Senate Brief

No. 16 February 2013

Usher of the Black Rod

The parliamentary position of the Usher of the Black Rod, an officer who maintained order in the upper house of a parliament, dates from the fourteenth century in England. Senate standing orders require the President of the Senate to keep order in the Senate, and traditionally that authority is exercised through the Usher of the Black Rod. Under the direction of either the President or the Senate, the Usher of the Black Rod may be required to assist with the removal of a senator who the Senate has determined is disrupting proceedings or to arrange for the removal of any person who causes a disturbance in the Senate, its galleries or committees. The attendant staff in the Senate and the galleries work under the direction of the Usher of the Black Rod. A modern feature of this security work is to provide advice to the President and senators on managing demonstrations and the physical security of the building.

Historically the Black Rod was used to arrest or expel anyone who offended the Most Noble Order of the Garter, but its use now is entirely ceremonial. Modelled on the design of the Rod used by the Legislative Council of New South Wales, the Black Rod was manufactured by Griffith Limited in Sydney in 1927 for the opening of the Provisional Parliament House in Canberra. The wood of the original Rod was replaced with ebony in 1988 for the opening of Parliament House. The Rod is silver-capped and ornamented with a silver crown above a representation of the Australian coat of arms.

From 1972 until 1996 the Usher of the Black Rod wore a sword, made by Wilkinson Sword, on ceremonial occasions. The sword has solid silver fittings and is modelled on the sword of the British Diplomatic Corps. It is decorated with the Australian coat of arms, the words "Australian Senate", and a wattle pattern. The sword is now on permanent display at the Old Parliament House, Canberra.

A central figure at openings of parliament, the Usher of the Black Rod announces the arrival of the Governor-General and then escorts the Governor-General and the official party into the Senate chamber. The Governor-General then directs the Usher of the Black Rod to request the members of the House of Representatives to attend in the Senate chamber.

On a normal sitting day the Usher of the Black Rod announces the arrival of the President into the chamber before the President says prayers. As well as ensuring the safe delivery of messages from the Senate chamber to the House of Representatives, the Usher of the Black Rod is also responsible for recording the attendance of senators in the chamber on each sitting day. Whenever a division or quorum is to be determined, the Usher of the Black Rod supervises locking the chamber doors before the beginning of a count.

Further reading

Harry Evans and Rosemary Laing (eds.), *Odgers' Australian Senate Practice*, 13th edn, Department of the Senate, Canberra, 2012; available on the Internet at http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Senate/Powers_practice_n_procedures/odgers

Images provided courtesy of Auspic, Parliament House, Canberra

Silver capping on the Black Rod

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