

Closer Look

A series of discussion papers for secondary teachers and students

Australia's Parliament House

Introduction

The building that houses the Australian parliament must meet specific needs of parliamentarians as well as the requirements of the Australian Constitution. This Closer Look explores how parliamentarians use the building they work in, the history of Australia's houses of parliament and facts about the current building. Secondary students and others will understand that Australia's Parliament House was purpose built in 1988 to meet the requirements of federal parliamentarians for the next 200 years.

This paper contains the following areas of content:

- Main points
- The special needs of Parliament House
- The Constitution and the Parliament of Australia
- Why build a new house?
- How the Parliament uses the building
- Design and decoration
- Facts about the building
- Conclusion
- More information

Main points

Australia's Parliament House is designed to help members of parliament carry out their responsibilities with the support of hundreds of people who work in the building.

The Australian Parliament has been housed in three buildings since 1901.

The Australian Constitution specifies certain requirements regarding the location of the Parliament.

Parliament House has a distinctly Australian character.

The special needs of Parliament House

Each year, about one million people visit the building which houses the Parliament of Australia. This large structure sits at the apex of Capital Hill in the centre of Canberra—Australia's national capital. The building was designed by architects Mitchell, Giurgola and Thorp and opened in 1988. The flagpole that straddles the building has become a symbol of the Parliament and of Canberra.



Photograph of Australia's Parliament House from the air. The two curved walls separate the two chambers. The public entrance is closest to the lake and opposite that entrance is the ministerial wing.

Parliaments are unique. They are not like office blocks or law courts or convention centres. A parliament must do four basic things and the building must be designed to allow these four things to happen. The members of a parliament must be able to:

1. represent people
2. make laws
3. scrutinise the government
4. form a government from among the elected parliamentarians.

Australia's modern Parliament House was planned to facilitate these functions. All four functions of parliament take place in the House of Representatives and Senate chambers as well as other rooms. There are many other activities that take place in the federal Parliament such as radio and television broadcasting and printing reports and other documents.

The Constitution and the Parliament of Australia

The Australian Constitution has in part influenced the building of Australia's Parliament House. The Constitution defines the Parliament in the following way:

Legislative power

1. The legislative power of the Commonwealth shall be vested in a Federal Parliament, which shall consist of the Queen, a Senate, and a House of Representatives ...

Constitution of the House of Representatives

24. The House of Representatives shall be composed of members directly chosen by the people of the Commonwealth, and the number of such members shall be, as nearly as practicable, twice the number of the senators.

This means that the Australian Parliament should have two chambers, one larger than the other and with enough office accommodation for all members, senators, staff and related services.

Ministers of State

64. The Governor-General may appoint officers to administer such departments of State of the Commonwealth as the Governor-General in Council may establish.

Such officers shall hold office during the pleasure of the Governor-General. They shall be members of the Federal Executive Council, and shall be the Queen's Minister of State for the Commonwealth.

This section refers to the ministers who make up executive government (often referred to as the Cabinet; although the term Cabinet is not mentioned in the Constitution). Consequently, the Cabinet Room and ministers' offices are located in Parliament House. This gives the ministers quick access to the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Seat of Government

125. The seat of Government of the Commonwealth shall be determined by the Parliament, and shall be within territory which shall have been granted to or acquired by the Commonwealth, and shall be vested in and belong to the Commonwealth, and shall be in the State of New South Wales, and be distant not less than one hundred miles from Sydney.

This section demonstrates that the position of Canberra, the seat of Australian governance was determined not by the development of a population centre but by the Parliament of Australia.

Why build a new house?

The Parliament of Australia has resided in three buildings:

- Victorian Parliament House, Melbourne
- Provisional Parliament House (PPH), Canberra
- new Parliament House, Canberra.

Victorian Parliament House, Melbourne

When the federation was formed in 1901, there was no federal capital city so the federal Parliament met in the Victorian state parliament.

Provisional Parliament House, Canberra



Provisional Parliament House, Canberra

In 1927, when the provisional Parliament House was opened, the Parliament moved to Canberra. Provisional Parliament House was designed and built in the new national capital of Canberra as a small, temporary building. It was required to contain two chambers as well as some offices for the Parliament House staff. Members and senators did not have their own offices and the Cabinet room was located in another building to reflect the separation of powers between the legislature and executive government. By 1947 this temporary building was too small and major additions were made to accommodate the increasing number of members and senators while several parliamentary offices spilled into adjacent buildings.



An early photograph of Parliament House

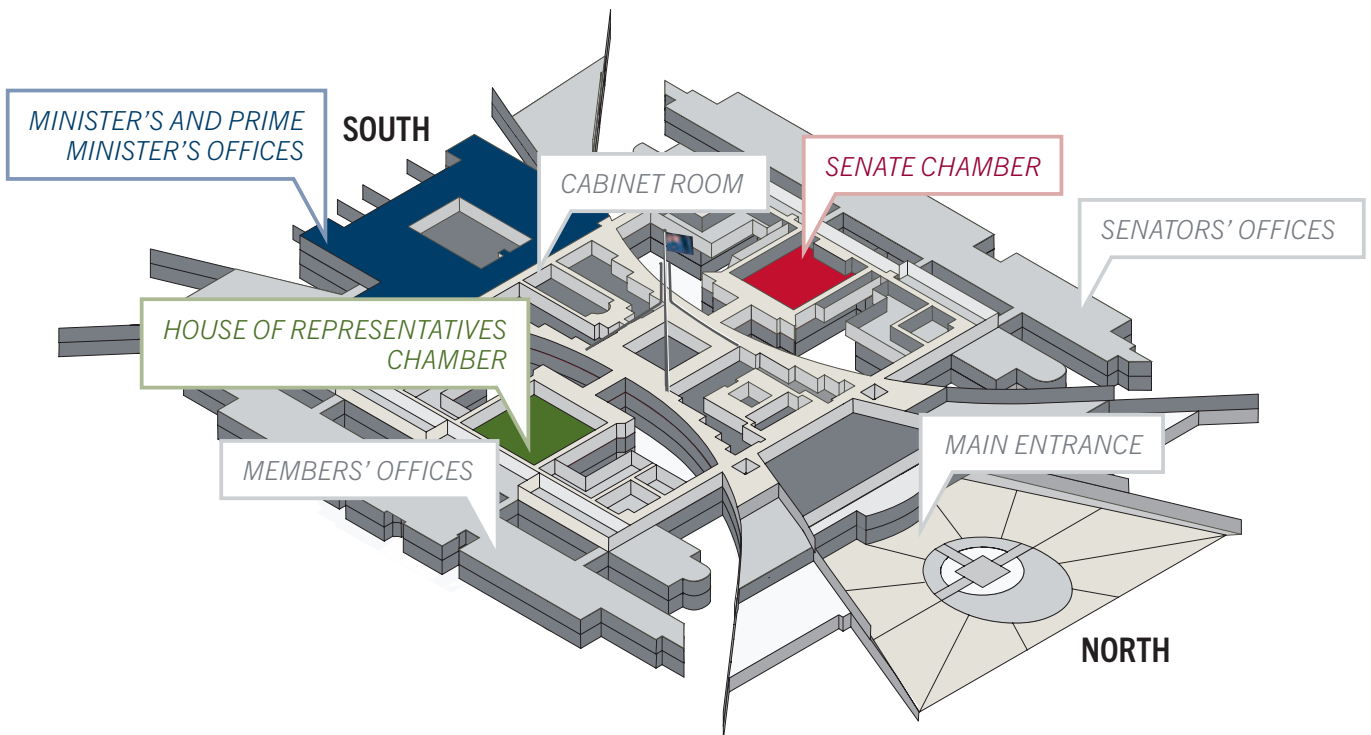
New Parliament House, Canberra

During the 1960s and 1970s, the provisional building became seriously over-crowded, and the Parliament examined many ideas for its new permanent home. In 1978, the Prime Minister, Mr Malcolm Fraser announced a competition to design and then build a new house ready for the celebration of Australia's bicentennial year in 1988.

In 1979, the Parliament House Construction Authority announced the competition for a new building. There were 329 entries from 28 countries. The winning design was announced on 26 June 1980 and was submitted by architects Mitchell/Giurgola and Thorp. The building was constructed in seven years and was opened on 9 May 1988 by Queen Elizabeth II.

How the Parliament uses the building

The diagram below of Australia's Parliament House shows its scale and the relationship between the parliamentary, executive, ceremonial and public areas. The building is 300 metres wide, 300 metres long and covers a gross floor area of 250,000m². Massive curved walls separate and define the major component parts. The House of Representatives wing is on the eastern side with the Senate chamber and offices to the west. The executive wing is at the southern end of the structure, behind the ceremonial and public spaces of the central zone.



Aerial plan of Australia's Parliament House



The Australian House of Representatives



The Australian Senate

The chambers

The dominant spaces across the whole building belong to the House of Representatives and Senate chambers where members and senators meet to debate bills and represent the people from their electorates and states. The Australian Government is formed in the House of Representatives by determining the party or coalition of parties that hold the majority of seats and which therefore has the largest number of members. Opposition parties in both chambers scrutinise the work of the government especially during regular Question Time sessions.

The House of Representatives currently seats 150 members and there are enough unused seats to accommodate future increases. The Senate currently seats 76 senators, and like the House of Representatives, has vacant seats to accommodate future needs.

In both chambers:

Members of the government sit to the right of the Speaker or President (as the case may be) while members of the opposition sit to the left

Members of minor parties (such as the Australian Greens and the Family First Party) and Independents sit on the benches at the curve of the chamber. This group is known as the crossbench in the Senate; in the House this distinction is not made—there are only government and non-government members.

The press gallery views chamber proceedings from above the Speaker's Chair in the House and from above the President's chair in the Senate.

Members of the public watch chamber proceedings from either side of the chamber in designated seating areas.



A Senate committee in session

Committee rooms

Parliament House contains 19 committee rooms. Although these rooms are formal parliamentary spaces, they are not used for debating or voting on legislation. A parliamentary committee is comprised of a small number of parliamentarians with a specific task; generally to gather information (on behalf of the Parliament) related to a current legislative proposal or an issue of community concern. Both chambers employ a range of committees. The photograph to the left, illustrates a Senate committee in action. The senators are sitting in the background; members of the public observing the proceedings are in the foreground and

one man at the centre of the scene is giving evidence to the committee. Technicians sitting in the glassed-in control room switch on microphones and record the discussions. Note also, the television cameras which are installed in spaces in the walls of the committee room.



The Cabinet Room

Cabinet Room

Cabinet usually meets in the Cabinet Room in Parliament House. The Cabinet is the centre of executive government. It is responsible for managing the policy directions and business of the government. Cabinet is chaired by the Prime Minister and operates as a sub-committee of the ministry.

The Cabinet Room is located on the ground floor in Parliament House opposite the Prime Minister's office and close to the offices of the other ministers. Marquetry panels of eucalypt leaves designed by artists Tony Bishop and Michael Retter adorn the room.

Hidden among the leaves is a cicada, a dragonfly and a blowfly. Despite these 'bugs' the room is highly secure and is regularly swept electronically because the Cabinet discusses confidential and secret matters that affect the life and well-being of the nation.

Design and decoration

The interior design, the art works and furniture of Parliament House are designed to display the rich variety and quality of life in Australia. Visitors to the building are surrounded by a vision of Australia as a reminder that the building is owned by the people and that its purpose is to serve the entire Australian community.

The Australian chambers exhibit the colours of Westminster parliaments with a red upper house and a green lower house, however these traditionally rich colours are modified to more Australian colours. The greens of the House of Representatives are based on the colours of Australian acacias and eucalypts while the reds of the Senate reflect the rocks, dust and clays of inland Australia.

The Parliament House Art Collection includes more than 5,000 works that reflect Australia's past and present. Australian paintings and sculpture by past and present Australians decorate the walls of offices and public spaces. The collection includes paintings by Fred Williams and Arthur Boyd and the Red Ochre Cove by Mandy Marti, which is the largest commissioned painting in Australia. Perhaps the most famous painting in the building is the Tom Roberts depiction of the opening of the first federal Parliament in the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne in 1901.



Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by HRH The Duke of Cornwall and York (later King George V), May 9, 1901 (1903) Tom Roberts (1856-1931) oil on canvas, 304.5 x 509.2 cm. On permanent loan to the Parliament of Australia from the British Royal Collection. Courtesy of Parliament House Art Collection; Department of Parliamentary Services, Canberra ACT. Photo credit: Bruce Moore.

Wherever possible, natural light pours into the building through skylights over both chambers and large windows open into courtyards planted with lawns and trees. Views from the building look out across Australian bush gardens to the Brindabella Ranges to the west and the hills beyond Queanbeyan to the east. The bush environment is reflected in an enormous tapestry in the Great Hall, created by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop after Arthur Boyd's *Untitled* painting.



Facts about the building

- The Parliament House site covers 32 hectares of Capital Hill; one of the hills around which Walter Burley Griffin designed Canberra in 1912. The building occupies 15 percent of this site.
- The building is 300 metres long and 300 metres wide. It is one of the largest buildings in the southern hemisphere.
- Parliament House was built to last at least 200 years.
- There are 4,500 rooms in the building, and 2,700 clocks.

- Australian materials are used throughout 90 percent of the building.
- The building cost approximately 1.1 billion dollars.
- The underground car parks hold up to 2,000 cars.
- A multi-channel television and radio station broadcasts proceedings of the Parliament from both chambers and committee rooms.
- The building has two libraries; one a reading library, the other a research library for the benefit of answering questions on most topics from members and senators.
- The Parliamentary Education Office runs a parliamentary role-play program for visiting students and teachers to learn how the Parliament works.

Conclusion

Houses to accommodate the Australian Parliament since 1901 have differed in style, size and location. The Australian Constitution and the functions of the Australian Parliament place specific requirements on the building that operates as Australia's Parliament House. Parliament House opened on 9 May 1988 and was designed specifically to meet the needs of the Parliament for at least 200 years.

More information

Video – What is Parliament?

<http://www.peo.gov.au/multimedia/video/whatIsParliament/transcript.html>

FAQ 4 Australia's Parliament House http://www.peo.gov.au/faq/faq_4.html

Fact Sheet Series

- 43 Parliament House Facts <http://www.peo.gov.au/students/fss/fss43.html>
- 45 Inside Parliament House <http://www.peo.gov.au/students/fss/fss45.html>

Parliament House architecture and features <http://www.aph.gov.au/DPS/building/visiting/architect.htm>

Parliament House landscape <http://www.aph.gov.au/DPS/building/visiting/landscape.htm>

Parliament House images and virtual tours <http://www.aph.gov.au/DPS/building/visiting/images.htm>