

FUNCTIONS OF PARLIAMENT

Parliament has four main functions: legislation (making laws), representation (acting on behalf of voters and citizens), scrutiny (examining the government), and formation of government.

Legislation

The most important thing Parliament does is to make new laws and change or improve old ones. Most laws are written by government departments and introduced into the Parliament by government ministers. Each year, Parliament passes about 220 bills which become Acts of Parliament once they are signed by the Governor-General. The House of Representatives spends about half its time debating legislation.

Representation

All members of Parliament are elected. Each one of the 150 members of the House of Representatives (MPs) is elected by about 94 000 voters in each electorate. MPs reflect the interests of their electorates when they make speeches. They also assist people in their electorate to solve problems about such things as pensions, migration and taxation. Senators represent states. Each state is represented by 12 senators while each territory has two senators.

Scrutiny

The government or executive implements the laws and other decisions of the Parliament. However, the Parliament likes to check or scrutinise what the government does, especially how the government spends money. The opposition plays an important part in the scrutiny activities of Parliament.

The role of members and senators is to:

- set up parliamentary committees to examine government bills
- investigate how the government spends money in the budget by participating in estimates committees, which are held twice a year
- question the government each day in Question Time in both the House of Representatives and the Senate

Formation of government

In Australia, the federal government is selected from and is part of the federal Parliament. At a federal election, the party (or coalition of parties) with the support of the majority of members elected to the House of Representatives becomes the government. This is why the House of Representatives is sometimes called the house of government.

The Prime Minister chooses experienced and knowledgeable government members to be ministers, who run departments such as the Department of Health and Aging. Although the government is formed in the House of Representatives, some ministers are senators. About two-thirds of ministers are members of the House of Representatives, and about one-third are senators.