

What is the Federation Chamber?

The Federation Chamber is an alternative venue to the Chamber of the House for debate of a restricted range of business. It operates in parallel with the Chamber of the House to allow two streams of business to be debated concurrently.

Since its inception in 1994, the Federation Chamber (originally known as the Main Committee) has become increasingly important in managing the time allocated to House business—allowing more time for scrutinising government legislation and for private members' business and discussion of committee reports. It is a debating committee and as such is a subordinate body of the House.

Why have the Federation Chamber?

The intention behind the establishment of the Federation Chamber is to give members extra opportunities to speak on certain bills or reports and at the same time free the Chamber for debate on other matters. This allows the time of the House to be used more effectively, and significantly increases the amount of time available for considering business. It also provides extra opportunities for private members to make speeches on topics of their own choice.

The smaller size of the Federation Chamber has led to its debates generally being more intimate and interactive than those in the House itself. This has contributed to its popularity with many members as a debating venue.



Debate in the Federation Chamber

Meetings

All members of the House are automatically members of the Federation Chamber and eligible to participate in its meetings.

The Deputy Speaker is the Chair of the Federation Chamber. The Second Deputy Speaker and members of the Speaker's panel (see Infosheet No. 3 *The Speaker*) assist in chairing meetings of the Federation Chamber.

The Chief Government Whip has primary responsibility—following consultation with ministers, opposition whips and crossbench members—for determining the agenda of the Federation Chamber and organising the referral of business to it from the Chamber.

Federation Chamber business is listed in a separate section of the Notice Paper (www.aph.gov.au/housenp). The program for meetings of the Federation Chamber is published as an attachment to the Daily Program (www.aph.gov.au/dailyprogram).

Meetings of the Federation Chamber are open to the public and are covered by a dedicated channel of the television monitoring system which can be viewed within Parliament House and on the Parliament's website (www.aph.gov.au/live). Its debates are recorded in Hansard (www.aph.gov.au/repshansard) and the minutes of its proceedings are included in the Votes and Proceedings of the House (www.aph.gov.au/votes).

The Federation Chamber meets in the largest of the House of Representatives committee rooms. This room has been dedicated to its role and is furnished as a small-scale chamber with seating provided for 38 members. It incorporates the U-shaped seating configuration used in the Chamber of the House. The Federation Chamber also has dedicated seating for the public, the press and ministerial and opposition advisers.

What can it do?

The House may refer a range of business to the Federation Chamber—specifically, the second reading and consideration in detail stages of bills (its major role), committee and delegation business, private members' business and documents presented to the House.

The Federation Chamber can debate and resolve motions and process bills through the relevant stages, including making amendments to them, just as the House can. However, as the Federation Chamber is a subordinate body, any decision it makes on business referred to it must be later confirmed by a decision of the House.

Opportunities for private members

In addition to business referred by the House, the Federation Chamber provides opportunities for private members to speak on matters of their own choosing. Time is allocated for:

- 3 minute constituency statements
- committee and delegation business
- private members' business
- 90 second statements
- the grievance debate
- the adjournment debate

The adjournment debate can occur on days outside routine business by agreement between the Whips. Members can present petitions during constituency statements, members statements, the adjournment debate and the grievance debate. See Infosheet No. 6 *Opportunities for private Members* for more information.

When does it meet?

The Federation Chamber follows the schedule of parliamentary sittings for each calendar year (available at www.aph.gov.au/calendar). The Deputy Speaker sets the meeting times for the Federation Chamber.

The routine of business for each sitting day is provided for in the standing orders of the House (written rules, www.aph.gov.au/standingorders), and is available at www.aph.gov.au/house/business.

Meeting times of the Federation Chamber are:

	Commencement	Adjournment
Monday	10.30 am	7.30 pm (break 1.30 to 4 pm)
Tuesday	4 pm	7.30 pm
Wednesday	9.30 am	7.30 pm (break 1 to 4 pm)
Thursday	9.30 am	1 pm

The Federation Chamber's hours may be extended if the amount of business necessitates (provided the House is sitting at the same time).

Although the standing orders permit the Federation Chamber to meet at any time during a sitting of the House, in practice it does not meet when all or most Members might be expected to be present in the Chamber, i.e. Question Time, a division in the House, an address to the House by a world leader, etc.

Federation Chamber procedures

Procedures in the Federation Chamber are substantially the same as those operating in the Chamber for the same type of business, with the exception of those relating to the subordinate nature of the Federation Chamber—for example, the need to report back to the House.

Guiding principle—co-operation

Unlike in the Chamber of the House, there is no provision for divisions (recorded votes) in the Federation Chamber. If business cannot be progressed by general agreement it is reported back to the House as 'unresolved'.

Unlike in the House, if one member dissents from the result announced by the Chair, the Federation Chamber must report the matter back to the House as 'unresolved' (Infosheet No. 14 *Making decisions—debate and division* provides an explanation of the voting procedures in the House). It then becomes a matter for the House to resolve.

This factor perhaps best highlights the guiding principle behind the operation of the Federation Chamber—co-operation.

Business is generally only referred to the Federation Chamber following agreement on the referral between government and non-government members. Disagreements occurring in the Federation Chamber are referred back to the House for settlement. Disorder in the Federation Chamber can result in the expulsion (for 15 minutes) of the member responsible, or suspension or adjournment of the Federation Chamber.



A member speaking in the Federation Chamber

Other details

Other details of the operation of the Federation Chamber include:

- the quorum is three, which must include, in addition to the Chair, one government and one non-government member
- a minister may move that further proceedings on an item of business be taken in the House
- any member may move that the Federation Chamber adjourn or that proceedings be suspended
- proceedings on a bill may continue regardless of unresolved questions (unless the nature of the unresolved question makes this impractical).

For more information

House of Representatives Practice, 7th edn, Department of the House of Representatives, Canberra, 2018, pp. 305, 358-9, 575, 642, 781-91.

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Renaming the Main Committee*, 2004.

About the House website: www.aph.gov.au/athnews.

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