

CROSSING THE FLOOR

When members and senators vote in Parliament, they nearly always vote with their party. Political parties demand loyalty from their members. On rare occasions however, members and senators may choose not to vote with their party. They can abstain (not turn up) from voting or they can show their public disagreement by crossing the floor and sitting with the other side.

When there is a division vote, in which members and senators have their vote formally recorded, those voting in favour of a motion sit to the right of the Speaker or President, and those voting against, sit to the left. The votes are counted by tallying up the number of members and senators sitting on each side.

A member or senator 'crosses the floor' if they walk across the chamber and vote with the other side. Crossing the floor is a public act made in full view of all the other members of the House, the media and the public. It is meant to make a statement. Party members may consider anyone who crosses the floor to be a traitor.

Members and senators rarely cross the floor. Even if a couple of members cross the floor, it makes little difference to the vote because the government usually still has a majority of members. Crossing the floor can only make a difference when enough parliamentarians change the numbers on each side, or when a government has a majority of only one or two votes (as in the case of the Legislative Council in the South Australian parliament in 1998); then parties' leaders are vigilant about how their members vote.