

## FACTS ABOUT THE RIKSDAG

# From proposals to laws – how the Riksdag works



PHOTO: MELKER DAHLSTRAND

When the members have concluded their debate in the Chamber, it is time for a vote and a decision. The result can be seen on the wall on both sides of the rostrum at the front of the Chamber.

Much of the work carried out in the Riksdag is the result of changes proposed by ministers in the Government. If these changes are to become reality, often a new law has to be passed. Usually, the Government proposes new laws and the Riksdag decides on them.

Laws can be passed on many things, great and small, and in all areas of society. They can be on a whole range of matters, ranging from criminal law to benefits to the long-term unemployed. Another thing the Riksdag does is to consider the proposed central government budget every year.

The Riksdag also takes many decisions that do not concern laws. They may concern for example the direction of defence and security policy or an action plan for health and medical care.

The proposals the Government submits to the Riksdag are called bills. They can apply to new laws as well as amendments to laws. The Government submits approx. 200 bills and written communications every year. Sometimes a bill is based on a government inquiry. Some bills are about implementing EU legislation in Sweden. The bills vary greatly in terms of level of complexity and length, from one page to many hundred.

### Counter-proposals from MPs

When a bill arrives for discussion in the Riksdag, the Chamber – where the members of parliament meet –

is notified. Working in the Chamber is an important part of the duties of an MP.

A great deal of the political work of an MP is also done inside the party groups and the parliamentary committees. Each committee currently consists of 17 members with virtually the same distribution according to political parties as in the Riksdag as a whole.

At meetings of the Chamber, proceedings are led by the Speaker of the Riksdag or one of the Deputy Speakers (see fact box on page 3). They are assisted by the Clerk of the Chamber and other officials. The officials look into which committee is responsible for the subject matter dealt with in the bill, and at the next meeting of the Chamber, the bill is sent to this committee. If it has to do with the Constitution, for example, it will be sent to the Committee on the Constitution, and if it deals with crime, then it will be the responsibility of the Committee on Justice.

As soon as the bill has been notified to the Chamber, members of the Riksdag may submit counter-proposals, or private members' motions. They normally have 15 days to do this. A private member's motion may be opposed to a whole bill or parts of it. It can also be a request that the matter be examined further.

Motions may contain alternatives to the Government's proposals, but they may not raise questions that lie outside the subject of the bill. Motions may have differing political weight. Motions supported by whole

political parties are called party motions, and they are signed by the party leadership. Sometimes many members belonging to a particular party support a motion, but it is also possible for one or a small number of members to submit a motion. In September, when the parliamentary year begins, members may submit motions freely on any subject that the Riksdag may decide upon. In other words, their proposals do not need to be connected to any particular bill.

### **The committee weighs up proposals**

Each committee starts working with a government bill when the period for submitting private members' motions has expired. The members consult their party groups. The officials working at each committee draw up background materials and documentation – they prepare the matter. They may turn to other committees, central government agencies, organisations and the Council on Legislation for information. The Council on Legislation, which checks compliance with the Constitution and other laws, will give its views on proposed laws whenever the Government or the Riksdag so requests.

The committee can also hold hearings, in which members can put questions directly to experts of various kinds, such as researchers or representatives of trade and industry and organisations. Some hearings are open to the public.

Once the officials have finished their preparations, the members discuss the prepared documentation in the committee. These meetings are held behind closed doors. The chair of each committee has to consider the various proposals that have been put forward in the committee and what the opinions of the different parties are.

### **The balance of power between the parties**

Following the 2014 elections, the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party formed a government with 138 of the 349 seats in the Riksdag. They are therefore a minority government and require support from other parties for their proposals to be approved. The Moderate Party, Centre Party, Liberal Party and Christian Democrats, who previously made up the Alliance Government, currently have a total of 141 seats. The other parties in the Riksdag are the Sweden Democrats with 49 seats and the Left Party with 21 seats.

The members who have an opinion that differs from the majority can enter a reservation. If a member agrees with the majority but wishes to highlight a particular view, he or she can do this by making a special statement of opinion.

The decision of the committee is published in a committee report.

### **Committee reports are debated**

Meetings in the Chamber in which MPs debate and decide matters are called plenary meetings. Sometimes, they make a decision without having a debate first, for example when the matter is a simple one and there is political consensus regarding the proposal in question.

Members wishing to take part in the debate have to notify the Chamber no later than one day before, stating how long they intend to speak. Then the officials write an order paper showing which matters are to be raised the following day and in which order they are to be debated.

Members all have issues in which they specialise and they are members of various parliamentary committees. Therefore, they are not always present in the Chamber for all debates, but they participate in the actual vote.

### **The Riksdag takes its decision**

After a debate, the Riksdag takes a decision. This may take place immediately, or at a special meeting with the purpose of taking a decision. Decisions can be taken with or without a vote.

When it is time to vote, the members are called to the Chamber with the help of a signal that sounds everywhere in the Riksdag. The members have only eight minutes to reach their places in the Chamber.

When a decision is to be taken, the Speaker asks whether the Chamber supports the committee's proposal. If no one objects, the Speaker assumes that the answer is yes and confirms this by striking the gavel. In this case, the decision is said to have been taken by acclamation.

The request of one member is enough for a vote to be held. The parties may choose merely to vote on certain points in the committee report. The vote begins by the Speaker asking the members to indicate by means of one of three different gestures whether they vote in favour, against or abstain. The Speaker assesses whether the "yes"s or "no"s have received more votes. Provided no member requests a count of votes, the Speaker's assessment will then apply.

## The Speaker – the foremost representative of the Riksdag

The Speaker has the highest-ranking elected position in Sweden. The Speaker ranks before the Prime Minister, but after the King – the head of state. The members of the Riksdag elect a Speaker and three Deputy Speakers for each electoral period, which consists of four years.

When the Deputy Speakers are on duty, they are subject to the same requirements as the Speaker. However, the exception is that they carry out their Riksdag duties under the same conditions as other Riksdag members and they are also entitled to vote in the Chamber. The Speaker, on the other hand, has an alternate member.

The Speaker leads and plans the work of the Riksdag. He or she is a member of a Riksdag party, but has to be impartial – he or she may not take part in debates or vote in the Chamber. The Speaker is also expected to review working procedures in the Riksdag.

The responsibility for convening and leading meetings in the Chamber also rests on the Speaker. He or she is required to give the floor to the various participants in the debate and keeps a check of the length of each contribution. When the members are not in agreement, a vote is taken. Afterwards, the Speaker informs the Chamber of the distribution of the votes and confirms the decision with a rap of his gavel.



PHOTO: MELKER DAHLSTRAND

In the centre, the Speaker of the Riksdag Urban Ahlin (Social Democratic Party) together with the deputy speakers Esabelle Dingizian (Green Party), Björn Söder (Sweden Democrats) and Tobias Billström (Moderate Party).

The Speaker also chairs the Riksdag Board, which includes 10 members. The Board plans the work of the Riksdag and leads the Riksdag Administration. The Speaker also represents the Riksdag both in Sweden and abroad.

When there is to be a new Government, the Speaker has to lead negotiations and propose a new prime minister. The Speaker is also the Chair of the War Delegation and member of the Advisory Council on Foreign Affairs.

In the event of a count of votes, the members have to press one of the three buttons in their benches: the “yes”, “no” or “abstain” button. Usually, a majority of one vote is enough to determine a matter. If the number of “yes” and “no” votes is the same, the problem is either solved by lot or by postponing the matter.

### The Government follows up

Once a decision has been taken, the Riksdag sends a written communication to the Government. It is then up to the Government to ensure that it is implemented.

In the case of new or amended laws, it is the Government’s task to have them published in the Swedish Code of Statutes (SFS). In addition to this, every year the Government has to inform the Riksdag of what measures it has taken as a result of the Riksdag’s decisions.

### The budget process concerns us all

The proposed central government budget is the Government’s most comprehensive bill and it affects all the committees. It includes a ceiling for central government expenditure. The central government budget is grouped into 27 expenditure areas and the responsibility for these is divided between the various parliamentary committees. The budget bill also contains a forecast of state revenues through taxes, contributions, etc.

Work on the budget bill begins in the spring when the Government states its guidelines for economic policy. The Riksdag adopts a decision on the Spring Fiscal Policy Bill in June. In September, the Government submits its proposal for the budget for the following year, the Budget Bill. The members then have the opportunity to submit motions in connection with the proposal.

The parliamentary committees work with the budget proposals during the autumn. At the end of November, the Riksdag decides on the total limit for central government expenditure and how the appropriations are to be divided *between* the areas in the central government budget. In December, the Riksdag then decides how the money is to be divided *inside* the various areas in the central government budget and makes an estimate of central government revenue.

Sometimes things do not turn out as the Government and Riksdag had intended. The Government can then propose an amendment to the budget, for example to give a central government agency more money. Proposals for revised budgets may be submitted in April and September.

### Many laws are related to the EU

Because Sweden is a member of the European Union (EU), the Riksdag has transferred some of its powers to decide on laws to the EU. This is incorporated into the Swedish Constitution.

For certain areas, the EU has exclusive decision-making authority, for example in the area of foreign trade and competition policy. In other areas, such as agriculture, the environment and transport, both Sweden and the EU may legislate. Otherwise, the EU is not allowed to interfere in the legislative process. Housing policy, the size of pensions and the school system are examples of areas in which the EU does not have decision-making powers.

When the EU institutions have decided on new EU laws, Sweden has to follow them. An EU regulation is incorporated directly into Swedish legislation. A directive, on the other hand, can be seen more as a legislative target. The EU member states determine themselves how they are to reach the target. Directives may also concern provisions of authorities or government agencies.

### The EU in the committees

All the parliamentary committees monitor the work being carried out in the EU in their particular area. They examine proposals and decide when more information or discussions with the Government are needed. EU issues also form a large part of the proposals from the Government or the members. Each proposal is considered in the committee responsible for the area in which the issue in question belongs.

In the EU, it is the Commission that puts forward proposals for legislation. The Government informs the Riksdag of its view of a particular EU proposal in

### There are different kinds of debates

Most debates in the Chamber concern items of parliamentary business to be decided by the Riksdag. But there are also other debates where no decisions are taken. These are known as special debates. The parties may request debates on issues that they think should be highlighted; these are known as current affairs debates. General policy debates, debates between party leaders and foreign policy debates are other examples of special debates. When the Government presents the central government budget in the autumn and the spring fiscal policy bill in the spring to the Riksdag, these are also debated in the Chamber.

an explanatory memorandum. It is then considered by a committee.

The committees also examine all proposed legislation for which both the national parliaments and the EU have decision-making powers. If a committee considers that a particular matter would best be dealt with at the national level, the committee writes a statement in which it has to justify its assessment. The statement is then debated in the Chamber, and the Riksdag takes a decision in the form of a reasoned opinion to the EU.

Prior to meetings in the Council of Ministers, ministers in the Government consult the Riksdag Committee on EU Affairs on which line Sweden is to follow. The Committee on EU Affairs is organised in the same way as a regular parliamentary committee, but is primarily responsible for strategic EU issues. The Government is expected to follow the line agreed upon with the Committee on EU Affairs. A record is kept of what is said at the meetings and this is published on the Riksdag website.

Prior to summit meetings between heads of state of government in the European Council, the Prime Minister also has to consult the Committee on EU Affairs. The Prime Minister reports back to the Riksdag following the meeting.

### Read more

- [www.riksdagen.se](http://www.riksdagen.se)
- [www.eu-upplysningen.se](http://www.eu-upplysningen.se)