

This infosheet outlines the roles of the parliamentary staff who can be seen at work in the Chamber when the House is sitting. Many of these roles have their origins in the English (Westminster) system and retain aspects of the traditions associated with their roles in the House.

This infosheet also gives a brief introduction to the Department of the House of Representatives, and to the Parliamentary Service as a whole.

The Clerk of the House

The Clerk of the House is the most senior parliamentary official in the House. The Clerk is responsible for advising the Speaker and members on parliamentary law, practice and procedure, and for administering the Department of the House of Representatives.

Like many of the roles and traditions in the House, the office of the Clerk of the House has its origins in the 14th century English Parliament. There have been 17 Clerks of the House of Representatives since 1901, the longest serving holding the office for 18 years.

The Clerk is a specialist in the rules of parliamentary procedure and practice and carries out a range of duties inside and outside the Chamber in relation to this role. One of the Clerk's most important functions is to provide advice to the Chair and to members on the operation of proceedings. Each day before the House meets the Clerk examines the business scheduled for the sitting and briefs the Speaker on any procedural issues which may occur. The Clerk is also available to advise the Speaker and members on the interpretation of the standing orders, parliamentary practice and precedent, and the requirements of the Constitution and the law affecting the Parliament and the House. The Clerk must have extensive knowledge and experience in these areas. Without exception, an officer who is appointed as Clerk has been in the service of the House and has served at the Table for a long period.

As well as being a specialist in the rules of parliamentary procedure and practice, the Clerk has an administrative role as head of the Department of the House of Representatives. The Clerk administers this parliamentary department under the oversight of the Speaker in the same way as the secretaries (chief executives) of government departments administer their department under a minister.

The Deputy Clerk

The Deputy Clerk is the second most senior official of the Department of the House of Representatives. They are responsible for advising and assisting members, their staff and officers on matters of parliamentary practice and law and drafting private members' bills and amendments.

The Deputy Clerk assists the Clerk in the management of the department and during the Clerk's absence performs the duties of Clerk. The Deputy Clerk is also the Clerk of the Federation Chamber (the House's second debating chamber, see Infosheet No. 16 *The Federation Chamber*) and holds the position of Registrar of Members' Interests.

The Deputy Clerk is assisted by three Clerks Assistant and the Serjeant-at-Arms, who are each responsible for the administration of one of the department's four major work areas (Chamber Services, Procedure, Committees and Corporate Services).

Clerks at the Table

In the House, a panel of senior departmental staff act as Clerk (or Deputy Clerk) at the Table. The Clerks at the Table, like the occupants of the Chair, work to a roster. The Clerk of the House and the Deputy Clerk are both at the Table on important occasions and usually at Question Time. At other times, the Deputy Clerk or other senior departmental staff may perform the role of the Clerk or the Deputy Clerk.

Both the Clerk and the Deputy Clerk sit at the head of the Table of the House, immediately in front of the Speaker's Chair. The Clerk sits on the Speaker's right, and the Deputy Clerk on the Speaker's left. The Clerks at the Table can be distinguished from members by their black gowns (until 1995 they also wore wigs, similar to those worn by barristers).

Clerks at the Table may be called upon to give immediate advice to the Chair or others in relation to a procedural or technical matter suddenly arising. Any member can ask the Clerks for advice during proceedings—usually in relation to a point of order they wish to make, or a motion they wish to move. The Leader of the House (the minister responsible for the programming of government business) can often be seen consulting the Clerks at the Table in relation to the progress of business.



The Clerks at the Table can be seen immediately in front of the Speaker's Chair, easily distinguishable by their black gowns.

The Clerk is the only non-member to have a speaking role in the proceedings of the House. At the beginning of each Parliament the Clerk chairs the House until a Speaker has been elected.

During proceedings, the Clerk announces each item of business in the House. The Clerk also 'reads' bills at each stage of their progress through the House—that is, when the bill is introduced (first reading) or when the House orders that the bill be read a second or third time. At each stage, the Clerk reads out only the title of the bill (see Infosheet No. 7 *Making laws*). This procedure helps members keep track of what stage of debate the House is engaged in and reflects the longstanding tradition in the English parliamentary system of the Clerk reading out the full text of the bill to members (prior to widespread literacy). During debate, the Deputy Clerk operates the clocks which time members' speeches.

As each item of business is dealt with by the House, the Clerk records the decisions the House has made. The Clerk also certifies all action taken by the House in the legislative process—that is, when a bill has been passed or amended, and when a bill originating in the House has been passed by both Houses.

Like the Clerk, the Deputy Clerk at the Table provides advice to members on the operation of proceedings. The Deputy Clerk also keeps a detailed record of proceedings, which, along with the record kept by the Clerk, form the basis of the official minutes of the House—the Votes and Proceedings (see Infosheet No. 12 *Finding out about the House*).

When the House takes a formal vote—a division—or if a member calls for a quorum to be formed, the Clerk operates the bells that summon members to the Chamber. (See Infosheet No. 14 *Making decisions—debate and division*). It is the job of the Deputy Clerk to turn the sandglasses which measure the length of time for which the bells are rung for divisions and quorums. During a division, the Clerk counts the members voting 'Aye' and the Deputy Clerk counts the members voting 'No'.

Serjeant-at-Arms

Like the Clerk, the role of the Serjeant-at-Arms has its origins in the early English parliament. The Serjeant's dress is highly distinctive and is based on traditional court dress. During normal sitting days, they wear a cut-away black coat with black trousers or skirt, along with either a white bow tie (for men) or lace jabot (for women). On ceremonial occasions, the Serjeant-at-Arms wears a form of Court dress, including a black cut-away coat, knee breeches (or skirt), silver-buckled shoes, lace jabot and cuffs, white kid gloves, ceremonial sword and cocked hat (carried under left arm).

The functions of the Serjeant-at-Arms in the Chamber are associated mainly with the ceremony of Parliament and the preservation of order. The Serjeant is responsible for the security of the House of Representatives Chamber and for controlling admission to the galleries. Security staff in the Chamber and galleries are employees of the Department of Parliamentary Services who work under the direction of the Serjeant. The main formal Chamber responsibility of the Serjeant during the sittings of the House is to assist the Speaker maintain order by removing disorderly people from the House or galleries. The Serjeant's other duties in the Chamber include recording members' attendance and delivering messages (formal communications) from the House of Representatives to the Senate.

The Serjeant also has a ceremonial role as the custodian of the Mace, the symbol of the Speaker's and the House's authority, which is placed on the Table of the House when the House is sitting. Carrying the Mace on the right shoulder, the Serjeant-at-Arms precedes the Speaker when the Speaker enters and leaves the Chamber at the beginning and the end of a sitting. The Serjeant also has ceremonial duties at the opening of each session of the Parliament.

Outside the Chamber, the Serjeant has administrative responsibilities as the manager of members' and corporate services, and has special responsibility for the security of the part of the parliamentary precincts occupied by the House of Representatives. The Serjeant is a member of the Security Management Board, which has responsibility for the overall security of the parliamentary precincts.

The Serjeant also advises the Speaker on issues to do with the radio broadcasting and televising of the House of Representatives, and media policy in general.



The Serjeant-at-Arms staff group and chamber attendants

Chamber attendants

Attendants in green and beige uniforms may be seen moving around the Chamber or seated around its perimeter. They are responsible for the distribution of bills, amendments and other documents to members in the Chamber. They also assist members by providing lecterns, stationery and drinking water, and carrying messages. Members may call an attendant by pressing a button on their desks.

Hansard staff

Hansard staff sit at a small table in the middle of the Chamber, near the end of the Table of the House. They are responsible for producing a written record of the proceedings. These days, computer-assisted transcription and voice recognition technology are used, rather than shorthand. Outside the Chamber, Hansard reporters' other duties include transcribing proceedings of parliamentary committees and ministerial conferences, both in Canberra and at venues around Australia.

The Department of the House of Representatives

The Department of the House of Representatives has about 180 staff members responsible for providing administrative support for the House of Representatives and its committees and a range of services and facilities for members in Parliament House. The department also administers some shared functions on behalf of the House and the Senate.

The work of the department encompasses five main areas:

Chamber and Federation Chamber

The department provides programming, procedural and administrative support necessary for the conduct of the business of the House and the Federation Chamber; undertakes research on parliamentary matters; produces publications and provides information about the House and its proceedings; and provides administrative and research services for some domestic committees.

Community awareness

Departmental staff provide services to increase public knowledge and awareness of, and interaction with, the work of the House of Representatives and the Parliament.

Committee support

Staff provide procedural, research, analytical, drafting and administrative support for House of Representatives committees and some joint committees to fulfill their role in the parliamentary consideration of policy and legislation and the scrutiny of government (other joint committees are supported by the Department of the Senate).

Inter-parliamentary relations and capacity-building

The department provides advice and support to facilitate and maintain the Parliament's relationships with international and regional parliaments, parliamentary bodies and organisations.

Members' services and corporate support

Departmental staff provide advice, services and support to members in Parliament House and the department. This includes advice and services relating to members' salaries, allowances, accommodation and office services. It also includes providing financial, human resource management advice and support and office services to the department.

The Parliamentary Service

Staff supporting the Parliament work for the Australian Parliamentary Service, which provides services to each House of the Parliament, to committees of each House, to joint committees and to senators and members.

There are four parliamentary departments. The Department of the House of Representatives and the Department of the Senate support the House and Senate, respectively. The Department of Parliamentary Services provides shared services to the Parliament as a whole. The Parliamentary Budget Office, established in 2012, provides independent and non-partisan analysis of the budget cycle, fiscal policy and the financial implications of proposals.

The Australian Parliamentary Service is separate from the Australian Public Service. Public service departments (also called government departments) serve the Executive Government. The parliamentary departments provide

professional advice and support to the Parliament and its members independently of the Executive Government.

Parliamentary staff provide the same services for opposition or other non-government members and senators as they do for government members and senators. They must be non-partisan and impartial at all times.

For more information

House of Representatives Practice, 7th edn, Department of the House of Representatives, Canberra, 2018, pp. 208–16.

House of Representatives website:
www.aph.gov.au/house.

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

X: @AboutTheHouse | Bluesky: @aboutthehouse.bsky.social |

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The Chamber of the House of Representatives

