

What happens at your House when an election is called?



Photo: AUSPIC

Have you ever wondered what becomes of the House of Representatives when an election is called? What happens to the business before it, are Members still paid, do committees operate? With a federal poll due by the end of the year, we take a look at the rules and conventions that apply to the House when the nation goes into election mode.

The Governor-General dissolves the House

When a general election is announced, the House of Representatives is dissolved by proclamation of the Governor-General. This is the formal step required by the Constitution. Once the proclamation is made, the House effectively ceases to exist. By contrast the Senate continues in existence as only half its Senators are due for election at any one time (except in the case of a double dissolution, which is uncommon).

It is usual for the Governor-General to prorogue both Houses of Parliament at the same time as dissolving the House of Representatives. This prevents the Senate conducting any business during the election period.

Any business before the House lapses

From the exact moment the Governor-General's proclamation dissolving the House is read at the front entrance to Parliament House all proceedings in the House come to an end. This means that any business listed on the Notice Paper,

including bills, notices, orders of the day and unanswered questions on notice, lapses. Any answers to questions on notice that are received after dissolution of the House cannot be accepted and there is no provision for the resumption of proceedings in the new Parliament on lapsed bills – they must be reintroduced and start their consideration all over again. In addition, any temporary rules of the House (known as sessional orders) or any other orders or resolutions of the House cease to have effect. However, staff work to ensure that any bills that have been passed by both Houses before the dissolution receive the Governor-General's assent before the dissolution proclamation is made. This can be difficult if the House continues to meet right up until the time of dissolution.

Members cease to be Members

Technically, at this time, all Members of the House of Representatives cease to be Members, although those who have nominated for re-election continue to receive allowances up to and including the day before the election. For these Members, the frenetic pace of parliamentary life is

substituted with the frantic pace of the campaign trail.

For those Members not standing for re-election, all their responsibilities and allowances cease on the day of dissolution. However the Member's electorate office remains in place until the election of a new Member who may take over the same office.

The Government enters a 'caretaker period'

The Prime Minister and his Ministers continue in office until someone else is appointed. But the Government enters a 'caretaker period' until either the election results are clear or a new Government is appointed. By convention, their duties during this time are purely administrative and no major decisions regarding policy, appointments or contracts are made.

During the dissolution period, the Ministry and Cabinet may meet, if necessary, to conduct the normal business of Government. But no major decisions are made.

Continued on page 28

The Speaker remains in office

As there are administrative tasks that need to be performed after dissolution, the Speaker of the House of Representatives is still deemed, by legislation, to be Speaker until someone is elected to the position in the new Parliament.

Committees cease operation

Upon dissolution, all House of Representatives and joint committees cease to exist and all committee inquiries lapse. Any planned public hearings or inspections must be cancelled. All matters related to the lapsed inquiry, such as committee

deliberations, recommendations or draft reports, remain confidential. If a committee is re-appointed in the next Parliament, it is technically a new committee, even though it may have the same title, powers and issues for investigation. The new committee may or may not resume any inquiry not completed by its predecessor. If it does resume an investigation, the committee is allowed to use the records and evidence taken in the previous Parliament.

About the House

About the House will not be published during the election period.

Did you know?

The Official Secretary to the Governor-General reads out the proclamation dissolving the House at the front entrance of Parliament House. A copy of the proclamation is then posted on the door of the House of Representatives Chamber to notify visitors that the House is dissolved.



Hill side

This is the side of Capital Hill the media doesn't usually cover. The stories and issues that backbench Members are raising in the House that have meaning for them and their electorates.

No mean feat – 600 tonnes of soil were moved recently by residents of the WA electorate of Pearce. Why? Because the group called Men of the Trees wants to plant one million trees to help the environment. Member for Pearce, Judi Moylan, told the House that the massive soil dump was needed to provide enough soil in salt ravaged areas to enable the tree planting to go ahead.



Politicians praising journalists, now that's something you don't hear every day. But that's exactly what Gary Hardgrave, Member for Moreton (Qld), did recently in the House when he congratulated Bob Howarth, editorial technology manager for Queensland Newspapers in Brisbane and the editor of the *Braille Mail*. Bob has travelled to East Timor five times to help re-establish the print media in that fledgling democracy. On top of that, with the backing of Queensland Newspapers, Bob helped organise the printing of the first African edition of a braille newspaper for people in Gambia.



This year marks the 60th anniversary of the awarding of the first Victoria Cross to an Australian of the Second World War. Corporal John Hurst Edmondson VC of the 2nd/17th Australian Infantry Battalion, from Liverpool in New South Wales, received the award posthumously for conspicuous bravery at Tobruk in Libya. Recently a commemoration ceremony was held in Liverpool to mark the occasion. The Member for Fowler (NSW), Julia Irwin, drew the House's attention to the anniversary, citing a passage from General Blamey's letter to Corporal Edmondson's parents following the loss of their son: "... his courage [is] something I fear none of us could aspire to. He has left his name in history."

The Commonwealth should get power over the Murray-Darling River Basin. That's what the Member for Sturt (SA), Christopher Pyne, told the House when he called for "a referendum to take power from the States and deliver it to the hands of the Commonwealth for the good of the country". Mr Pyne was concerned about the lack of cooperation to date in fixing the problems of the Murray-Darling Basin and the dangerously low levels of water flowing into the system.



Concerns about cane grub and black sigatoka bug in North Queensland were brought to the attention of the House by Member for Kennedy (Qld), Bob Katter. There are fears that the cane grub outbreak could result in crop losses of up to 20 per cent. Mr Katter called for crop protection insurance to be made available to farmers.



When the Centenary of Federation celebrations were held in Melbourne in May, they included a gathering of some of Australia's most prominent women. But for Julia Gillard, Member for Lalor (Vic), it was the words of a 16-year-old schoolgirl that had most resonance. Ms Gillard repeated in the House the call that was made by Leeanne Grima from Marian College in Victoria. "In the community, within the media and advertising sector," Leeanne said, "we seek the parliament's support that women be portrayed authentically as real women, towards the aim that body image does not remain an integral criteria of a woman's self and social worth."

