Law-making: House of Representatives

Law-making is one of the main activities of the Parliament. Laws are made through a process of debate and decision-making. During parliamentary debates, ideas are tested, challenged, refined and ultimately accepted or rejected. This lesson involves a role-play that demonstrates how proposals for federal laws—bills—are considered by the Parliament.

OUTCOMES

By participating in this role-play, students will:

• understand how the federal Parliament debates and votes on bills
• understand the role of government ministers, the opposition, minor parties and Independents
• explore the concepts of representation and scrutiny
• inquire into real and current issues
• practise public speaking, careful listening and quick thinking
• engage in critical thinking.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

Generate discussion about the role-play by exploring some of the following questions with your students:

Who works in the House of Representatives?
• 150 members
• parliamentary officers, including: the Clerk and Deputy Clerk, Serjeant-at-Arms, Hansard reporters, chamber attendants, security and broadcasting operators.

How do you become a member of the House of Representatives?
Members are elected at a federal election. Each member represents an electorate and is elected by the people who live in their electorate.

What do members of parliament do in the House of Representatives?
Members of parliament make sure the concerns and views of the people of their electorate are heard by talking about issues in Parliament. They also debate bills (proposed laws) or propose amendments (changes) to bills.

What is a law?
A law is a rule for Australia.

TO DOWNLOAD ITEMS IN THE TOOLKIT, GO TO: www.peo.gov.au/teaching/role-play-lesson-plans/law-making-house.html
Setting the scene for the role-play

Before the role-play begins, you can set the scene by doing some short activities with the students. For example:

- Watch the introductory videos in the Toolkit.
- Ask the students to imagine that they are members of the House of Representatives. How old would they be? Where would they work? What tasks would they have? What skills would they need? What did they do before becoming a member of parliament? For more information about members of parliament, check this link: [www.peo.gov.au/learning/fact-sheets/members-of-the-house.html](http://www.peo.gov.au/learning/fact-sheets/members-of-the-house.html)
- Ask the students to describe their electorate. Where is their electorate located? For example, is it urban, rural, coastal or inland? How would they describe the electorate and its people? For information about electorates, check the Australian Electoral Commission website: [www.aec.gov.au/profiles/](http://www.aec.gov.au/profiles/)
- Encourage students to get into role as members of the House of Representatives and to understand that they:
  » represent the views of their electorate
  » may belong to the government or opposition so will be working as part of a large team
  » may be an Independent or member of a minor party.

MAIN ACTIVITY: Conducting a law-making role-play

Scripts

The PEO scripts provide a framework for the role-play. The scripts include specific roles that can be assigned to students, and indicate what they have to do and say. You can download a full script set or a template, which allows you to write your own script, from the Toolkit.

Choosing a bill (proposed law)

Your class will need a bill to debate. If time allows, you may wish to have your students research the topic and write speeches prior to the role-play.

Choose the bill using one of the following options:

- Brainstorm ideas with the class.
- Select a topic to meet the requirements of a curriculum area.
- Identify a local issue that needs fixing.
- Use a bill and script set provided in the Toolkit.

Once you have chosen a bill, you can write its name and purpose on page one of the law-making script template, available in the Toolkit.
Set-up
Transform the classroom into a chamber by arranging chairs and tables into a horseshoe shape as indicated by the seating plan. The seating plan, as well as diagrams of the chamber, can be downloaded from the Toolkit.

Props and costumes
The Clerk will need a bell. You may like to use other props, such as a Mace for the Serjeant-at-Arms and gowns for the Speaker and Clerks. Instructions for making these are in the Toolkit.
Getting into role

- Divide the class into government, opposition, minor parties and Independents. Refer to Parliament NOW on the PEO website for the current numbers in the chambers. Use these to work out the proportions for your parliament. [www.peo.gov.au/learning/parliament-now.html](http://www.peo.gov.au/learning/parliament-now.html)

- Select a Speaker – this is a non-debating role and is generally someone from the government who can exercise authority in the room.

- Select a Clerk (pronounced ‘Clark’) and Serjeant-at-Arms – these are parliamentary officers who do not debate or vote. A teacher may take the role of Deputy Clerk. This role does not require active participation, but puts the teacher in a central position in the room so they can assist with the running of the role-play.

- Elect party leaders – the government elects the Prime Minister and the opposition elects the Leader of the Opposition.

- Select a minister to introduce the bill – one who has a responsibility (portfolio) relevant to the bill. For example, the No Homework Bill would be introduced into Parliament by the Minister for Education.

- Select a shadow minister.

- Choose party whips (managers) to count the vote at the end of the debate.
Starting the role-play

1. The Clerk rings the bell and instructs the members to stand.
2. The Serjeant-at-Arms leads the Speaker into the chamber, carrying the Mace on their right shoulder.
3. The Serjeant-at-Arms announces the Speaker, places the Mace on the table and moves to their seat.
4. The Speaker tells everyone to sit down and begins the session.
5. The Clerk stands and reads the rules of the chamber and the title of the bill (first reading).
6. The minister introduces the bill and the shadow minister responds to the bill.
7. After a few speeches from government and non-government members, the House may be adjourned. If you do not wish to adjourn, go straight to step 11.
8. The Serjeant-at-Arms leads the Speaker from the chamber, holding the Mace.
9. If you choose to adjourn the debate, team members can hold party meetings to plan more speeches. Independents and minor parties can decide whether to support or oppose the bill; they may also wish to suggest changes (amendments).

Continuing the debate

10. Repeat steps 1–4.
11. The Speaker selects members to make speeches, alternating between government and non-government members.

Voting on the bill

12. When the debate is finished, the Speaker leads a ‘vote on the voices’ (uncounted vote) before declaring the vote.
13. If the opposition lose the vote on the voices, the opposition whip may call for a division (formal counted vote); if so, the Clerk rings the bell to let members who are not in the chamber know a vote is about to happen.
14. The Speaker conducts the division with help from the whips and then declares the vote.

Passing the bill

15. If the majority of votes are for the bill, it is agreed to and the Clerk reads the title of the bill (second reading).
16. If the majority of votes are against the bill, the bill is defeated and there is no second reading.
17. The Speaker adjourns the House.
18. The Serjeant-at-Arms leads the Speaker from the chamber, holding the Mace.
Debrief

After the debate, explore the following questions with your students:

**Do government bills always pass this chamber?**
The government has majority support in the House so will usually get its bills passed. However a bill could be defeated if a majority of members vote against it.

**What happens if the vote is a tie?**
The Speaker votes on the bill to break the deadlock.

**Is it important to get the support of the Independents and minor parties?**
If they hold the balance of power in the House, they can determine whether a bill will pass or not, and can put pressure on the government to amend the bill.

**What other major steps must a bill go through to become a law?**
If a bill it passed by the House, it is then debated and voted on by the Senate. If the Senate agrees to it, the bill is signed by the Governor-General and becomes a law or Act of Parliament.

**Extension activities**

**Senate**
After a bill has passed through the House of Representatives it progresses to the Senate where it is also debated and voted on. You might like to conduct a role-play that follows the progress of a bill through the Senate. To do this, check out the *Law-making: Senate role-play lesson plan* on the PEO website.

**Amendments**
Both houses of Parliament can make changes, which are called amendments, to the wording of a bill. Often the opposition, minor party members and Independents will agree to pass a bill if amendments are made to it. You might like to conduct a role-play that incorporates amendments. To do this, check out the *Amending a law role-play lesson plans* for both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

**Committees**
Committees investigate issues and bills in more detail than is possible in the chamber. The committee process helps parliamentarians become informed by gathering information from government departments, experts in the field, lobby groups and interested citizens. You might like to conduct a role-play of a committee. To do this, check out the *Committee role-play lesson plan*.

Role-play lesson plans on the PEO website: