Civic Governance: Policy Library

Strengthening Municipal Codes of Conduct to Improve Outcomes for Racialized Women & Gender Minorities

CENTRE FOR CIVIC GOVERNANCE

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About the Policy Library Pilot Project

The Centre for Civic Governance is embarking on a new project to compile a Policy Library that will tangibly contribute to equity efforts for racialized folks, women, and gender minorities in elected office. The Library will serve as an all in one resource where you can find precedent, how-to-guides, best practices, and visions for how to build on past success. Our current priority areas include:

- Advancing Feminist Policy
- Protecting Electeds from Harassment at Work
- Racial Equity & Accountability
- Intersectional Policy

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Toward a Safer Workplace for Local Elected Officals

Currently, municipal codes of conduct in British Columbia are determined by each municipality. This produces a patchwork of codes that can leave women & gender minorities vulnerable to gender based discrimination. For women & gender minorities who are multiply marginalized, this patchwork can be magnified further.

Codes of conduct typically govern employee behaviour, local electeds are not categorized as “employees” leaving them vulnerable to harassment by their peers on council. Further, code of conduct reports and violations can be politicized and have been used in a weaponized manner to silence and intimidate other members of council.

What should a code of conduct do?

- Define clear professional expectations including what behaviours are prohibited such as harassment and discrimination
  - Harassment and discrimination should be in alignment with Canadian laws and standards
- Detail clear reporting and accountability structures
  - Confidential reporting processes to protect against retaliation
  - State clear consequences and disciplinary actions for code violations

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Toward a Safer Workplace for Local Elected Officals

It is important to note that **codes of conduct are normalizing documents that comply with colonial Canadian laws**. By that nature, these documents are imperfect and **cannot always address cases where more subtle or structural forms of marginalization and discrimination occur**.

However, when analysed critically for their limitations, codes of conduct can still offer some degree of recourse against the most egregious forms of harassment and discrimination that elected officials face. With strong reporting structures, patterns such as structural discrimination can be identified and provide grounds for improving structures to support more diverse voices in local government.

Addressing Harassment in In Camera & Closed Meetings



- Local elected officials are required to attend to confidential matters in the form of In Camera or Closed meetings, making reporting and accountability more difficult.
- “The Barriers Remain” (2026) report has identified this gap and calls for structures for reporting and networks of support for those affected by harassment during these meetings

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Status of Municipal Code of Conducts in B.C.

Each incoming local government is given the option of introducing a code of conduct, reforming a current code of conduct, or choosing not to have a code of conduct entirely – this last option must be justified. This method benefits more local and customizable control for each municipality but suffers from a lack of clarity, issues with enforcement, and a lack of accountability.

A Patchwork of Codes

Each municipality is tasked with reviewing their code of conduct at the beginning of every term

Individual communities to develop systems that work for them . This individualized approach can be difficult to navigate and support from peer networks or a higher body is limited.

Investigations with no teeth

Municipalities decide how investigations are conducted

Some cities retain independent integrity commissioners while others choose to investigate complaints internally. Regardless of investigation findings, council still votes on consequences for a code violation.

Lack of accountability

Power imbalances are reproduced when assigning consequences.

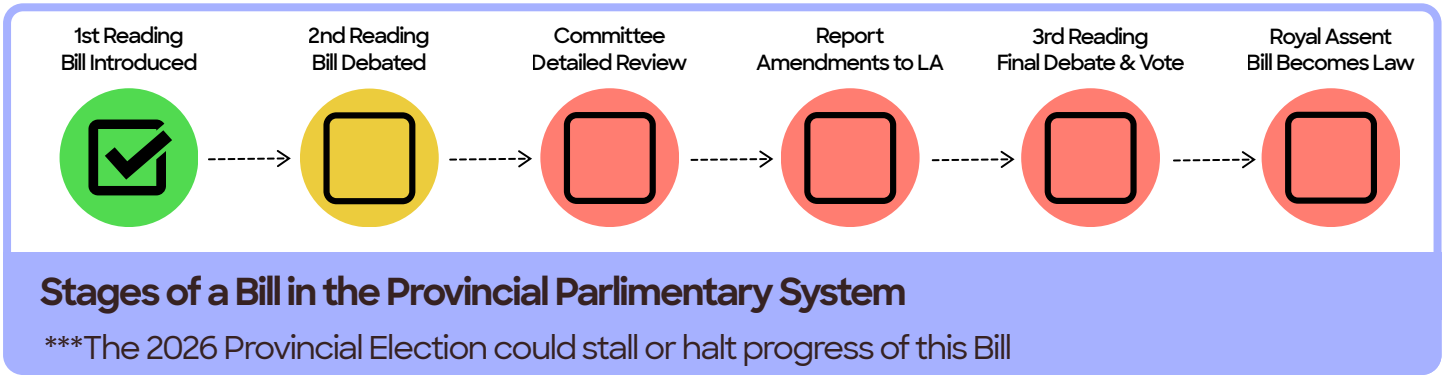
Given the persistent ways power reproduces itself, electeds who are more vulnerable or hold multiple marginalized identities are in this instance at the whim of the majority. By favouring majority rule, this hinders the retention of a diverse elected body

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Provincial Bill-17: Standardizing Municipal Codes of Conduct

The British Columbia Provincial Government is preparing to bring in new legislation that amends The Community Charter, Regional Districts, The Vancouver Charter, The Islands Trust, and Cultus Lake Parks Board to include a standardized code of conduct for municipal electeds. Bill 17-2026 Housing and Municipal Affairs Statutes (Codes of Conduct) Amendment Act, 2026 **has not yet passed its second reading after an adjournment in debate on May 20th, 2026**. Until this Bill passes and a new standardized Province-wide code is issued, municipalities around B.C. will continue to create and administer their own individual codes.

In its current form, the Bill focuses on granting Legal Authority to Housing and Municipal Affairs to prescribe a standardized code and outlines a process for introducing Integrity Commissioners. The Bill states that each municipality should retain the services of an independent integrity commissioner and that commissioners should have the right to recommend consequences for code violations from a preset list within the Bill.



Stages of a Bill in the Provincial Parlimentary System

***The 2026 Provincial Election could stall or halt progress of this Bill

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Provincial Bill-17: Standardizing Municipal Codes of Conduct

The majority of the Bill is concerned with the implementation of integrity commissioners. These comissioners are expected to conduct independent investigations into code of conduct complaints, reccomend sanctions, and must produce an annual report that includes their findings and outcomes. As part of this work, the Bill makes clear the requirement of confidentiality when investigating complaints. Every municipality in B.C. is expected to retain the services of an independent integrity comissioner at the cost of the municipality. In some cases, should the complaint be found to be frivolous the complainant may be responsible for the cost of the investigation.

The Bill addresses issues of quorum leaving the Minister of Housing and Municipal Affairs two options: finding the remaining members constitute legal quorum or appointing an external decision maker.

The province has yet to provide any detail on the anticipated contents of their standardized code of conduct. Additionally, the Bill in it's current form does not provide any detail of the costs of implementation which could be a major consideration for smaller communities.



What this legislation doesn't do

- Provide specifics on what will be included in the new Code of Conduct
- Provide a province wide cost assessment for municipalities
- Depoliticize code of conduct complaints; worries about weaponization of the Code remain

Further Clarification Needed: How or if municipalities can ameliorate the standardized provincial Code to address evolving or municipality specific conduct concerns

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Case Studies

With the status of Bill-17 up in the air, other policy options from across the country can offer perspective.

2026 PROVINCE OF ONTARIO - MUNICIPAL ACCOUNTABILITY ACT AMENDMENT 2026

Description	Given Royal Assent on June 2nd 2026, this amendment is concerned with the role and responsibilities of an Integrity Commissioner of Ontario and a standardized code of conduct for all Ontario Municipalities. Given its recency and scope, this document provides a valuable comparison with B.C.'s Bill-17. This Bill provides a second, higher level of accountability to a city or locally operating commissioner via the creation of an Integrity Commissioner of Ontario. This ensures there is an opportunity for further escalation should an elected official be accused of repeated offences. This means the local commissioner can refer their findings and recommendations to either the council or to the Integrity Commissioner of Ontario. The Integrity Commissioner of Ontario conducts their own investigation and may recommend the seat become vacant. The council still votes on these recommendation with every non-excluded member voting in favour the threshold for removal The amendment also provides stricter guidelines on timelines and voting processes including a mandatory clerk-called meeting within 30 days if removal is recommended.
Keep	• Second tier provincial commissioner for more serious complaints. • High bar for removal. • Strict timelines for acting on code of conduct violation recommendations. • Mandatory Code of Conduct Training.
Discard	• No specifics on the contents of the standardized code of conduct • No complainant standing. Accused members are empowered to lobby other councillors and make submissions on the vote (s. 223.4.0.4(5)). Complainants are not given the same. • Insufficiency Penalty. Failing the seat-vacancy vote forecloses even the lesser reprimand/suspension penalty (s. 223.4.0.4(7)(b); s.160.0.4(7)(b)) creating an all or nothing situation for removal recommendations. • Strong confidentiality may override FOIs and limit transparency.

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2025 CITY OF VANCOUVER - ADVANCING RECOMMENDATIONS AND REMEDIES TO IMPROVE OPERATION AND APPLICATION OF VANCOUVER'S CODE OF CONDUCT BY-LAW

Description	This motion was brought forward in 2025 by Councilor Pete Fry during a particularly turbulent time on Vancouver Council. The motion cannot be extracted from the context including a 2025 integrity commissioner report that found the majority of Vancouver Council in breech of the code of conduct. Council could not vote on consequences of this finding due a lack of quorum given that too many councilors were implicated in the complaint. The motion addresses four key areas: • Endorsing prior (2023, 2024) City of Vancouver Integrity Commissioner Annual Reports • Clarity around sanctions and confidentiality • Protecting the role of the City of Vancouver's independent integrity commissioner • Advocacy to the province to enforce mandatory, enforceable municipal codes of conduct This is a very dense motion that makes reference to several other documents including Integrity commissioner reports, the office of the Ombudsperson of B.C., and an independent review of the City of Vancouver's Code of Conduct.
Keep	• Suggestions to fix the quorum gap should a complaint implicate council so that quorum cannot be reached. • Stronger protections and independence for Integrity commissioners. • Sanctions for breaching confidentiality and misuse of the process, although stronger definitions of "misuse" are necessary. • Clarification on confidentiality.
Discard	• Ambiguity around "public release" is possibly in contravention of strengthening confidentiality. • Filing fees are refunded only if a breech is found.

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