

PREPARING FOR A NEW FEDERAL PARLIAMENT

In Australia, the federal electoral cycle is determined by the Australian Constitution and the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918. The House of Representatives can meet for a maximum of three years from the opening of the Parliament before its members must face re-election. The Prime Minister chooses the date for a federal election. This could be at any time during the three-year term.

Prorogation of Parliament and Dissolution of the House of Representatives

The Governor-General brings the work of the Parliament to a close by issuing a special proclamation called a prorogation. This is an ancient power of the British Crown adopted in the Australian Parliament as a formal way of closing Parliament. A prorogation may occur at any time, but nowadays is usually used only before an election is called.

The House of Representatives is then dissolved (brought to an end). The dissolution of the House of Representatives triggers the issuing of writs for the election of new members to the House.

Half-Senate elections (to elect half of the 72 state senators plus the four senators representing the two territories) are usually held at the same time as elections for the House of Representatives, though they need not be. See the Elections fact sheet for more information.

The entire Senate is not dissolved, except in the special case of a 'double dissolution' election under section 57 of the Constitution. See the Double Dissolution fact sheet for more information.

Caretaker government

After the Parliament is prorogued, bills and other business before the House of Representatives and the Senate lapse and will need to be reintroduced in the next Parliament. After the House is dissolved, the government becomes a caretaker government and, by convention, does not make major decisions, except in consultation with the opposition. The sittings of the Senate are terminated, but Senate committees may still operate. Parliamentary business can resume once the opening ceremony for the new Parliament has been held.



Photo by AUSPIC

Procession of the new parliament, at the opening ceremony for the 43rd Parliament of Australia

Opening a new Parliament

A new Parliament starts with an opening ceremony with some traditional practices borrowed from the British Parliament. One such practice is that the new Parliament is declared open in the Senate rather than the House of Representatives. This is so the Governor-General can attend and deliver a speech. This tradition dates back to the practice of the British Parliament in which, since the seventeenth century, the monarch has not entered the House of Commons. In Australia, the Governor-General does not enter the House of Representatives.

An important part of the opening ceremony is the swearing-in of all members of the House of Representatives, as well as the four senators elected to represent the two territories. New state senators are sworn in after the following 1 July.

A modern addition to the opening of a new Parliament is an Indigenous 'Welcome to Country' ceremony, which was held for the first time in February 2008 before the opening of the 42nd Parliament.



Photo by AUSPIC

Governor General giving a speech at the Opening of the 43rd Parliament