orders of the House appear to have been breached and calls upon the Chair to make a ruling.

**Proportional representation** – Representation of parties in an elected body (legislature) in proportion to the votes they received in an election.

**Portfolio committee** – A committee whose membership is confined to a specific number of members of the National Assembly. Portfolio committees exercise oversight over a particular government department or “portfolio” and deal with Bills and matters within that portfolio.

**Powers and Privileges Act** – The Powers, Privileges and Immunities of Parliament and Provincial Legislatures Act, 2004 (Act 4 of 2004), as amended.



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**Precincts of Parliament** – The precincts referred to in section 2 of the Powers and Privileges Act.

**Private member** – Any member other than the President, Deputy President, a Minister, Deputy Minister, the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker.

**Presiding officer** – A member elected or appointed to chair House sittings. The term also refers to the elected political office bearers of the institution.

**Proceedings** – The business conducted in the House or in a committee.

**Question Paper** – Contains details of questions put to the Executive during Question Time. Members hand in signed questions to the Questions Office, marked for oral or written reply. Questions are edited under the authority of the Speaker in terms of the Assembly Rules. Questions are printed on a green Question Paper.

**Reading** – A formal stage in the passage of a Bill through the National Assembly.

**Recess** – A temporary suspension of the regular activities of the legislature for a short period of time.

**Rules** – The formally agreed directives according to which the business of the House and committees is conducted.

**Ruling** – An authoritative decision or pronouncement by a presiding officer, usually on a matter of procedure and relating to the rules and practice of the House.

**Senate** – From 1994 until the adoption of the Constitution in 1996, the House which together with the National Assembly formed South Africa's bicameral Parliament.

**Select Committee** – A committee whose membership is confined to a specific number of members of the National Council of Provinces. Select committees monitor a cluster of state departments and deal with Bills relating to those departments.

**Serjeant-at-Arms** – An officer of the National Assembly who conducts the Speaker or presiding officer into the Chamber each sitting day, bearing the Mace.

**Speaker** – The principal presiding officer of the National Assembly, elected by the House.

**Special petition** – A petition requesting a pension or other specific or personal relief from the State which is not authorized by law.

**Statutes** – Acts of Parliament or a legislative body. Together these enactments make up the Statute Book, usually a series of volumes that form a complete official record.

**Substantive motion** – With reference to a member or the holder of an office specified in Rule 88, means a self-contained proposal in terms of Rule 85 or Rule 88 for separate consideration by the House, relating to any charge against that member or office-bearer.



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**Tabling** – The official presentation of a document or paper in the House, or, if not presented in the House, the publication in the ATC of the document or paper after it has been officially submitted to the Speaker.

**Tagging** – Tagging refers to the classification of a Bill into its appropriate legislative category (see also JTM). In terms of the Constitution, different Bills follow different legislative processes within Parliament, depending on their content.

**Unparliamentary language/gestures** – The use of offensive or unbecoming language by a member in proceedings of the House or a committee. If found guilty of this offence, members will be asked to withdraw the offending remark or apologise for the offending gesture.

**Usher of the Black Rod** - An officer of the National Council of Provinces who conducts the Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces or presiding officer into the House each sitting day, bearing the Black Rod.

**Westminster system** – A system of government modelled after that of the United Kingdom, the main features of which are a head of State (the Queen or a representative of the monarchy) who is not the head of government (Prime Minister) and an Executive which is drawn from and directly responsible to Parliament. The system is based on a series of conventions and procedures for operating a legislature.

**Whip** – A member designated by his/her party to assist in the smooth running of the party and the functioning of the House. Combined, the whips are sometimes referred to as “the whippers”.