

# Question Time



Front bench Members speak from the despatch boxes.

## Question

What are the boxes on the House of Representatives Chamber Table?

## Answer

Two heavy rosewood 'despatch boxes', with elaborate silver and enamel decorations, sit on the Chamber Table in front of the Clerk and Deputy Clerk. Front bench Members of the House – the Prime Minister, Ministers, the Opposition Leader and Shadow Ministers – speak from these despatch boxes, using them as a rostrum from which to address the House (and occasionally thumping them to emphasise a point).

The boxes were a personal gift from King George V to mark the opening of the provisional Parliament House in Canberra in 1927 and the inauguration of the sittings of the Parliament in the national capital. The boxes are among the most cherished possessions of the House and each has an elaborate illuminated inscription, signed by the King, attached to the inside surface of the lid. They are unlocked, lined with green material and contain forms and books (a Bible, a Missal and the Jewish Holy Scriptures) for use by Members making an oath of allegiance following their election to the House.

Visually the despatch boxes are evidence of the Westminster tradition linking the Australian House of Representatives and the United Kingdom House of Commons. While the origin of the boxes is obscure, the most accepted theory is that centuries ago Ministers, Members and the Clerk of the United Kingdom House of Commons carried their papers in a box, with one or more boxes customarily left on the Chamber Table.



Each despatch box has an elaborate illuminated inscription signed by King George V.

## Send in your questions

If you have a question that you would like to have answered about the House of Representatives, write to, email, phone or fax:

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