



The Role of an Independent Member of Parliament

A Member of Parliament who does not belong to or represent a political party is called an Independent.

A person can run as an independent at elections or a sitting Member of Parliament may decide to revoke their party allegiance and become an independent. This may result if a sitting member decided to leave the political party that they were elected to represent or if a party decided to expel one of its MPs.

The role of an independent Member of Parliament is to represent their electorate and achieve the best results from Government for their constituents. Independents are generally able to vote according to their beliefs and the perceived will of their electorate, whereas members who belong to political parties are expected to follow the party line on most votes.

Independents in Parliament

In the Queensland Parliament, the Independent members sit together in the Chamber. They have the same rights as other members of Parliament - that is, they can ask questions at Question Time, speak on matters before the House that affect them or their constituents, and vote on pieces of legislation and motions before the House.

The power of an Independent

Independent Members of Parliament are sometimes in a position to hold the balance of power when a vote is taken in Parliament. When this is the case, the Government will likely negotiate with the Independent Member or Members in an attempt to ensure their support.

Sometimes an Independent has the power to determine which major political party forms the Government. This occurred in Queensland during the 1990s.

After the 1995 Queensland election, the Labor Party was declared the winner by the narrowest of margins - a majority of just one seat. However, the result for the electorate of Mundingburra was challenged by the Liberal Party and the Court of Disputed Returns upheld the challenge and declared the seat vacant. This led to a by-election for this electorate, with the Liberal Party winning the contest.

The result was that Queensland had a hung parliament with the Labor Party holding 44 seats, the Coalition of the Liberal and National parties holding 44 seats and the one remaining seat being held by an Independent, Liz Cunningham, the Member for Gladstone. The Coalition negotiated with Liz Cunningham and, with her support, the Labor Party lost power in Queensland and the Coalition formed a minority government until the next state election in 1998.

Other Independents in the Queensland Parliament

The longest-serving Independent in any Australian Parliament is Thomas Aikens, who represented the electorate of Townsville South in the Queensland Parliament from 1944 to 1977.

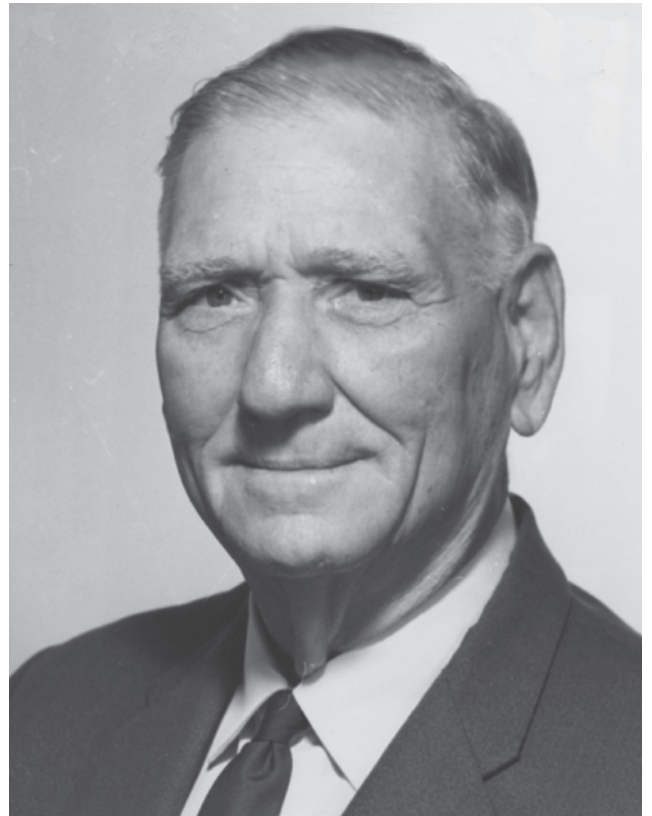
Mr Aikens served 12 continuous terms as an Independent Member of Parliament.

The Role of an Independent Member of Parliament

As well as Liz Cunningham MP, and Thomas Aikens, there have been a number of other notable independents who have served in the Queensland Parliament. These include:

- Chris Foley, MP won a by-election for the electorate of Maryborough in April 2003 as an Independent and was re-elected at the 2006 and 2009 elections.

- Ernest Stevens served as an Independent in the Legislative Assembly from 1878 to 1896 before being appointed to the Legislative Council where he was a Member from 1899 to 1920. Mr Stevens represented the Electorates of Warrego and Logan during his almost 18 years as an elected representative in the Lower House before serving another 21 years as an appointed representative in the Upper House;
- Arthur Coburn was elected as an Independent member representing the electorate of Burdekin from 1950 to 1969;
- Peter Wellington MP was the Independent Member for Nicklin from 1998 until his retirement in 2017. Mr Wellington's decision to support the ALP after the 1998 and 2015 elections enabled the ALP to form minority governments in those years. In 2015, Mr Wellington was elected as Speaker of the Parliament, the first Independent Member to hold that office in Queensland for a century;
- Dorothy Pratt MP was first elected to the Queensland Parliament in 1998 as a member of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. In 1999 she became an Independent and was elected as such at each subsequent election until her retirement in 2012;



Thomas Aikens, the longest-serving Independent in any Australian Parliament.