Ministers and shadow ministers sit on the front row of the seats in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. That is why they are referred to as frontbenchers. Backbenchers are members of parliament who are not ministers or shadow ministers; they sit in the rows of seats behind the frontbench.

Most members of parliament start their parliamentary career as a backbencher. A promotion to the front bench means not only a change in role, but a change in seating.

Role of frontbenchers

Government frontbenchers are ministers who have been allocated a portfolio — an area of responsibility for how Australia is run. In the chamber, the role of a minister includes introducing bills (proposed laws) and answering questions about their portfolio during Question Time.

Opposition frontbenchers are shadow ministers who have been given the responsibility of scrutinising (closely examining) the work of a particular minister and their portfolio. In the chamber, the role of a shadow minister includes speaking about opposition policies and asking questions to relevant ministers during Question Time (see Ministers and Shadow Ministers).

Role of backbenchers

Most of the work conducted in the chambers relates to debating and voting on bills. Backbenchers also draw attention to electorate or state/territory issues by speaking about them in the Parliament.

When not in the chambers, backbenchers have several roles, including working to provide help and services to their community, and participating in parliamentary committees (see Senators and Members of the House of Representatives).

LINKS

APH website
House of Representatives Infosheet: Opportunities for private Members
www.tinyurl.com/Infosheet6

House of Representatives Infosheet: The work of a Member of Parliament
www.tinyurl.com/Infosheet15