

This infosheet describes the job of a typical backbench member of the House of Representatives—that is, a member who does not hold a parliamentary or party office.¹ The term ‘backbencher’ refers to the member’s seating position in the Chamber of the House, where the front bench is occupied by ministers and shadow ministers. However, it should be noted that much of what is described here applies to all members—the Speaker and frontbench members also represent their constituents as well as carry out their various additional responsibilities.

What does a member of Parliament do?

While there is no formal ‘job description’ that sets out what a backbench member does, it is possible to identify aspects of work common to all backbenchers. These include:

- being a spokesperson for local interests,
- being an ombudsman and facilitator who deals with concerns about government matters,
- being a law maker; an examiner of the work of the government and how it spends the money it raises from taxation, and
- contributing to debates on national issues.

If a member has been elected with the support of a political party (as most are), they are also expected to participate in party activities.

Most members can thus be viewed as having three roles: parliamentarian, constituency representative and party member. Each of these roles is examined in more detail below.

The different roles can place competing demands on a member’s time—for example, most members must leave their electorates to attend Parliament. When Parliament is not meeting, parliamentary committees on which they serve may be conducting public hearings and inspections in different parts of the country.

Individual members’ expertise or experience and the nature of their electorates can influence members’ work

¹ Parliamentary/party office holders include the Speaker, the Prime Minister, ministers and assistant ministers, the Leader of the Opposition, shadow ministers and leaders of a recognised party.

priorities and their decisions as to where their most effective contribution can be made.



Backbenchers in the House

What skills does a member need?

Members require a broad range of skills to enable them to make an effective contribution across the breadth of their work responsibilities. Individual members have different sets of skills, developed through education and their work before becoming a member of Parliament. These may influence where a member chooses to make their main contribution. For example, research and analytical skills are important in committee inquiry work, and in the examination and preparation of legislation. Good communication skills are important in all aspects of a member’s work, but are particularly so in working with constituents, debating legislation and lobbying. Negotiation skills, organisational skills and problem-solving skills are just a few of the other skills required by members. As in any field of work, members develop existing skills and acquire new ones, simply because of the wide variety of tasks they are required to undertake.

Information and communication

One of a member’s most important skills is communicating—receiving, understanding and evaluating information from many sources, and passing on information and opinions in Parliament and elsewhere—to the government and to individuals and groups.

Being well informed and having up to date information is vital if a member is to understand and debate the great

range of legislation and other issues dealt with by the House and provide an effective representational link between their constituents and the Parliament.

Members spend a great deal of time reading, although they cannot expect to read all the material sent to them. Major national, regional and international news is priority reading in order to be informed. In addition, hundreds of reports are presented to the House each year, and a member with an interest in even just a few policy areas may read hundreds of pages of reports annually in order to keep updated on the subject matter. They also need to read and digest detailed research on specific topics done for them by personal or parliamentary staff. Parliamentary or party committee work may require more reading and research in relatively specialised areas.

Another major parliamentary occupation is speaking. Making speeches in the Chamber is the role with which the general observer is most familiar and which probably attracts the most publicity, although other tasks such as office work or committee work may in fact take more time. Nevertheless, most members are regularly called upon to speak in the Chamber of the House and in the Federation Chamber (the House's second debating chamber, see Infosheet No. 16 *The Federation Chamber*), usually in support of, or in opposition to, a piece of legislation.

There are a number of other opportunities for members to speak in the House to raise issues of particular interest to them or their constituents—for example, during the adjournment debate at the end of each sitting day, and the weekly private members' business day when bills and motions may be sponsored by private members (see Infosheet No. 6 *Opportunities for private Members*). While at Parliament House, members also spend time talking with colleagues, members from other parties, journalists, visitors, lobbyists and the parliamentary staff who administer the operations of the House.

A key aspect of communication for a member is keeping constituents informed of developments in government or party policy and the implications of government decisions and activity. Members also spend a great deal of time communicating on behalf of their constituents—by taking up the cases of individuals or by relaying the concerns of electors generally to the government or to their parties. Every aspect of a member's work involves communicating—writing many letters/emails, talking to

large numbers of people, both privately and in public forums, and, perhaps most importantly, listening.

Parliamentary committee work

The House of Representatives has a system of committees which carry out investigations, conduct inspections, hear people's views and proposals, analyse evidence, discuss and debate aspects of an inquiry in detail and report their conclusions. Depending on the inquiry topic, much of this work is done away from Canberra. The committees set up by the House (including some set up jointly with the Senate which also has its own committees) investigate matters of public policy, examine the activities of government and make recommendations for change. Committees are given wide powers of investigation. They are valuable vehicles for the receiving and giving of information and provide a direct link between members and the Australian community.



A committee inspection during an inquiry

Each parliamentary committee consists of both government and non-government members. Most Members of Parliament, except ministers and some of the principal office holders, serve on committees. Backbench members are generally members of more than one committee. Committee work is an important part of the duties of members and makes considerable demands on their time.

As well as attending meetings, public hearings and inspections, in order to make a contribution to the work of a committee, a member must spend time studying the subject matter of the inquiry. The demands are greater on those members who are committee chairs because they must lead the work of their committees and be the spokesperson for their work. Committee meetings are

held in Canberra when the House is meeting and at other times. Most committees also hold hearings, public meetings or informal discussions in a number of places throughout the country.

At the conclusion of their investigations, committees present a report to the House. The report may be debated. At a later time, the government provides the House and the committee concerned with a response to the recommendations made by the committee.

For further information on House of Representatives committees see Infosheet No. 4 *Committees*, and www.aph.gov.au/house/committee.

Political parties

Nearly all members belong to a political party. In the 47th Parliament, 12 of the 151 Members of the House are Independents (i.e. not members of a political party).

Members are expected to contribute to the development and amendment of the policies of the party to which they belong. Each party has its own ways of doing this but, in all parties, members are given opportunities to put forward the interests of their constituents and their own personal views. All parties hold meetings of their parliamentary members, usually weekly when the Parliament is sitting, at which policies are discussed.

Both the government and opposition parties make extensive use of backbench party committees, each committee specialising in a particular area of government. These committees look at legislative proposals and government policy, and may help to develop party policy. While parliamentary committees work towards the production of individual reports with recommendations that the government may or may not adopt, party committees have a continuing role in commenting on and adapting party policies.

Party committees usually meet weekly on parliamentary sitting days, often prior to or after parliamentary sittings in the morning, or at night. A member may be on more than one party committee and most backbench members spend a considerable amount of time on these activities.

Constituents and their member

Members provide a direct link between their constituents and the Parliament. The federal electoral divisions in Australia have an average of approximately 114,099

eligible voters. Electoral divisions differ greatly in area, ranging from approximately 32 sq. km. (Grayndler, NSW) to over 1.4 million sq. km. (Durack, WA). Each member maintains an office in their electorate. Some members representing very large electorates may have electorate offices in more than one centre. Members in large electorates spend a great deal of time traveling within the electorate.

In the electorate, members and their staff spend most of their time supporting their constituents' interests. Sometimes this requires the personal intervention of the member, who may write to a minister, phone a public servant or call in to a minister's office to enlist their personal involvement in addressing the matter. Many of the inquiries or calls for assistance fall within the areas of social welfare, immigration and taxation. A member also deals with problems concerning family law, postal and telephone services, employment, health and education. Many Commonwealth and state functions overlap and when this occurs, cross referrals of problems are made between federal and state members, regardless of political affiliations.

Members have influence and standing outside Parliament and typically have a wide range of contacts with government bodies, their political party, community groups and individuals. Personal intervention in a constituent matter by a member traditionally gets priority attention from government departments. If the matter is purely an administrative one, the member may contact the department or authority concerned, where the case will be dealt with by the relevant section. If the matter is urgent, the member may approach the minister directly or, if the member feels the case requires public discussion or a change of policy, may bring the matter before the House—for instance, by addressing a question to the responsible minister or by raising it in debate. Members can also advise constituents on the preparation of petitions to the House. Petitions can only be presented to the House if the problems concern matters on which the House can act (see Infosheet No. 11 *Petitions*).

Members also make representations to the government on behalf of their electorates as a whole on matters of special interest to the electorate. A major road construction or other significant project within the electorate, or the prospect of closure of a local industry which would cause unemployment or other problems for the area, are examples of electorate issues that might be raised by members. Such matters are more likely to be the

subject of questions on notice (see Infosheet No. 1 *Questions*) or to be raised in the House than are problems of individual constituents. Members' representation of community views on national issues is also important in shaping policy. The role of members in representing community views on national issues is crucial for shaping policy.

Members frequently meet constituents who are visiting Parliament House. Some constituents seek out members to lobby them on a particular problem. Mostly, however, the constituents are simply visitors to the national capital who want the chance to meet their member. Members also find time to meet groups of school children from their electorates and show them around the Parliament. Parliament House has an education centre where visiting school groups can learn about Parliament and meet with their federal representative. See www.peo.gov.au.

It is the constituents who pass judgment on the performance of members of Parliament at each election. Members must prove themselves fit for the task of being their parliamentary representative. Members who wish to make a long term commitment to improving the governance of Australia need to be dedicated to serving the interests of their electorates and proving themselves worthy of re-election.

Working hours

Members work long hours in the House, on parliamentary committee work and in their electorates.

Generally when the House is sitting, it meets for between 8 and 11 hours a day and sometimes even longer. It is not unusual for a member's day to begin with a breakfast meeting at about 7.30 am and to end with House rise at 8 pm or later. Members are not present in the Chamber all the time, but they keep in touch with proceedings via television monitors in their offices and other locations throughout Parliament House, and are ready to attend in the Chamber at any time to vote in a division, to make a speech or to lend support to a colleague. Meetings of the Federation Chamber and parliamentary committee meetings and hearings also take place while the House is sitting, and members have to allocate their time carefully to avoid demands on them to be in two places at once. When not attending these formal meetings of the House, members do research, write speeches, meet constituents, are lobbied by interest groups, raise matters of concern

with ministers and participate in party meetings and party committee work.

The hours worked by members in the electorates are similar to those worked in Canberra. In their electorates, members meet with community leaders and organisations, make presentations, visit schools, attend party meetings, handle constituent inquiries, speak with the media and keep themselves up to date with developments in the electorate. Travelling time between different centres in larger electorates can add significantly to the amount of time needed to keep in touch with community views—some electorates in Australia are larger than many countries.

The many demands on a member can easily fill days and evenings for seven days a week. This is especially the case during sitting periods, when electorate responsibilities must be addressed over the weekend before the member returns to Canberra. Members from electorates in parts of Australia furthest from Canberra spend many additional hours travelling at the beginning and end of each sitting week. These working hours also affect members' families and members need to prioritise their activities carefully in order to maintain a balanced perspective on issues.

International program

Members have opportunities to be involved in the Parliament's international program. These international links with other parliaments help to promote understanding, sharing of knowledge and democratic development. The program includes parliamentary visits (incoming and outgoing), development programs and participation in international parliamentary associations. Members on outgoing delegations can be away from a few days to several weeks, and in due course the delegation presents to Parliament a report on the visit. See www.aph.gov.au/international.

For more information

House of Representatives Practice, 7th edn, Department of the House of Representatives, Canberra, 2018.

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