

At the end of our first century

We've doubled in size and we're busier now than we ever have been, although we're not sitting as long as we used to. This is not a social commentary on Australians. These are the facts of what has happened to the House of Representatives over the past 100 years.

As we celebrate the centenary of the House, it is interesting to reflect on how much things have changed since the House first met in 1901.

Back then, there were 3.3 million Australians and 75 Members were elected to the House. All were men. By 1951, we had grown to 7.5 million people and 123 Members, but only one woman was elected to the House. Today, we number more than 19 million and we elect 148 Members, although that will increase to 150 at the next Federal election due this year. Now there are 35 women Members.

Legislation has skyrocketed. In 1901 just 17 Acts were passed compared to the 174 Acts that were passed in 2000. Even individual Members are flexing their law making muscle more often, with the number of private Member's bills increasing from 3 in the first year of the House to 14 last year. This has all been managed with fewer sitting days – 113 in 1901 but only 73 in 2000.

With that much legislation it is no surprise that the number of annual divisions in the House has also increased from 113 in 1901 to 145 last year. The 1950s must have been more contentious – in 1951 the House divided on 178 occasions. But we must have more important issues to discuss today. 'Matters of Public Importance' raised in the House have jumped from 5 in 1901 and 11 in 1951 to 50 in 2000.

The face of the House has also changed, just as the face of Australian society has been transformed over the past 100 years. When the House first met, 41 Members were born in Australia and 34 were born overseas – 31 in the UK and one each in Chile, New Zealand and the USA. In today's House, 131 Members were born in Australia and 17 were born overseas, but the countries of origin

are far more diverse. There are still some Members who were born in the UK (4), New Zealand (3) and the USA (1), but now joining them are Members who were born in Cyprus, Fiji, France, Greece, Hungary, Malta and the Netherlands.

Now it's Labor, Liberal, National and two Independents who sit in the House. In 1901 it was Labor, Free Trade, Protectionist and Independent who were our first representatives, although at that time party allegiances were much looser than they are today.

The one thing that has remained relatively constant is the average age of Members. It was 46 at the beginning of the 20th Century and is 49 at the start of the 21st Century.

Did you know?

The House makes many decisions every day but most are decided simply by Members calling 'aye' or 'no' and the Speaker declaring the result. Only a small proportion of decisions or votes are made by 'division'. A 'division' occurs when two or more Members challenge the result declared by the Speaker. A full count is then undertaken and the names of Members voting on each side are recorded.

While most matters the House discusses could be regarded as important, there is a special procedure called a 'Discussion of a Matter of Public Importance' which allows an individual Member to initiate discussion on a matter which is of current concern. A maximum of one matter per sitting day is allowed and in recent years most Matters of Public Importance have been proposed by Opposition Shadow Ministers.

Centenary of Parliament projects

The Australian Parliament is celebrating its centenary with a range of interesting and informative projects.

The Department of the House of Representatives will be providing Australians with lasting mementos of the House's first 100 years. A CD-ROM and documentary video will examine the history and development of the House from 1901 to 2001. In addition, two books will be published: a book of photographs illustrating the first 100 years of the House, and a centenary edition of *House of Representatives Practice*, detailing the procedures and practices of the House. Further information on these projects can be obtained from the House of Representatives Liaison and Projects Office. call: (02) 6277 2122 or email: liaison.reps@aph.gov.au

A new exhibition from the Department of the Senate focuses on the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. Open daily from 9am to 5pm on the first floor of Parliament House, the exhibition is free of charge. The Senate is also publishing a biographical dictionary of all Senators since 1901. For more information on the Senate projects, call: (02) 6277 3146.



The design of a commemorative pin to mark the Centenary of the Australian Parliament. For details on ordering the pin, call the House of Representatives Liaison and Projects Office on (02) 6277 2122 or email: liaison.reps@aph.gov.au