

# *The Supreme Court of Canada*



Supreme Court  
of Canada

## *History*

The Supreme Court of Canada was created by an Act of Parliament in 1875, as a general court of appeal with wide national jurisdiction.

For many years the Court's decisions could be appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England. This right of appeal was abolished in criminal cases in 1933 and in other cases in 1949. The Court is now Canada's ultimate court of appeal.

The Court was originally composed of a chief justice and five puisne or associate judges. In 1927 the number of judges was increased to seven and in 1949, with the abolition of appeals to the Judicial Committee, to nine, the current number. By law, at least three judges must be appointed from Quebec. By tradition, three judges are appointed from Ontario, two from the Western provinces and one from the Atlantic provinces.

The Judges heard cases for a while in the former reading room of the Senate and later in other rooms borrowed from Parliament. In 1882 the Court moved to a small building at the foot of Parliament Hill, which has since been demolished. Construction on the present building began in 1939, but the Court did not move in until 1946.

The Supreme Court building, which now has a heritage designation, was designed by renowned Montréal architect Ernest Cormier. It is situated just west of the Parliament Buildings on a bluff high above the Ottawa River. The building was completed in 1941 but was used for the next four years to house wartime government offices.

The imposing structure contains a grand entrance hall, the Supreme Court's main courtroom, the judges' offices and conference room, the offices of the administrative staff, a library and two courtrooms used by the Federal Court of Canada.

## *Jurisdiction of the Court*

The Supreme Court is a general court of appeal. It reviews cases coming from the provincial and territorial appellate courts and the Federal Court of Appeal in civil, criminal, constitutional and administrative law matters. In most cases, appeals are heard by the Court only if permission to appeal is first given. The Court will grant such permission (called leave to appeal) if a question of public importance is involved or if there is an important issue of law.



The Court holds three sessions annually, in winter, spring and fall. Hearings are open to the public. The Court generally sits Monday to Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., except in July, August and September.

## *The Court in Session*

The Supreme Court sits in Ottawa. Each year it receives about 600 applications for leave to appeal, but hears only approximately 80 appeals. Litigants can present oral arguments from remote locations by means of a video-conference system.

The minimum number of judges required to hear an appeal is five. However, most cases are heard by a panel of seven or nine judges. The decision of the Court is sometimes rendered at the conclusion of the hearing, but in most cases judgment is reserved to enable the Judges to write considered reasons. Decisions of the Court may be unanimous or a majority may decide, with dissenting reasons given by the minority. The decisions and reasons of the Court are printed and also posted on its Internet site.

## *Visits to the Court*

From May 1 to August 31, the Supreme Court building is open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Law students conduct guided tours.

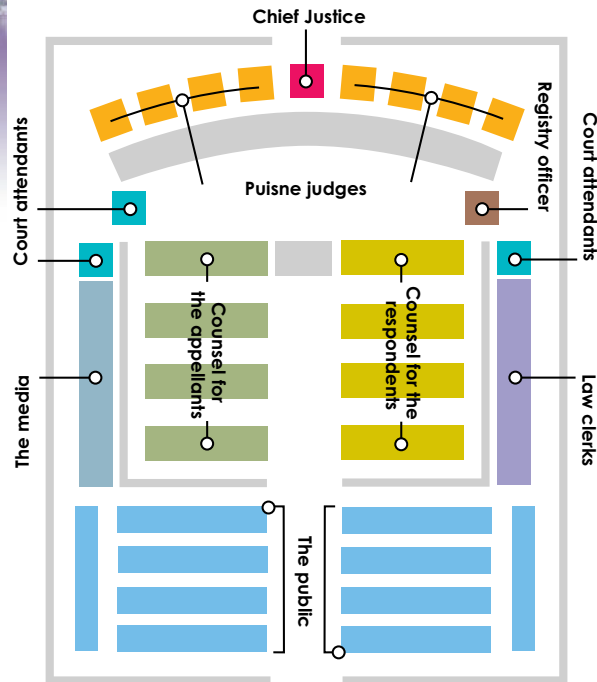
From September 1 to April 30, the public has access to the building Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and guided tours are by reservation only.

Group visits can be arranged throughout the year. For reservations, call (613) 995-5361 or 1-866-360-1522. For further information, consult the Court's Internet site at [www.scc-csc.gc.ca](http://www.scc-csc.gc.ca).

## Did you know?

- The Supreme Court sat for the first time on January 17, 1876, but did not have any cases to hear. In April of that year, it heard its first case. It sat for one week in June and disposed of three cases. In the following January, it started holding regular sessions with a full agenda.
- Should the Governor General die, become incapacitated, or be absent from the country for a period of more than one month, the Chief Justice or, if that office is vacant, the senior puisne judge of the Supreme Court, would become the Administrator of Canada and exercise all the powers and duties of the Governor General.
- The judges are appointed by the Governor in Council. They may remain in the position until age 75.
- Puisne judge: The word "puisne" is an old French word meaning younger. This term, used by the Supreme Court, distinguishes the Chief Justice from the other eight judges.
- The cornerstone of the Court building is dated May 19, 1939, and was supposed to be laid by King George VI. Queen Elizabeth laid the cornerstone in the presence of the King, her husband, on May 20, 1939.
- There are two flagstaves at the front of the Supreme Court building. The Canadian flag to the west is hoisted daily. The other flag flies only when the Court is sitting.
- Two 3-metre high bronze statues have been erected on the steps of the Supreme Court building. These works from the early 1920s were created to be a part of a huge memorial to King Edward VII and were to be stored until its completion. The memorial to Edward VII was never finished. Made by Toronto artist Walter S. Allward (creator and architect of the Canadian War Memorial at Vimy Ridge in France), JUSTICIA (JUSTICE) and VERITAS (TRUTH), were forgotten for almost 50 years. In 1969 they were found in their crates buried under a parking lot. They were erected on their present site in 1970.
- The judges wear the red robes trimmed with white Canadian mink only for special occasions, such as the swearing in of new justices or the reading of the Speech from the Throne.

## Floor plan



## How to contact the Supreme Court

**Internet site:**  
[www.scc-csc.gc.ca](http://www.scc-csc.gc.ca)

### GENERAL INQUIRIES

**E-mail:**  
[reception@scc-csc.gc.ca](mailto:reception@scc-csc.gc.ca)

**Telephone:**  
(613) 995-4330  
1-888-551-1185

**Mailing address:**  
The Supreme Court of Canada  
301 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0J1

### TOUR INFORMATION OR RESERVATIONS

**E-mail:**  
[tour@scc-csc.gc.ca](mailto:tour@scc-csc.gc.ca)

**Telephone:**  
(613) 995-5361  
1-866-360-1522