



**Legislative Assembly
Parliament of Victoria**

Fact Sheet 14

Why is the Assembly Green?

Background

One of the first things visitors to Parliament House notice is that the Legislative Council is furnished in red, and the Legislative Assembly in green. Most of the Assembly's documents, such as the Notice and Question Papers, are printed on green paper. The use of green is a Westminster tradition. The red and green system is used in many, but not all, Westminster-style parliaments around the world, including the Parliament of Victoria.

The use of green in the Assembly reflects the use of green in the House of Commons. However, the origins of its use there are uncertain. There are various theories as to why the Commons uses green, and these are outlined below.

Couverts de sarge verte

A traveller's book published in 1663 describes the House of Commons as being upholstered in *sarge verte*, which translates roughly as green fabric. So we know that the green furnishings are at least 340 years old. However, any symbolism associated with green is not mentioned in this book.

St Stephen's Chapel

From 1548 to 1834, the Commons sat in St Stephen's Chapel and there is some suggestion that it may have been painted green. However, there is no evidence of this, and it is more likely that the walls were decorated with multi-coloured biblical murals and that, when the Commons moved in, these walls were covered up with tapestries that may have reflected the Tudor colours of green and white.

Black Friars Hall

The Commons sat in a hall at Black Friars before moving to St Stephen's Chapel, and it is possible that the hall may have been decorated in green, and that the Commons took the tradition to St Stephen's.

Sober plumage

A particularly convincing argument is a matter of economy; the Commons may have had to make do with cheaper decorations than the nobles in the House of Lords. Red cloth was dyed with an expensive imported madder (a climbing plant, the root of

which was used for dyeing), while dull green cloth was much cheaper to produce. As Chevalier described the situation: ‘the rich could indulge their taste for brilliant colours, but poorer people had to remain content with more sober plumage’.

Similarly, media reports about the opening of the Parliament of Victoria compare the elegantly decorated Legislative Council Chamber with the more utilitarian surrounds of the Legislative Assembly Chamber. Early drawings of the Legislative Assembly show the furnishings in green, so the planners evidently associated the Assembly with the House of Commons.

Painted Chamber

The Painted Chamber, which was a part of the old Palace of Westminster, was decorated in green and it has been argued that the entire Palace, except for the Lords’ Chamber, was decorated in green. If so, then green would have come to represent the Lower House by circumstance rather than due to symbolism.

Oak Leaves

The carpets throughout Parliament House have an oak leaf pattern, which is red on the Council side, and green on the Assembly side. It is thought that the oak leaf pattern symbolises the oak tree under which the Magna Carta was signed. The Parliament of Victoria is strongly associated with the oak tree in the Parliamentary Gardens, the Federal Oak, that was planted by Sir Henry Parkes in 1890 at the commencement of the Australasian Federal Convention. Representatives from the colonies met at the Convention to agree on the concept of federation. Whether the oak leaf pattern evokes the Magna Carta or Australian Federation, it is symbolic of the liberty and democratic values central to the Victorian Parliament.

Tradition rather than symbolism

Whatever the symbolic reason for the use of green, the use of the colour is now traditional. Green has become the distinguishing colour of the Commons, and lower Houses in general, by association rather than by reliance on symbolism.

Fact Sheets

The Legislative Assembly Procedure Office has produced a series of Fact Sheets that explain parliamentary procedure and terminology. All Fact Sheets are available on Parliament's website www.parliament.vic.gov.au or through the Procedure Office.

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