

3. THE CHAMBER

Seating

The Chamber has a horse-shoe shaped seating arrangement, with Members from the governing party or parties sitting on the right of the Chair and the Members from the opposition parties and other non-government Members on the left. The front bench seats on the right hand of the Speaker are reserved for Ministers (S.O. 23). Similarly, the front bench seats on the left hand of the Speaker are reserved for the Opposition Executive ('shadow ministers'). The two chairs on the right of the Table are, by practice, reserved for the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister but are also occupied by other Ministers or Parliamentary Secretaries when they are in charge of the business before the House. Similarly, the two chairs on the left of the Table are reserved for the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Opposition but may be occupied by Members leading for the Opposition in the business before the House.

Other Members have allotted seats. A Member's request for the allocation of a seat should be made to the Serjeant-at-Arms but any question arising regarding the seats to be occupied by Members is determined by the Speaker (S.O. 24(b)). A Member is entitled to retain the seat occupied at the end of the previous Parliament (S.O. 24(a)) (except when a change of government necessitates a change of sides).

The Mace

The Mace is present in the Chamber at all times the House is sitting, including during suspensions of sittings, and is placed on the Table whenever the Speaker, Deputy Speaker or member of the Speaker's panel is in the Chair. Prior to the election of a Speaker the Mace is placed on brackets below the Table (S.O. 12(c)).

Bar of the House

The Bar of the House, between the back rows of Members' seats at the main entrance to the Chamber, demarks the area of the Chamber reserved to Members, which non-Members may not enter unless invited by the House. It consists of a cylindrical bronze rail which may be placed across the gap between the two sides of the back row. A witness before the House is examined at the Bar unless the House orders otherwise (S.O. 255(b)).

Galleries

There are open galleries on all four sides of the Chamber at first floor level and enclosed soundproof galleries on three sides at second floor level. All galleries come under the authority of the Speaker and are administered and controlled by the Serjeant-at-Arms.

Distinguished visitors

The Speaker may admit distinguished visitors to a seat on the floor of the House (S.O. 257(a)). This honour is accorded infrequently—usually to very distinguished visitors including some Heads of State.

Distinguished visitors' galleries

The distinguished visitors' galleries are at floor level, at the right and left of the rear of the Chamber in the area behind the Members' seating. Access is by invitation from the Speaker (S.O. 257(a)) and has been accorded to dignitaries including Presiding Officers from other Parliaments, Heads of State, and members of visiting official parliamentary delegations. The Speaker's office issues tickets for seats in the distinguished visitors' gallery.

Special visitors' gallery

The first row on both sides of the middle aisle of the first floor central gallery is designated the 'special visitors' gallery'. Four seats in this area are reserved for Senators. Tickets are issued by the Speaker's office for seats in this gallery at question time and at other busy times. The gallery is for special guests of the Speaker and personal guests of the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition. Other guests may include former Members and Senators, senior diplomats and visiting senior parliamentary officers from other parliaments.

Senators

Senators are welcome to sit in the seats reserved for them in the special visitors' gallery (*see above*). They may also sit in the distinguished visitors' gallery if they prefer to sit at chamber level. Senators wishing to use either gallery at question time should notify the Speaker's office and obtain tickets. At other times they should notify the Speaker's office to ensure enough seats are provided but they do not need tickets. Senators must observe the Speaker's instructions regarding good order (S.O. 257(c)).

Speaker's gallery

The second and third rows on both sides of the first floor central gallery comprise the Speaker's gallery. This gallery is reserved for guests of the Speaker and Members' guests. Members may request two tickets for question time by applying to the Speaker's office.

Public galleries

The remaining seats in the central gallery and the two side galleries are open to the public. The central gallery is generally open at all times the House is sitting. Members of the public are able to obtain tickets to the public galleries for peak periods such as question time by booking through the Serjeant-at-Arm's office and collecting the tickets from the cloak room in the public area of the first floor. Those with reservations are normally seated in the undesignated seats in the central gallery first. At question time, people may queue for unreserved seats.

Press gallery

The rear gallery (behind the Speaker's Chair) is reserved for the press. Members of the media who have photographic security passes for Parliament House may occupy a seat in the press gallery. Special press passes are issued by the Serjeant-at-Arms to non passholders on the recommendation of the Press Gallery Committee. Licence to occupy a seat in the press gallery may be withdrawn at any time at the discretion of the Speaker.

Enclosed galleries

The enclosed soundproof galleries at second floor level enable the operations of the Chamber to be described to visitors without disturbing the proceedings. They are mainly used by school groups.

Visitors

Visitors are persons in the Chamber who are neither Members nor officials. They were traditionally referred to as 'strangers'. Members may not bring visitors into the areas of the Chamber or of the Main Committee which are reserved for Members (S.O. 257(b)). Visitors must not disturb the operations of the Chamber or the Main Committee and may be removed by the Serjeant-at-Arms if they do so (S.O. 96). In practice those who disturb proceedings are usually removed by one of the security staff who are responsible to the Serjeant for their activities in the chamber and galleries.

Broadcasting of proceedings

Radio

Since 1946 the proceedings of Parliament have been broadcast live by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) on each day on which either House is sitting. As a general rule, the House of Representatives is broadcast on Monday, Thursday and Friday (if sitting) and the Senate on Tuesday and Wednesday. A recording of the question time of the House which is not being broadcast live is also broadcast later in the day (following the live broadcast of proceedings). The Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings exercises control over the broadcast in accordance with principles ratified by each House. The resolutions of the House containing the principles governing broadcasting and rebroadcasting (1994) and conditions for broadcasters (1996) are reprinted at the back of the volume of standing orders.

Television

The televised proceedings of the House and the Main Committee, as well as some of the public hearings of parliamentary committees, are broadcast live on the House Monitoring Service within Parliament House (and externally to government departments) and over the internet. This official broadcast is also available for the use of the television networks. The live proceedings are currently broadcast nationally by A-PAC (Australian Public Affairs Channel), and within Canberra by the TransACT cable network. Generally only question time and special events, such as the Treasurer's Budget speech and the Leader of the Opposition's reply, are broadcast live on free to air television (by the ABC). Other free to air television coverage is usually limited to excerpts in news and current affairs programs.

Internet

Internet access is available to sound and video broadcasts of the proceedings of both Houses, the House of Representatives Main Committee, and selected public hearings of parliamentary committees taking place in Parliament House (<http://www.apf.gov.au/live/>).

The Main Committee

The Main Committee is a second chamber which operates in parallel with the Chamber of the House to allow two streams of business to be debated concurrently. All Members of the House are members of the Main Committee and eligible to participate in its meetings, although only a minority of Members are present at any one time.

The Main Committee meets in one of the largest House of Representatives committee rooms which has been dedicated to its Main Committee role and is fitted out in a small-scale chamber setting. Like the Chamber of the House the Main Committee has a horse-shoe shaped seating arrangement. Members do not have allocated seats, although in practice government and opposition Members usually sit on the right and left of the Chair respectively. There are seats for 38 Members, and room for additional seating if required. There are galleries (at floor level) for advisers, the media and the public. Proceedings are televised on the House monitoring service.