



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.

The House 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 Department of the House of Representatives website or the Parliament Shop or are held by major libraries. All of the publications described here can be accessed online.

Keeping up to date

Key resources are available online to help members of the public stay up to date on what is happening in the House.

About the House—read House news, including what is expected to happen in the House in the upcoming week, what happened in the House last week and a review of selected features of House business at www.aph.gov.au/athnews.

Committees—find out what committees of the House of Representatives and joint committees of both Houses are up to at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee (see also Infosheet No. 4 *Committees*).

Members' information—locate contact details for, and information on, the current members of the House of Representatives at www.aph.gov.au/senators_and_members.

Order of business—see the different types of business conducted in the House and the time allocated to each at www.aph.gov.au/house/business (see also Infosheet No. 2 *A typical sitting day*).

Sitting calendar—find out when the House is due to sit at www.aph.gov.au/calendar.

Social media—follow the House on Facebook ([aboutthehouseau](https://www.facebook.com/aboutthehouseau)), X (@AboutTheHouse), YouTube (@AboutTheHouse) and Instagram (@aboutthehouse.au).

House resources

A range of resources are available that explain (at different levels) how the House operates.

Guide to Procedures—this is a concise introduction to the procedures of the House of Representatives, at www.aph.gov.au/gtp.

House of Representatives Practice—this is a comprehensive, detailed text on the law and practice of the House of Representatives. It presents a degree of historical perspective and includes appendixes containing extensive statistical information about the proceedings of the House. It is available at www.aph.gov.au/practice.

Infosheets—a series of infosheets, including this one, explain various aspects of the House's operation and procedures. The full series is at www.aph.gov.au/infosheets.

Parliamentary Education Office—this office provides useful parliamentary information for students and teachers. See www.peo.gov.au.

Procedural Digest—this publication summarises procedurally unusual and interesting events in the House and is available at www.aph.gov.au/proceduraldigest.

Standing and sessional orders—these are the formal rules governing the proceedings of the House. 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. They are at www.aph.gov.au/standingorders.

Statistical Digest—this publication contains cumulative statistics on legislation, questions, petitions and various other items of business. It also details the time spent on those items. See www.aph.gov.au/statisticaldigest.

Work of the Session—this is a consolidated list of the business dealt with by the House including bills, motions, documents, statements, matters of public importance discussed, committee reports and members' attendance at sittings of the House for a parliament. It also contains statistical summaries of the sittings and business of the House. See www.aph.gov.au/wots.

Official records and business of the House

The following three House 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 and Federation Chamber (the second debating chamber of the House, see Infosheet No. 16 *The Federation Chamber*). Items of business are grouped under the headings 'government business', 'committee and delegation business' and 'private members' business'.

Within each section items are listed as either 'Notices' or 'Orders of the day'. Notices indicate that a Minister or member intends to introduce a matter for consideration. Orders of the day are matters that have already been introduced and of 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.

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, the House may agree to a motion to discharge them 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 Parliament starts with a clean sheet.

The House is required by its standing orders to consider matters in the order they appear on the day's Notice Paper. Before each issue of the Notice Paper is published, the Leader of the House 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 ask questions in writing of ministers relating to their official responsibilities. Answers are given in writing. The rules applying to written questions and answers are similar to those applied during questions without notice by the Speaker during Question Time, only there is more time to apply them.

Questions are listed on the Notice Paper and remain there until an answer is received. The first Notice Paper to be published for each sitting period includes the full text of all questions not yet answered, while subsequent publications only include the full text of the questions appearing for the first time. When an answer is received, it is sent to the member concerned and published.

Although answers are not mandatory, if a question has been on the Notice Paper for more than 60 calendar days, the member can ask the Speaker to write to the minister seeking reasons for the delay in responding. This request can be made after Question Time when members have the opportunity to ask questions of the Speaker. A list of written questions, and answers if provided, can also be found in the Questions in Writing section of the parliament's website.

Committee reports awaiting Government response

The Government is to respond to committee reports within six months, otherwise the relevant minister must present a signed statement to the House indicating the reasons for non-response. This section of the Notice Paper indicates the status of Government responses to committee reports from the 43rd Parliament onwards, and, as with the full text of all unanswered questions in writing, appears in the first publication of each sitting period.

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 their deputies in chairing the House or Federation Chamber), House and joint committees and their membership and current inquiries, and the appointment by the House of members to statutory bodies.

Daily Program (what's on today?)

The Daily Program, also known as the 'Blue' (named 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 Notice Paper, including 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 are 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 record what is done (or deemed to be done) by the House as a collective body, and not the words of individual members.



Bound volumes of the Votes and Proceedings

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
- 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)
- 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, including:

- 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 of each question
 - if a formal vote (division) takes place, the record lists the members voting for and against the question.

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, 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.

At the end of each issue are the details of notices given that day.

The House Hansard can be accessed online at www.aph.gov.au/repshansard.



Hansard staff can be seen sitting at a small table in the middle of the Chamber, near the end of the Table of the House.

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.



Proceedings of the House being broadcast

ParlView (<http://parlview.aph.gov.au>) allows members of the public to watch, replay, pause and download broadcasts of the Senate and House of Representatives, parliamentary committee hearings, other events and press conferences.

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. A copy of the text of the bill is presented to the House when it is introduced. 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, giving a general outline of its contents and providing 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 (most can start in either house) 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 assented to. Acts which have been amended by subsequent legislation are periodically consolidated and published as Act Compilations. 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.

The text of all current Acts as well as related and historical legislative material, can be found on the Australian Government Federal Register of Legislation at www.legislation.gov.au.

Parliamentary Papers

Many documents are presented to (or tabled in) the House and/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 papers presented to Parliament is available at www.aph.gov.au/house/tabledpapers.

The Parliamentary Papers Series

The Parliamentary Papers Series contains all documents ordered to be included in the series at the time they are tabled in Parliament (see resolution adopted by the House on 28 March 2018).

An alphabetical index is published electronically to the website at www.aph.gov.au/house/tabledpapers. The series to 2016 (when hard copy publication ceased) is also available at major public or research libraries.

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 electronically on the website at www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Tabled_documents

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, and determinations.

The Disallowable Instruments List lists legislative instruments which have been presented and which remain subject to possible disallowance by the House or the Senate (available at www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/eginstruments/house-dissallowable-instruments).

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. If minutes of meetings and transcripts of published evidence are presented at the same time as the report to which they relate they are usually not made part of the Parliamentary Papers Series.

Committee reports, transcripts and other information about committees is 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 16th century note takers were systematically recording and publishing the debates despite the risk of arrest. By the end of the 18th 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.

For more information

House of Representatives Practice, 7th edn, Department of the House of Representatives, Canberra, 2018, ch. 5, 7-10, 15, 17-18.

Images courtesy of AUSPIC