

## JOINT SITTING OF PARLIAMENT

A joint sitting of Parliament means that members of the House of Representatives and senators meet together in one chamber. The reason for a joint sitting is to resolve a deadlock between the two chambers of the Parliament. The procedure is described in section 57 of the Australian Constitution.

The Commonwealth Parliament can only make laws when both the House of Representatives and Senate agree with the contents of a bill (a proposed law) and then pass it. Sometimes, one chamber (usually the Senate) rejects or refuses to pass a bill and the two chambers are deadlocked. Section 57 of the Constitution says that in the case of a deadlock, the Governor-General can dissolve the Parliament (known as a double dissolution), and after an election can arrange or convene a joint sitting of both chambers to try to pass the deadlocked bill(s) again. A government would only hold a joint sitting if it was sure that it had a majority of the combined votes to pass the bill or bills that previously had not passed.

The only time in the history of the Commonwealth Parliament that there has been a section 57 joint sitting was in 1974.

In this instance, the Whitlam government had a majority of nine votes in the House of Representatives but not a majority in the Senate. By April 1974, there were a number of bills that the Senate had not passed. To resolve this deadlock, the Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, requested the Governor-General to use section 57 to dissolve both houses and call an election for 18 May.

The Labor government won the election but with a reduced majority in the House of Representatives. The government still did not have a majority in the Senate. When the Senate rejected the same six bills again, the Governor-General, using section 57 of the Constitution, convened a joint session of both houses on Tuesday 6 and Wednesday 7 August 1974 to vote together on the bills. These were three bills on electoral matters, two regarding health insurance and one to set up the Petroleum and Minerals Authority. All were passed by an absolute majority of members of the House of Representatives and senators voting together.