

GOVERNMENT

In general the word government can refer to:

- the system of rules used within a country or community (for example, Australia has a democratic system of government)
- the leading decision-making group within a country or community
- the people who form the executive who are responsible for deciding on national strategies.

This fact sheet focuses on the leading decision-making group within the federal Parliament.

Forming government

In Australia, the federal government is selected from and also a part of the federal Parliament. At a federal election, the party or coalition with a 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'.

If no political party or coalition achieves a majority in the House of Representatives at a federal election, the result is sometimes called a 'hung parliament'. However, it is still possible for a government to be formed if a majority can be achieved through agreement with Independent and/or minor party members. This type of government is known as a 'minority government'.

To remain in government, a party or coalition must maintain the support of the majority of members of the House of Representatives. This is called the principle of responsible government. It ensures that the government is accountable to the Parliament. In Australia the principle of responsible government works together with the principal of separation of powers to guide the way in which law is made and managed. See the Separation of Powers fact sheet for more information. Although government is formed in the House of Representatives, there are also members of the government in the Senate. In the Senate, the government may or may not hold the majority of seats.

Government responsibilities

The responsibilities of the federal government include:

- Making important decisions on behalf of Australians (eg. whether or not to send Australian troops to war zones).
- Developing policy (eg. the ideas and plans for managing trade, foreign affairs, environment, health and education).
- Introducing ideas for new laws, or changes to old ones, to the Parliament (eg. the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme Bill 2010).
- Implementing laws passed by the Parliament, through government departments (eg. the Department of Immigration and Citizenship implements immigration law).
- Representing Australia overseas (eg. through key spokespeople such as the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs).

Government Leadership

The leader of the government is the Prime Minister, and traditionally sits in the House of Representatives. There is also a head of government in the Senate called the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

Some government members of parliament are selected to be ministers. Ministers are responsible for looking after a particular area of government, also called a 'portfolio'. Ministers work with their corresponding government department to develop policies and implement laws passed by the Parliament. For example the Minister for Defence works with the Department of Defence to implement laws about defence matters.

Together the Prime Minister and selected ministers make up the Cabinet or Executive Government. The Cabinet has a particularly important role in leading the government; see the Cabinet fact sheet for more information.