House of Representatives

Infosheet

FINDING OUT ABOUT THE HOUSE

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For a parliamentary democracy like Australia's to work well, it is important that the public can find out what the Parliament is doing. The House's effectiveness in calling Ministers to account for their actions and debating national issues depends on its activities taking place in public so people can judge for themselves how their representatives are performing.

Some proceedings of the House are reported in newspapers and other media. However, this reporting only covers a fraction of the House's activities and its content is reliant on the interpretation of the person preparing the report. The House itself publishes a range of information which provides comprehensive records of the House's proceedings and explanations of its procedures.
This Infosheet explains some of the information available and where to find it. Some publications are available from the Parliament Shop, the Department of the House of Representatives or are held by major libraries. All of the publications described here can be accessed on the Internet.

News and current information

Find out when the House is due to sit at www.aph.gov.au/calendar. Get lists of, contact details for, and information about, the current Members of the House of Representatives at www.aph.gov.au/senators_and_members.

Committees of the House of Representatives and joint committees of both Houses conduct investigations into many subjects and make recommendations for changes to government policies, services and administration (see Infosheet No. 4 'Committees'). Each committee maintains its own website giving details of its membership, inquiries, reports and other publications. Consolidated information and access to individual committee websites can be obtained at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee.

About the House magazine—a magazine giving news about committee investigations, interviews with Members and other information about the House's activities is published several times a year. Inquiries about the magazine can be made by email to icro@aph.gov.au or by writing to International and Community Relations, House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600.
About the House news at www.aph.gov.au/ath gives news on what the House and its committees are doing and provides easy access to more information about the House. It is updated weekly.

Understanding how the House operates

The following publications can be found at www.aph.gov.au/house/ppp.

Standing and sessional orders—the formal rules governing the proceedings of the House are known as the standing orders. Rules in force only for a specified period of time or for the current session of Parliament are called sessional orders. The rules are amended from time to time by the House.

Guide to Procedures—a concise introduction to the procedures of the House of Representatives.

House of Representatives Practice—a comprehensive, detailed text on the law and practice of the House of Representatives. This work presents a degree of historical perspective and includes appendices containing extensive statistical information about the proceedings of the House. The current (6th) edition was published in 2012.

Infosheet series—this Infosheet is one of a series which explain various aspects of the House's operation and procedures.

www.peo.gov.au—the website of the Parliamentary Education Office contains useful information for students and teachers.

Proceedings of the House are broadcast on radio, television and the Internet

Official records and business of the House

The following publications can be found at www.aph.gov.au/house/chamberdocs.

Notice Paper (what's on the agenda?)

The *Notice Paper* shows all of the business awaiting the House's attention as well as some other information. It is published for each sitting day, apart from the first sitting day after an election. It is divided into sections.

Business section

The business section lists all items of business that are currently under consideration by the House. Items of business are grouped under the headings 'Government Business', 'Business of the Federation Chamber', 'Committee and Delegation Reports' and 'Private Members' Business'.

Within each section items are listed as either 'Notices' or 'Orders of the day'. Notices indicate that a Member or Minister intends to introduce a matter for consideration. Orders of the day are matters that have already been introduced and for which consideration has not been completed. Notices and orders of the day normally remain on the *Notice Paper* until the House has dealt with them fully. Notices not fully dealt with on the day of their introduction become orders of the day for a later sitting.

A notice may be withdrawn before it is moved by the Member sponsoring it. However, orders of the day on the *Notice Paper* are regarded as the property of the House rather than an individual Member and cannot be withdrawn or removed without the agreement of the House.

Items listed under Private Members' Business are removed from the *Notice Paper* automatically if they have not been considered within eight sitting Mondays. In the case of items of government business on which no further debate is desired, it is now customary for the House to agree periodically to a motion to discharge these from the *Notice Paper*.

When the House is dissolved for a general election all the business on the *Notice Paper* lapses (becomes ineffective) and the next session starts with a clean sheet.

The House is required by its standing orders (rules) to consider matters in the order they appear on the day's *Notice Paper.* However, before each issue of the *Notice Paper* is published Ministers may change the order of government business. The Selection Committee determines the order of private Members' business and committee reports to be considered on Mondays. In addition, during a sitting there are procedures that can be used to postpone items of business or permit them to be taken out of turn.

Questions in writing

Members may send questions in writing (previously known as questions on notice) to Ministers relating to their official responsibilities. Replies are also in writing. Questions are listed on the *Notice Paper* and remain there until a reply is received. The first *Notice Paper* to be published for each sitting fortnight includes all questions not yet answered, while *Notice Papers* for subsequent sittings in a fortnight only include questions which have appeared for the first time that day. When an answer is received it is sent to the Member concerned and published in *Hansard*.

Information section

The final section of the *Notice Paper* contains general information. It lists members of the Speaker's panel (i.e. Members who can assist the Speaker and his or her deputies in chairing the House); House and joint committees, their membership and inquiries being undertaken; and the appointment of Members to statutory bodies by the House.

Daily Program (what's on today?)

The *Daily Program*, or the 'Blue Program' or 'Blue' as it is also called, after the colour of the paper it has traditionally been printed on, provides a guide to business expected to be dealt with on a particular day. Unlike the *Notice Paper,* the *Daily Program* is not a formal document and does not set the order of business or limit its scope. If circumstances require it a supplementary program may be published.

Some matters appear on the *Daily Program* which do not appear on the day's *Notice Paper*, for example: a proposed ministerial statement; the subject of a matter of public importance; the presentation of a major government paper or committee report; business which may be introduced without notice, such as taxation measures; and, sometimes, bills expected to be received from the Senate.

Votes and Proceedings (what did the House do?)

The *Votes and Proceedings* is the official record of the proceedings of the House of Representatives, in effect the minutes of its meetings. An issue of the *Votes and Proceedings* is published for each sitting.

The *Votes and Proceedings* records what is done (or deemed to be done) by the House as a collective body, and not the words of individual Members.

A typical day's *Votes and Proceedings* records:

- that the House met at a certain time and the Speaker took the Chair, made an acknowledgement of country and read prayers
- that oral questions (questions without notice) were asked
- the documents presented
- motions moved in connection with any of the documents presented
- matters of public importance proposed and discussed
- each motion and bill considered by the House
- announcements of various kinds that have been made relating to the operation of the House, for example, details of ministerial arrangements
- messages received from the Senate or the Governor-General

- the question for the adjournment of the House, the fact that debate took place (the adjournment debate), the time the House adjourned and the date and time of its next meeting
- a list of documents deemed to have been presented (as described later in this Infosheet)
- a record of Members' attendance
- the minutes of proceedings of the Federation Chamber (the second debating chamber of the House)—if it met that day

For each item of business the *Votes and Proceedings* records all action taken by the House—for example the moving of motions and amendments and the name of the Member who moved them; whether debate occurred (or was adjourned to a future day or resumed from an earlier occasion); the questions put from the Chair and the decision taken by the House on each question. If a formal vote (division) takes place the record lists the Members voting for and against the question.

Work of the Session

The *Work of the Session* is a consolidated list of the business dealt with by the House. It is published twice a year and includes lists of bills, motions, documents, statements, matters of public importance discussed, , committee reports and Members' attendance at sittings of the House for the six month period. It also contains statistical summaries of the sittings and business of the House.

Hansard—what's been said in debate

Hansard is the best known parliamentary publication. Its official title is 'Parliamentary Debates'—the term *'Hansard',* used in Australia and elsewhere, comes from the name of the 19th century publishers of the record of the House of Commons debates in the United Kingdom.

The House of Representatives *Hansard* contains the transcript of the debates in the House and the Federation Chamber, that is, the words of Members' speeches. The text is edited to some extent, for example, to remove repetitions and to correct grammatical mistakes, however the editing is not allowed to affect the meaning of what is said.

Although *Hansard* is essentially a record of the spoken word, it contains other information relating to the proceedings, including the results of divisions (votes), the text of amendments moved to motions and bills, the text of petitions presented and the titles of documents presented.

In addition, with the permission of the House and the approval of the Chair, material of various kinds may be included with the *Hansard* record of a speech. Only documents, such as maps and statistical tables or graphs, which need to be seen in visual form for comprehension and cannot easily be read into the record can be included in this way. Members are not allowed to incorporate the text of speeches they have not delivered in the House.

Debates are recorded in the Hansard

At the end of each issue are details of notices given and answers to written questions (questions on notice) which have been received and circulated that day. The full text of both question and answer are published. Occasionally, when many answers are received on the same day, it is necessary to hold over the publication of some to a later issue.

Hansard can be accessed online at www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/hansard.

Listening to or watching proceedings

Since 1946 parliamentary proceedings have been broadcast live on the radio by the Australian Broadcasting
Corporation (ABC). Australia was the second country in the Commonwealth (after New Zealand) to provide live public broadcasts of all of its proceedings. Radio broadcasts can be heard on the ABC's NewsRadio stations. The House of Representatives and the Senate are covered on alternate days with Question Time from the House not broadcast live being replayed later in the day.

A television feed of proceedings is also made available to the television networks for broadcast. Normally only Question Time and special events, such as the Treasurer's Budget speech and the response by the Leader of the Opposition, are televised live (by the ABC). Most television stations include excerpts of Question Time in news and current affairs programs.

All proceedings from both Houses and some committee hearings are broadcast live on the Parliament's website at www.aph.gov.au/live.

Documents presented to the House

Legislation

Bills

A bill is a proposal for a law or a change to the law—a formal document prepared in the form of a draft Act of Parliament. Infosheet No. 7 'Making laws' describes the processes involved in the passage of bills through the House.

Accompanying each government bill is an explanatory memorandum. This is a separate document explaining the reasons for the bill, and giving a general outline of its contents and notes explaining the intention of each clause.

The first version of a bill available immediately after it is introduced in the House or the Senate is called its 'first reading print'.

If a bill is amended by the House in which it was introduced first (bills must go through both Houses but most can start in either) it is reprinted, with the amendments incorporated, before

its passage to the other House (a 'third reading print'). If it is amended again by the second House a schedule setting out those amendments is published.

A Daily Bills List shows bills currently before the Parliament and the stage reached by each bill. The Daily Bills List and the full text of bills, amendments and explanatory memorandums are accessible at www.aph.gov.au/bills.

Form of a bill

Bills are formal documents whose structure follows a fixed form. The parts of a bill appear in the following sequence. Not all parts are present in every bill.

- Cover page—sets out the short and long titles of the bill
- Contents—not formally part of the bill
- Long title—sets out briefly the purposes of the bill, starting 'A bill for an Act to . . .'
- Preamble (rare)
- Enacting formula—'The Parliament of Australia enacts:'
- Clauses—the substantive provisions of the bill. Clauses may be subdivided into subclauses, paragraphs and subparagraphs. Large bills are divided into Parts, which may be further divided into Divisions and Subdivisions. Clause 1 always states the name by which the Act is to be cited—the 'short title'. When a bill has a commencement provision, stating the date on which the Act is to come into operation, this is usually contained in clause 2. Clause 3 often contains definitions, setting out the meanings of words used, but these may also appear elsewhere in the bill.
- Schedules—material referred to and given legislative effect by preceding clauses. Schedules are used to avoid cluttering the main text of the bill with detail. For bills which amend existing legislation, the amendments are set out in schedules to the bill.

Acts

A bill becomes an Act when it has been passed in identical form by the House of Representatives and the Senate, and been assented to by the Governor-General. What were the clauses of the bill become known as sections of the Act. Acts are numbered on a calendar year basis in the order of receiving assent.

Acts are published individually as soon as possible after they are passed, and are later republished in bound volumes for each year. Acts which have been amended by subsequent legislation are periodically reprinted, consolidating amendments. Publishing of Acts is the responsibility of the Attorney-General's Department.

Notifications of Acts assented to are reported to the House and recorded in the *Votes and Proceedings* and in *Hansard*. This information can also be found in the Government Notices issue of the Commonwealth of Australia Gazette.

The text of all current Acts as well as related and historical legislative material can be found on the COMLAW database run by the Attorney-General's Department at www.comlaw.gov.au.

Parliamentary Papers

Many documents are presented to (or 'tabled in') the House or the Senate, for the information of Members of Parliament and the public. These documents include reports, returns and statements of all kinds from government departments and authorities, parliamentary committee reports, reports of royal commissions and government inquiries and a wide variety of other papers. The contents of such documents become public by being presented to the House. An *Index of documents presented to Parliament* is available at www.aph.gov.au/house/chamberdocs.

The Parliamentary Papers Series

The Parliamentary Papers Series contains all documents either ordered to be included in the series at the time they are tabled in Parliament, or considered later by the Publications Committees and recommended for inclusion in the series.

As most papers of a substantial nature are included in the parliamentary papers series, it is a major reference source for information on the role and activities of the Parliament and Government and is available at major public or research libraries.

Documents made part of the Parliamentary Papers Series are labeled and numbered in annual order.

Papers not made Parliamentary Papers

Although not distributed as part of the Parliamentary Papers Series, documents presented to Parliament but not included in the series, are also public documents and are normally available in printed versions through the author bodies. If no copies are available arrangements can be made to inspect the originals at Parliament House.

Deemed documents

Some documents are not physically presented to the House but are 'deemed to be presented' if they have been delivered to the Clerk and recorded in the *Votes and Proceedings*. This method of presentation is only intended to save the time of the House and deemed documents have the same status as documents presented to the House.

The majority of deemed documents are required by law to be presented to the House, including items of delegated legislation such as regulations, by-laws, rules, determinations etc. The *Disallowable Instruments List* (available at www.aph.gov.au/house/chamberdocs) lists regulations etc. which have been presented and which remain subject to possible disallowance by the House or the Senate.

Committee reports

The purpose of all committee inquiries is to report to the House (or to both Houses in the case of joint committees). The processes involved in committee inquiries are discussed in Infosheet No. 4 'Committees'. Committee reports are presented to the House and ordered to be made parliamentary papers. Minutes of meetings and transcripts of published evidence are

presented at the same time as the report to which they relate but are usually not made part of the Parliamentary Papers Series.

Committee reports and transcripts and other information about committees are available from www.aph.gov.au/house/committee.

Historical note

For several centuries the proceedings of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom were secret and it was a criminal offence to publish reports of the debates.

However, by the late sixteenth century note takers were systematically recording and publishing the debates despite the risk of arrest. By the end of the eighteenth century the House of Commons had given up its long running battle to keep the press out of the Chamber and decided that if proceedings were to be reported they should at least be accurate and seats were reserved in the gallery for reporters. From 1803, regular, accurate reports of debates were produced, initially by William Cobbett and then by Thomas Hansard, the son of Luke Hansard, the official printer to the House of Commons.

In Australia records of proceedings have been published since the Commonwealth Parliament first met in 1901.

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