

A series of information sheets giving a basic introduction to the Senate and its work

– 06B –

The Deputy President and Chair of Committees

The Deputy President and Chair of Committees is the second-most senior officer of the Senate. The title ‘Chairman of Committees’ was used until 1981 when ‘Deputy President and Chairman of Committees’ was adopted to more accurately reflect the role. Chairman became ‘Chair’ in 2014 as part of an update of the standing orders to standardise the use of gender-neutral titles.

The title of the office suggests two bundles of duties. First, deputising for the President in the chair during sittings and performing the duties of the President during the President’s absence. Second, as Chair of Committees, chairing the ‘committee of the whole’ Senate, which primarily considers legislation in detail. The Chair of Committees also convenes a committee of chairs of Senate standing and select committees to consider procedural and practical aspects of their work.

The Deputy President and Chair of Committees is a senator, usually with some years of experience, who is elected to the position by the members of the Senate.

Election of the Deputy President and Chair of Committees

[Standing orders 9 and 10](#) provide that the Senate shall appoint a senator to be the Deputy President and Chair of Committees, and that the appointment shall be made in a similar manner to the appointment of the President. The title Deputy President is generally used, with Chair of Committees referring specifically to the role of presiding over committee of the whole.

As described in Senate Brief 6A – [The President of the Senate](#), the President is elected by senators as the first item of business where there is no President, which occurs on the first sitting day after a general election (or at other times if the office is vacated due to a resignation). Accordingly, the election of the Deputy President occurs through a process of nomination or, if necessary, a secret ballot.

The term of service of the Deputy President is also the same as for the President. The office becomes vacant after a normal election for senators (a half-Senate election) on the day before the first sitting day of the new parliament, or on the date the Senate is dissolved for a



*Senator Slade Brockman, Deputy President of the Senate.
Image: DPS Auspic*

simultaneous election, if the Deputy President resigns or dies in office, or a vote of the Senate removes the Deputy President.

For more than four decades the practice usually followed is for the President to be a government senator and the Deputy President to be a member of the Opposition. Although the Deputy President remains a member of a political party, the duties of the office both inside and outside the chamber must be carried out in an impartial manner so, to some extent, the Deputy President is distanced from the day-to-day political activity of their party.

Although [section 18 of the Constitution](#) provides for the Senate to choose a senator to perform the duties of President in his or her absence, in practice, this is undertaken by the Deputy President. If the Deputy President is also absent, there is provision in [standing order 14](#) for the Senate to elect an acting President for that day only.

Parliamentary duties

The Deputy President is the President's deputy and takes the chair in the Senate whenever requested to do so by the President. The Deputy President supports the President in interpreting and applying the standing orders and maintaining order under [standing order 184\(1\)](#). The President and Deputy President are also supported by a number of 'temporary chairs of committees' who are nominated by warrant of the President. When in the chair, temporary chairs are referred to as 'Acting Deputy President'. Although this panel is formally nominated by the President, in practice arrangements for the panel are overseen by the Deputy President.

The Deputy President in the capacity of Chair of Committees is the presiding officer in committee of the whole, presiding over the chamber whenever a committee of the whole Senate is constituted (and relieved by temporary chairs from time to time). The committee of the whole is formed for several purposes, but primarily for the detailed examination of bills. To enable the effective scrutiny of bills, proceedings in committee of the whole are free-ranging, with senators able to contribute to debate numerous times, ask detailed questions of ministers and move and discuss amendments. The Deputy President facilitates the orderly conduct of this exchange of contributions, questions and proposals to amend bills, particularly during complex committee proceedings. The composition of the committee is the same as that of the Senate.

When the committee is formed, the President leaves the President's chair, and the Chair of Committees takes the chair at the table below, between the Clerk and the Deputy Clerk. The location of the chair at the table in committee facilitates receipt of advice from the clerks on matters which may be complex, facilitates communication with senators, and provides a visual signal that the Senate is in committee and that different rules apply to the proceedings.

If the Chair of Committees is absent during a committee of the whole, any one of the temporary chairs of Committees may take the chair.



Senator Andrew McLachlan CSC, Former Deputy President of the Senate, presiding during committee of the whole, supported by clerks who provide procedural advice.

Image: DPS Auspic

The Deputy President and Chair of Committees exercises the same authority when presiding in the Senate or in committee of the whole as the President, but any disorder in the committee of the whole may be dealt with only by the Senate, on receiving a report from the Chair.

The Deputy President must not remain in the chair of the Senate after the President enters the chamber. When the President is in the chamber the President must be in the chair (except in committee of the whole), and cannot, in order to take part in debate in the Senate, put the Deputy President in the chair. On the same principle, the Deputy President must be in the chair, as 'Chair of Committees', if they come into the chamber during committee of the whole proceedings. Thus, while the Deputy President can relieve the President in the chair of the Senate, the President cannot relieve the Deputy President in committee of the whole. The Deputy President has a seat on the chamber floor and contributes to debate in proceedings other than committee of the whole from this seat.

Like the President, the Deputy President and Chair of Committees is entitled to vote in all cases ([standing order 99](#)) and also has a discretion not to vote when in the chair ([standing order 101](#)). In practice this applies to all temporary chairs when they are in the chair and reflects the fact that, unlike other senators, the person in the chair cannot exercise a right not to vote by staying away from or leaving the chamber.

The Deputy President is, *ex officio*, the Chair of the Standing Committee on Procedure, which examines the procedures of the Senate and recommends to the Senate changes in procedures, where appropriate ([standing order 19](#)). In practice the Deputy President is also a member and the Deputy Chair of the Standing Committee on Appropriations, Staffing and Security.

The Deputy President is also chair of the Chair's Committee ([standing order 25\(10\)](#)), which may consider and report to the Senate on any matter relating to the operations of legislation and reference committees and Senate select committees. In this capacity, the Deputy President also provides leadership and guidance to the numerous chairs of Senate committees – 16 chairs of the legislative and reference committees and chairs of any select committees – who are comprised of senators from all party groupings. The Deputy President sets expectations for the management of committee proceedings by committee chairs, particularly in relation to chairing hearings at which witnesses appear.

Administrative duties

The Deputy President and Chair of Committees is deemed to be the President for the purpose of the statutory functions of the President in the event of the President's death, absence or incapacity. Such functions include functions under the *Parliamentary Precincts Act 1988*.

The Deputy President and Chair of Committees also oversees the arrangements relating to the panel of 12 or so Temporary Chairs and has a role in training and mentoring senators taking on this function.

With the Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Deputy President co-chairs the Parliamentary Education Office Advisory Committee, which advises the Presiding Officers in relation to parliamentary education and provides strategic oversight and guidance to the Parliamentary Education Office.

Ceremonial and representational duties

The Deputy President assists the President with ceremonial and representational duties from time to time, such as meeting with distinguished visitors and attending significant events including representing the President at international gatherings.

Diary of a typical day for the Deputy President and Chair of Committees

Today the Deputy President of the Senate ...

8.30am–9.00am	attended morning meeting with staff
9.20am–9.30am	briefed by the Deputy Clerk on the day's proceedings in the Senate
10.15am–10.45am	relieved the President in the chair of the Senate
11.00am–11.30am	met with the Deputy President of the Malaysian Senate
11.45am–12.45pm	resumed the chair of the Senate to conduct proceedings in committee of the whole on the consideration of a bill
1.30pm–1.45pm	weekly meeting with the President
2.00pm–3.00pm	attended the Senate during question time
3.15pm–4.00pm	resumed the chair of the Senate to conduct proceedings during the busy period where 'formal motions' and other matters are conducted
4.15pm–4.30pm	met with the Deputy Clerk regarding a ruling made during earlier proceedings in the Senate
5.30pm–6.30pm	chaired a meeting of the Senate Standing Committee on Procedure
8.00pm–8.05pm	gave an adjournment speech on a constituent matter
8.30pm	<i>[The Senate adjourned at 8.30 pm till tomorrow at midday]</i>

Deputy Presidents and Chairs of Committees since 1901¹

Name	State or Territory	Party	Term of office
Best, Robert	Vic	Prot	28.6.1901–31.12.1903
Higgs, William	Qld	ALP	16.3.1904–31.12.1906
Pearce, George	WA	ALP	21.2.1907–13.11.1908
Dobson, Henry ¹	Tas	Tariff Reform	25.11.1908–30.6.1910
O'Keefe, David	Tas	ALP	1.7.1910–30.7.1914
Henderson, George	WA	ALP	9.10.1914–30.06.1917
Shannon, John	SA	Lib	12.07.1917–30.06.1920
Bakhap, Thomas	Tas	Lib	21.07.1920–30.06.1923
Newlands, John	SA	Nat	5.07.1923–30.06.1926

Name	State or Territory	Party	Term of office
Plain, William	Vic	Nat/UAP	1.07.1926–30.06.1932
Hays, Herbert	Tas	UAP	1.09.1932– 23.09.1935
Sampson, Burford	Tas	UAP	24.09.1935–30.06.1938
McLachlan, James	SA	UAP	1.07.1938–30.06.1941
Brown, Gordon	Qld	ALP	1.07.1941–22.09.1943
Courtice, Benjamin	Qld	ALP	23.09.1943–1.11.1946
Nicholls, Theophilus	SA	ALP	6.11.1946–19.03.1951
Rankin, George	Vic	CP	12.06.1951–30.06.1953
Reid, Albert ²	NSW	CP	8.09.1953–22.05.1962
McKellar, Gerald	NSW	CP	7.08.1962–21.12.1964
Drake–Brockman, Thomas	WA	CP	16.03.1965–11.11.1969
Bull, Thomas	NSW	CP	25.11.1969–30.06.1971
Prowse, Edgar	WA	CP	17.08.1971–31.12.1973
Webster, James	Vic	CP/NCP	5.03.1974–21.12.1975
Drake–Brockman, Thomas	WA	NCP	17.02.1976–30.06.1978
Scott, Douglas	NSW	NCP	15.08.1978–10.12.1979
Maunsell, Ronald	Qld	NCP	19.02.1980–30.06.1981
McClelland, Douglas	NSW	ALP	20.08.1981–4.02.1983
Hamer, David	Vic	Lib	21.04.1983–5.06.1987 and 14.9.1987–30.06.1990
Colston, Malcolm	Qld	ALP	21.08.1990–16.08.1993
Crichton–Browne, Noel	WA	Lib	17.08.1993–9.05.1995
Reid, Margaret ³	ACT	Lib	9.05.1995–19.08.1996
Colston, Malcolm	Qld	Ind	20.08.1996–6.05.1997
West, Suzanne	NSW	ALP	6.05.1997–30.06.2002
Hogg, John	Qld	ALP	19.08.2002–25.08.2008
Ferguson, Alan	SA	Lib	26.08.2008–30.6.2011
Parry, Stephen	Tas	Lib	4.07.2011–6.07.2014
Marshall, Gavin	Vic	ALP	7.7.2014–9.5.2016
Lines, Sue	WA	ALP	30.8.2016–25.7.2022
McLachlan, Andrew	SA	Lib	26.7.2022–21.7.2025
Brockman, William (Slade)	WA	Lib	22.7.2025–

1 Senator Henry Dobson (Tas, Tarriff Reform) acted as the first Chairman of Committees from 13.6.1901 to 28.06.1901 on which date he resigned.

2 Died in office as Deputy President.

3 First woman Deputy President.

ALP	Australian Labor Party	Nat	Nationalist Party
CP	Country Party	NCP	New Country Party
FT	Free Trade	Prot	Protectionist Party
Ind	Independent	UAP	United Australia Party
Lib	Liberal Party of Australia		

Further reading

- Rosemary Laing (ed.), [Odgers' Australian Senate Practice](#), 14th edn, Department of the Senate, Canberra, 2016.

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