

# Parliament and Government in Queensland



**Secondary**

**Information booklet for secondary schools**



Chamber, Education and Communication Services  
Parliament House  
Brisbane Qld 4000

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**Chamber, Education and Communications Services**

Parliament House  
Brisbane Qld 4000

Web: [www.parliament.qld.gov.au](http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au)

Email: [parliamentary.education@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:parliamentary.education@parliament.qld.gov.au)

Phone: (07) 3553 6000

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## 1. A short history of Parliament in Queensland

The Queensland Parliament is based on the British system of government called the Westminster system, which evolved over many centuries. The term 'Westminster' refers to the Palace of Westminster (now the Houses of Parliament, London) which was once the residence of the King. The Palace was where members of the Church and nobility, and at a later date commoners, were called to attend 'parleys' (discussions) with the King.

Eventually, these discussions were formalised into a Parliament with two Houses. The term 'parliament' is derived from the old French word 'parlement' (speaking). The two groups of advisers to the King were represented in the Parliament - the House of Lords (also called the Upper House) represented members of the Church and the nobility and the House of Commons (also called the Lower House) represented the commoners. Based on Westminster tradition, Upper Houses usually have a red floor, and Lower Houses have a Green Floor.

Between 27 April and 11 May 1860, the first election was held in the Colony of Queensland to elect Members of Queensland's first Parliament. Twenty-six were Members elected to the Legislative Assembly (the Lower House) and 15 Members were appointed by the Governor to the Legislative Council (the Upper House).

Members of the First Queensland Parliament were summoned by the Governor to meet in Brisbane on 22 May 1860, in the Old Prisoners' Barracks. This date was significant because it also marked the anniversary of Captain Cook's charting of Moreton Bay.

Robert Herbert was elected as the Member for the electoral district of Leichhardt and from May 1860 until February 1866 served as Queensland's first Premier. Other firsts were:

First Speaker of the Legislative Assembly -  
Mr Gilbert Elliott

First President of the Legislative Council -  
Sir Charles Nicholson

First Clerk of the Parliament -  
Mr Lewis Adolphus Bernays

In 1863, the site for Queensland's first Parliament House was chosen and an architectural competition was held throughout Australia for a design. Charles Tiffin, Queensland's Colonial Architect won the competition with his design and in July 1865, the foundation stone of Parliament House was laid.

On 4 August 1868, Members of the Queensland Parliament met for the official opening of Parliament House. It was regarded by all as the finest building in Queensland.



*Workmen at the front of Parliament House, Brisbane, circa 1870*

### 1.1. Adult Suffrage

In the first election in 1860, voting was only available for men over 21, with multiple votes available to some based on property ownership. In 1905, adult suffrage, allowing women to vote, was introduced. However, Indigenous people remained disqualified for another 60 years. In 1914, Queensland became the first state to introduce compulsory voting and, in 1915, women were granted the right to be elected to the Legislative Assembly.

An amendment to the Elections Act in 1965, allowed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to vote in state elections. Enrolment and voting became compulsory for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in 1971.

Queensland uses the full preferential voting system.

## 1.2. Abolition of the Upper House

Traditionally in the Westminster system, parliaments are bicameral; that is, they have an Upper House and a Lower House. The relationship between Queensland's Upper House (the Legislative Council) and its Lower House (the Legislative Assembly) had, at times, been very strained. In 1917, a referendum was held asking the people of Queensland whether the state's constitution should be changed to alter the structure of the Parliament to only one house. This referendum to abolish the Upper House failed.

In 1920, following a cabinet decision, Lieutenant-Governor William Lennon appointed an extra 15 members to the Upper House, resulting in a government majority in both houses. Those members were to become known as "The Suicide Squad".

Later, in the lead up to the 1920 election, Premier Theodore campaigned for the abolition of the Upper House. Following his Government's re-election, he exercised his mandate and introduced into the Legislative Assembly, legislation to abolish the Legislative Council. The legislation was then passed by the Upper House, in effect abolishing itself. Upon Royal Assent of the legislation, the Legislative Council officially ceased to exist on 23 March 1922. At that time, Queensland became Australia's only state to have a unicameral (single house) parliament.

For more information about the Upper house see:

[>> Abolition of the Legislative Council - booklet](#)

## 1.3. Petitions

A petition is a document that states a concern and asks that something be done to improve a situation. Members of the community may sign a petition to show their support. The more signatures the better.

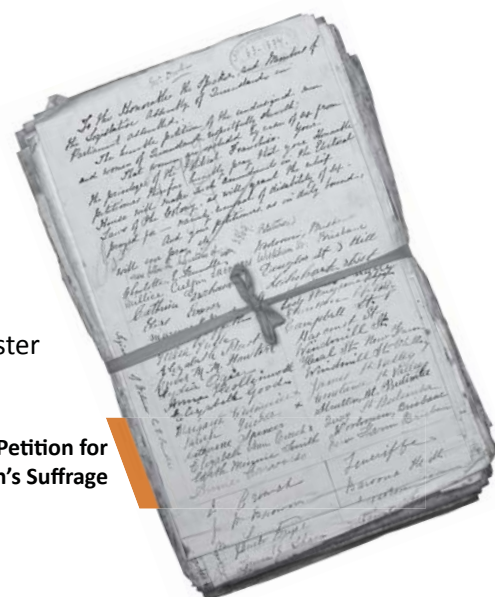
Petitions are tabled in the Parliament. They tell the Members of Parliament how petitioners are feeling about an issue. In Queensland, the relevant Minister must respond to the tabled petition within 30 days. In Queensland, petitions can be circulated online using an e-petition. Petitioners need to ask their MP to present the petition in Parliament.

For information about how petitions work see:

[>> Petition Information Brochure](#)

Classroom Activity:

[>> Petitions and Petitioners - worksheet](#)



1894 Petition for Women's Suffrage

## 1.4. Regional Parliaments

In September 2002, the Queensland Parliament had its first regional sitting when it sat in Townsville. This was the first time parliament sat outside Brisbane. More than 8,000 people attended the temporary parliament during the sitting week. Regional parliaments have since been held in Rockhampton in October 2005, Cairns in October 2008, Mackay in May 2011 and Townsville in September 2019. Parliament will sit in Cairns in May 2023.



## 2. How our system works – the Powers and Processes

### 2.1. The three levels of government in Australia

There are three levels of government in Australia: federal government, state government, and local government. The federal and state government are both established under the Australian Constitution.

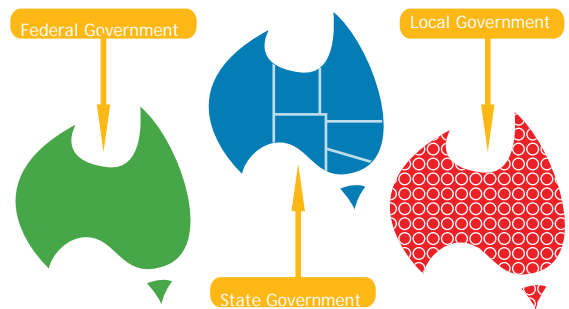
Local government receives its power from the state government. Every person forms part of the local community. Every local community is part of a state or territory and every state or territory is part of Australia. Representatives elected by their local community make decisions about the area they are elected to represent. Rules are made by our parliaments to keep order and allow for fairness in our community. These are called laws. It is the job of the Government to carry out the laws made by the Parliament.

For more information on the three levels of Government see:

>> [Factsheet 1.1—The Three Levels of Government](#)

Classroom Activity:

>> [Three Levels of Government worksheet](#)



*A diagram showing the three levels of government in Australia: federal government, state government and local government.*

### 2.2. The Separation of Powers in Queensland

The doctrine of the separation of powers refers to the separation of the three branches of Government - the legislature, the executive and the judiciary.

The legislature exercising legislative power enacts the laws, the executive exercising executive power administers the laws and the judiciary through the exercise of judicial power, interprets and adjudicates upon the laws. In practice, the Westminster system of government in Queensland has partial separation of powers. Ministers who are Members of Parliament are also members of the Executive.

For more information on the Separation of Powers in Queensland see:

>> [Factsheet 2.1—The Separation of Powers in Queensland](#)

Classroom Activity:

>> [Separation of Power in Queensland - worksheet](#)

### 2.3. Structure and Functions of the Queensland Parliament

According to section 2A of the Constitution Act 1867, the Queensland Parliament consists of the Queen (usually represented by the State Governor) and the Legislative Assembly. The Legislative Assembly consists of 93 directly elected Members, representing 93 electorates. After 2020 Queensland will have fixed four year terms.



*Members of Parliament in the Chamber*

The Legislative Assembly performs the following functions:

- Making laws
- Providing the Government of the day
- Granting supply – that is, bringing down and passing the Budget
- Scrutinising the actions of Government
- Representing the people
- Providing a forum for debate

For more information on the Structure and Functions of the Queensland Parliament see:

[>> Factsheet 3.3—Queensland Parliament Structure and Functions](#)

## **2.4. Political Representation**

Queensland is divided into 93 defined areas called electorates and these 93 electorates each have a name, e.g., the Electorate of Stafford or the Electorate of Gregory.

Each electorate is represented in the Queensland Parliament by one Member of Parliament who is elected in the State elections which are held every three years, e.g., the Member for Stafford or the Member for Gregory.

Each electorate has a similar number of voters (approximately 35 000). There is naturally some difference in the number of voters in the more sparsely populated electorates of our State, compared with our urban electorates. For example, the Electorate of Gregory, although one of the largest in size, has approximately 24 500 voters while the Electorate of Bulimba in Brisbane has approximately 38 500 voters.

For information about political representation and political parties see:

[>> Factsheet 7.6—Political Representation](#)

## **2.5. The Role of a Member of Parliament**

Your local member performs many different roles. A Member works both in the electorate and also in the parliament.

Members of parliament:

- represent the people of their electorate (known as constituents);
- assist constituents with their problems and their interactions with the government;
- speak out about the issues in their electorate;
- propose new laws and amendments to existing laws and vote on the passage of laws through parliament;
- keep a close watch on what the government does and how it spends taxpayers' money;
- speak in debates in the parliament;
- provide interviews to the media; and
- if they are a member of a political party, take part in party decisions.

Some members also work on parliamentary committees which examine the government's actions in detail and recommend alternative ways of doing things. Up to 19 of the 93 members may be ministers.

For more information about the role of a Member of Parliament see:

[>> Factsheet 3.17—The Role of a Member of Parliament](#)

## 2.6. The Office of the Speaker

The proceedings of the House are chaired by the Speaker. The office of Speaker is an ancient one which dates back to the early English parliaments of the 14th Century. In the Queensland Parliament, the Speaker is elected by a secret ballot involving all Members of Parliament when a new parliament meets following a general election. The Speaker supervises debates in the chamber and enforces the rules (Standing Orders) to ensure orderly conduct.

Within the Parliament's jurisdiction, the Speaker enjoys considerable powers and can issue writs for by-elections and warrants for offenders who have committed contempt against parliament, and have brought before the Bar of the Parliament such offenders for rebuke or sentence.

For more information about the Office of the Speaker see:

[>> Factsheet 3.13—The Office of the Speaker](#)



*The Speaker's Chair, Queensland Legislative Assembly*

## 3. How Laws are Made

### 3.1. The Passing of a Law

In Queensland, the process for making a law varies depending on the type of Bill to be introduced, who introduces it and whether the Bill is urgent. The Government introduces the majority of Bills into the Queensland Parliament.

For more information about making laws see:

[>> Factsheet 3.7—The Passing of a Law](#)

For more complex information about the stages of making laws including the initial policy work required to create a Bill see:

[>> Factsheet 3.6—The Passing of an Act](#)

Answers to frequently asked questions about the Legislative Process can be found at:

[>> Factsheet 3.5—Legislation Process FAQ](#)

Classroom Activity:

[>> Voluntary School Sports Mock Bill](#)

[>> Voluntary School Sports Mock Bill - role play](#)



## 4. Making Changes

### 4.1. What can you do about it?

Have you ever wanted to change the world? Would you like things to be done differently? Can you see a better way of doing things?

There are many ways to get involved, bring about change and influence decisions. Here are some of the ways in which you can be an active Citizen:

- Contact your representatives
- Write or sign a petition
- Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or phone talkback radio
- Join a political party
- Join or start a lobby group
- Inform the media
- Attend or organise a rally
- Send a submission to a Parliamentary Committee
- Attend local council meetings
- Become an informed voter

For more information about getting involved in decision making see:

[>> Factsheet 8.1—How can you be Involved?](#)

While many people believe they are only one voice and cannot change things, just one person's voice can often make the world of difference.

For instance, just one vote made English the official language in the United States instead of German in 1776. In 1971, Sir John Gorton lost the Prime Ministership of Australia on his own one vote.

For more information about times when just one voice has made a difference see:

[>> Factsheet 8.2—Power of One](#)

### 4.2. The Role of Pressure Groups

Many Queenslanders are members of interest groups: as participants in a church group; school association; conservation group; trade union or business organisation. Interest groups, acting as pressure groups, have become increasingly important as a means by which individuals can attempt to influence governments regarding their particular requirements. Although individuals within a representative democracy possess rights, allowing them to lobby parliamentarians and governments concerning pertinent issues, a collective approach can often exert more powerful pressure on decision-makers, as well as consolidating a range of similar ideas and opinions into a cohesive format.

For more detailed information about the role of pressure groups see:

[>> Factsheet 8.4—The Role of Pressure Groups](#)

### 4.3. The Role of the Media

At the Queensland Parliament, the media gallery consists of journalists who work for newspapers and television and radio organisations. These journalists collect and publish information on parliamentary activities.

The media plays a significant role in democratic societies such as Queensland, providing information to the public by reporting and commenting on the proceedings in the Parliament, the operations of the Government, and the views and alternate policies of the Opposition. All of these activities rely on access to information.

Queenslanders, through the media, can expect to:

- be informed about government decision-making processes;
- debate these decisions and comment on government conduct; and
- demand that decision-makers defend their stance.

For more information about the role of the media and its relationships and influence see:

>> [Factsheet 8.3—The Role of the Media](#)

#### 4.4. The Committee System

Generally, the main task of Committees in Queensland is to make sure government administration is accountable to the Parliament and to the people of Queensland. A parliamentary committee is made up of a group of Members, both government and non-government, who are appointed to the Committee. Committees generally have significant powers to inquire into matters for the Parliament. Often, committees seek information and views from people and organisations. Committees are able to do this in a way that the whole Parliament cannot. They have more time, are more flexible, and can gather evidence by speaking to people and organisations in communities throughout Queensland.

For more information about Parliamentary Committees see:

>> [Factsheet 3.9—Parliamentary Committees](#)

Classroom Activity:

>> [Parliamentary Committee Inquiry – role play](#)



*Parliamentary Committee hearing.*

## 5. Parliamentary Education Services

The Queensland Parliament offers the following educational services:

- Seminars, workshops, conferences and Youth Parliaments for educators, Legal Studies students tertiary students, public servants, Members of Parliament and their staff, and other client groups (both community service and fee paying).
- Tours for primary and junior secondary school students.
- Educational and information resources for use in educational institutions and by the wider community.
- A Parliamentary Internship Program, where university students undertake a nominated research project under the supervision of a Member of Parliament or senior officer of the Parliamentary Service.

For further information about these services go to our website:

[www.parliament.qld.gov.au/explore/education](http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/explore/education)

For more information please contact Parliamentary Education and Liaison Team on 3553 6413 or [Parliamentary.Education@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:Parliamentary.Education@parliament.qld.gov.au) .

## 6. Glossary

### **Act**

An Act of Parliament is a law passed by the Legislative Assembly and assented to by the Governor.

### **Adjournment Debate**

On each sitting, when the Question, 'That this House do now adjourn,' is proposed by the Leader of Government Business or a Minister at the conclusion of the day's sitting, a 30-minute debate ensues in which Members from all sides of the House may each speak for on any matter of their choice for up to three minutes.

### **Appropriation Bill**

An appropriation is a bill which, when passed by Parliament, will allow the government to spend money it has gathered from the community through taxes and charges.

### **Backbencher**

A member of Parliament who is not a minister, shadow minister or presiding officer.

### **Bicameral**

A parliament consisting of two chambers.

### **Bill**

A bill is a proposal for a law, either a new law or to change to an existing law, placed before the Parliament for its consideration.

### **Cabinet**

The group of senior Ministers in a government.

### **Censure Motion**

A censure motion is a motion moved in the house which is very critical of, and which seeks to attach blame to, a minister, another member, or the government.

### **Clause**

A clause is a numbered provision in a bill. Once a bill becomes an Act, a clause is known as a section.

### **Clerk of the Parliament**

The Clerk of the Parliament is the senior permanent official of a house of a Parliament who advises on procedure and records the decisions of the House, and is the Chief Executive Officer of the Parliamentary Service.

### **Closure or 'Gag'**

A closure is a parliamentary procedure used to bring about an abrupt end to a debate. The introduction of such a procedure was to assist in the effective management of parliamentary business by speeding up the passage of legislation when required.

### **Coalition**

A coalition is the joining together of two or more groups or parties, usually to form a government or opposition.

### **Condolence Motion**

In order to express the condolences of Parliament in the event of the death of a sitting Member or former Member of the Parliament, or an event which involves a major tragedy, such as the Queensland Floods in 2011 or the Port Arthur massacre in 1996, a Condolence Motion is moved in the House.

Members are then provided with the opportunity to express on behalf of themselves, their political party or their electorate, messages of sympathy to the bereaved families. Family members may be present in the Public Gallery to hear these messages.

### **Conscience vote**

A conscience vote is a vote in Parliament in which members are free to vote according to their own judgment or belief, and not necessarily according to the guidelines, policies or decisions of their political party.

### **Consideration in detail**

Consideration in detail is one of the steps of the legislative process. Bills are examined clause by clause. During this stage amendments may be proposed to individual clauses of the Bill.

### **Constitution**

A constitution is a set of basic rules by which a country or state is governed. Australia's constitution is set out in the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act.

### **Crossbench**

One of a set of seats for members of Parliament who belong to neither the government nor the opposition parties; seats for minor parties and independents.

### **Cross the floor**

To vote during a division in the Parliament with a party other than that for which a member was elected.

### **Dissent Motion**

A motion of dissent may be moved against the rulings of the Speaker by the Opposition. Dissent from the rulings of the Speaker:

- must be by motion on notice;
- notice of such a motion must be given within three sitting days of when the ruling occurred;
- the motion shall be considered within three sitting days of that on which the notice on motion was given.

### **Division**

A division is the separation of the members of a House of Parliament into two groups, for and against a proposal, so that their votes can be counted.

### **Executive**

The Executive is the branch of government which carries out or administers the laws. In Queensland, the Executive consists of the Premier and up to 18 other Ministers (the Cabinet) and the Sovereign (King or Queen), represented by the Governor.

### **Filibuster**

To filibuster is to use long speeches or other tactics in Parliament to deliberately delay a vote or decision.

### **First Reading**

After a Bill has been introduced in the Parliament, the Clerk reads the short title of the Bill for the first time.



### **Frontbencher**

A frontbencher is a member of Parliament who is a minister or shadow minister.

### **Guillotine**

The guillotine is a parliamentary procedure by which a time limit is applied to the debate at the various stages of the passing of a Bill. Each Government and Opposition speaker is restricted to a set time limit in which to speak.

### **Independent**

An independent is a member of Parliament who does not belong to a political party.

### **Mace**

Once a weapon of war shaped like a club, and the symbol of royal authority, but now the symbol of authority of Parliament and its Speaker.

### **Matters of Public Interest**

During the Matters of Public Interest debate is Members to speak on an issue of public interest. This provides an opportunity for backbenchers in particular to raise public awareness on certain matters.

### **Ministerial Statement**

Ministerial Statements are announcements made by Ministers with the approval of Cabinet, concerning policies and decisions relating to their respective portfolios.

### **Motion**

A motion is a proposal for action put forward in the Parliament, for consideration, debate and decision.

### **No-confidence motion**

A means by which a house expresses dissatisfaction with the performance of a government or a minister.

### **Opening of Parliament**

Following a State election, the political party or coalition of parties which holds the majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly is asked to form a Government. Members of Parliament assemble in the Legislative Council Chamber for the opening of Parliament by the Governor.

### **Pairs**

Although not recognised in Standing Rules and Orders, the pairs system is an established part of parliamentary procedure.

When a Member of Parliament is absent from Parliament for any number of reasons, an arrangement is made between the Government and Opposition Whips for a Member of the opposing side to abstain from voting. This means the voting strengths on both sides remain unaffected.

### **Personal Explanations**

This parliamentary practice gives Members of Parliament the opportunity to address the House to explain matters that are of a personal nature. These matters may not concern the Member's party or in the case of a Minister, his/her Government Department.

### **Petitions**

A petition is a formal document expressing a particular grievance by a person or persons, which is presented to the Parliament through a Member of Parliament. It includes a request for Parliament to act upon the petition.

### **Members' Statements**

If all scheduled business in the House has concluded before Question Time begins, the Speaker will call on any Member who wishes to make a statement to the House on any topic of concern. The call is alternated between Government and Opposition members with usually the Leader of the Opposition given the first opportunity to speak. Each speaker is given a time limit.

### **Royal Assent**

Following the passage of legislation through the Assembly, three parchment copies of the Bill are signed by the Governor on behalf of the Queen.

### **Second reading**

After the second reading debate and after agreement is reached that the Bill be given a second reading, the Clerk again reads the short title.

### **Sitting**

A sitting day is a day when Parliament meets to deal with its business. It commences when the Speaker takes the Chair and opens with prayers. It closes when the House is adjourned. The sitting may be temporarily suspended for meal breaks.

### **Speaker's Election**

Following the swearing-in of Members in the Legislative Assembly, the longest serving Member of the House (not being a Minister) presides over the House for the purpose of the election of a Speaker. The Speaker is elected by secret ballot.

### **Teller**

A teller is a member, usually a whip, who is chosen to count the members voting either for the ayes or the noes in a division.

### **Third Reading**

This is the final stage in the Legislative Process. The Minister in charge of the Bill moves the motion for the "third reading". This is the last opportunity for the Parliament to consider the Bill. The Clerk reads the short title of the Bill a third and last time after the third reading motion has been agreed to.

### **Valedictory Motion**

At the conclusion of the final sitting day of the year, the Premier or Deputy Premier moves the motion - 'That this House do now adjourn'.

This is then followed by a series of valedictory speeches led by the Premier and including the Leader of the Opposition and Members from both sides of the House.

A message of acknowledgment and thanks is extended to the Members, their staff, the elected and non-elected officers of Parliament and to all those who provide services to the Members of the Legislative Assembly within the Parliamentary complex.

### **Unicameral**

A parliament consisting of one chamber.

### **Whip**

A whip is a party manager in Parliament who is responsible for organising members of his or her party to take part in debates and votes, and who assists in arranging the business of a house of Parliament.