

MINISTERS

Members and senators who are in the government party or coalition, may be selected to be a minister. The Prime Minister or the party selects ministerial candidates, depending on the tradition of the party. The Prime Minister then allocates members of Parliament to specific portfolios or departments. There are usually about 30 ministers; 20 come from the House of Representatives and 10 from the Senate.

Ministers have three main responsibilities. The first is to run a department such as The Treasury or Foreign Affairs and Trade. If the government or the department needs new legislation on matters connected with the department, the minister makes sure the required legislation is written and passed through Parliament, often seeking expert advice from the department.

Secondly, if the minister wants new legislation for his or her department, the Cabinet has to approve of the idea and then agree with the bill when it is drafted. The Prime Minister may also ask the minister to develop ideas for new policies and bills and present these to Cabinet for discussion.

Thirdly, the minister sits in the Parliament and appears daily in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. All ministers must attend Question Time which lasts for about one hour starting at 2 pm each day. At this time, any member or senator may ask a minister any question about government policy or actions. Ministers bring to Question Time a large folio of information so that questions can be answered with factual details.

When a minister introduces a new bill in the Parliament, he or she outlines the main elements in the bill and the problem that the bill seeks to solve. The minister sits in the chamber during much of the debate on the bill. This is particularly important when bills are complicated or controversial. The minister must be available to the Parliament and be able to answer questions from other members and senators about the bill's details.

Ministers also have ceremonial duties. They welcome important visitors from Australia and overseas. They also represent Australia at international conferences and meetings, and may sign treaties and agreements between the Australian Government and other governments.