



Usher of the Black Rod

The parliamentary position of the Usher of the Black Rod, an officer who maintained order in the upper house of a parliament, dates from the fourteenth century in England. Senate standing orders require the President of the Senate to keep order in the Senate, and traditionally that authority is exercised through the Usher of the Black Rod.

Under the direction of either the President or the Senate, the Usher of the Black Rod may be required to assist with the removal of a senator who the Senate has determined is disrupting proceedings or to arrange for the removal of any person who causes a disturbance in the Senate, its galleries or committees. The attendant staff in the



The Usher of the Black Rod, Mr John Begley,
in the Senate

Senate and the galleries work under the direction of the Usher of the Black Rod. A modern feature of this security work is to provide advice to the President and senators on managing demonstrations and the physical security of the building.

Historically, the Usher of the Black Rod was an officer in a British order of knights called the Most Noble Order of the Garter, and was appointed to serve the monarch in the British House of Lords. The name Usher of the Black Rod comes from the staff of office which was used to arrest or expel anyone who offended the Order.

Modelled on the design of the Rod used by the Legislative Council of New South Wales, the Black Rod in the Australian Senate was manufactured by Griffith Limited in Sydney in 1927 for the opening of the Provisional Parliament House in Canberra. The wood of the original Rod was replaced with ebony in 1988 for the opening of Parliament House. The Rod is silver-capped and ornamented with a silver crown above a representation of the Australian coat of arms.

A central figure at openings of parliament, the Usher of the Black Rod announces the arrival of the Governor-General and then escorts the Governor-General and the official party into the Senate chamber. The Governor-General then directs the Usher of the Black Rod to request the members of the House of Representatives to attend in the Senate chamber.

On a normal sitting day the Usher of the Black Rod announces the arrival of the President into the chamber before the President says prayers. As well as ensuring the safe delivery of messages from the Senate chamber to the House of Representatives, the Usher of the Black Rod is also responsible for recording the attendance of senators in the chamber on each sitting day. Whenever a division or quorum is to be determined, the Usher of the Black Rod supervises locking the chamber doors before the beginning of a count.

The Usher of the Black Rod heads a Senate Department office which provides support services to the Senate, Senate committees and senators at Parliament House, and delivers corporate services to the department. The Usher of the Black Rod also undertakes clerking duties in the Senate chamber.

There have been 19 Ushers of the Black Rod since 1901. The first woman to hold this position was Andrea Griffiths who served from 2001 until 2008. The current Usher of the Black Rod is John Begley.



Silver capping on the Black Rod

Further reading

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

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