

## The Basics of Democracy and the Australian Parliament

### THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT

The Australian Constitution establishes the federal Parliament.

The four most important functions of Parliament are:

- To determine which party or parties will form government;
- To make laws;
- To provide a forum for popular representation; and
- To scrutinise the actions of government.

The Parliament consists of the Queen (represented by the Governor-General) and two Houses (the House of Representatives and the Senate). These three elements make Australia a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy.

### WHAT IS THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES?

The House of Representatives has 150 Members (often called MPs, meaning Member of Parliament). Each MP represents a separate electoral division around Australia called electorates. Electorates are a geographical region that is determined by the number of voters in that area. Each electorate has an equal number of voters.

Our votes in November 2007 were an endorsement of a candidate to become our local MP in the House of Representatives. Candidates are usually affiliated with a political party (such as the Australian Labor Party, the Liberal Party, the Greens etc) but can also be independent and not aligned with any party.

The party or parties with the majority of members in the House of Representatives forms the government. Generally the House of Representatives proposes legislation and this needs to be passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate for it to become law.

### WHAT IS THE SENATE?

The Senate has 76 Senators - 12 are elected for each of the 6 states, and 2 each for the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. Our votes were electing the Senators to represent our state or territory. Normally only half of the state senators and all of the territory senators are elected at each election. That is why at the recent election there were only 40 senate seats up for election. The other 36 senators will continue on.

Historically, the Senate has been regarded as a State's House: the States enjoy equal representation in the Senate, regardless of their population. State matters are still important to Senators. However, the Senate is also known as the House of Review. This is because proposed laws must be accepted by both the House of Representatives (where the government has the majority of members) but also by the Senate.

Often the party that forms government does not have a majority of the Senators affiliated with that party. Although after the 2004 election, the Liberal/National party coalition did have a majority of members in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This meant that it was easy for one political party to make laws without much debate on those laws or having to negotiate with the other Members and Senators on their views.

## **FORMING GOVERNMENT**

After our votes are counted and it is clear which party has the majority of seats in the House of Representatives, government can be formed. The leader of the majority party becomes the Prime Minister, appointed by the Governor-General and selects the ministers, all of who must be members of the House of Representatives or the Senate.

Ministers become responsible for a particular area of government (such as health, overseas aid, foreign affairs). Those ministers are responsible for how the government performs in that area and must keep Parliament briefed on the activity of the department.

## **THE OPPOSITION**

The opposition is the party, which holds the second largest number of seats in Parliament. There will be an opposition leader as well as shadow ministers. Shadow ministers act as spokespeople on particular areas of government and hold the government ministers to account.

## **WHAT DO PARLIAMENTARIANS DO ALL DAY AND HOW CAN WE INFLUENCE THEIR WORK?**

Besides reviewing, debating and passing laws, Parliament has many other institutional features that keep parliamentarians busy.

Every day that the House of Representatives meets in Canberra (approximately 20 weeks a year) there is an opportunity for the government to be held to account of its activities. This is called question time. The Parliamentary calendar is available at <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/sittings/index.htm> MPs also are busy working on committees and meeting people from their electorate who require their representation. The Senate, in particular, has a highly developed committee system and Senators spend much of their time on committee work.

Of course, members of Parliament are also busy in their electorates visiting events and organisations, meeting the public and attending to letters and requests. Each Member of the House of Representatives has an electoral office in their electorate and each Senator has an office in their state or territory (usually in the capital city).

The public can make arrangements to meet and speak with their representatives at Parliament House or in their electorates. RESULTS has been very effective in creating champions for microcredit and poverty reduction by meeting with MPs and Senators and developing ongoing relationships.

## **HOW CAN RESULTS MEMBERS INFLUENCE THE PARLIAMENTARY PROCESS?**

RESULTS members can have their voice heard in a number of ways:

- By writing to their MPs and or Ministers;
- By making submissions to Parliamentary inquiries;
- By writing to newspapers which are monitored by MPs;
- By visiting MPs and Ministers in their electorate office or at Parliament;
- By holding public events and inviting MPs along;
- By working with sympathetic MPs who can ask questions in Parliament and approach Ministers;
- By making submissions to the Treasurer on the next budget; and
- By making submissions to Party policy committees.