



**Legislative Assembly
Parliament of Victoria**

Fact Sheet 19

The Serjeant-at-Arms

Authority

The Serjeant-at-Arms is the Speaker's executive officer and one of the senior permanent officers of the House appointed under the *Parliamentary Officers Act 1975*. The Serjeant's main role is to carry out the instructions of the Speaker and the House, and to look after the security of the Legislative Assembly Chamber.

History

The Serjeant-at-Arms is an office with origins in the Westminster parliamentary tradition of the United Kingdom. Originally the Serjeants-at-Arms were members of the King's bodyguard. It is believed the office was first introduced in the time of the reign of Richard I (1189–1199) and that originally there were 24 men of knightly rank employed to protect the King and arrest traitors and other offenders.

In the fourteenth century Richard II appointed one of his Serjeants-at-Arms to act as the bodyguard of the Speaker in the House of Commons. His name was Robert Markless and he was appointed for life, receiving a salary of 12 pence per day, a horse, and all the trappings of office. In those early days, the Speaker was employed directly by the King and was often in the difficult position of trying to meet the demands of the Commons, which he was there to serve, and the conflicting interests of the King. As a result of this perilous position, one of the Serjeant's most important tasks was to protect the Speaker from his enemies in the Commons.

In 1415 the Serjeant-at-Arms was introduced to the Parliament in a form recognisable in the present day parliamentary structure. The change was led by the Commons, not at the request of the King as a means of extending his power of the Parliament, as is often thought. The Commons now had an officer with the authority of a King's representative, and the power to exercise authority of the parliament over ordinary citizens. Most importantly for the Commons, the exercise of this royal authority was on the instruction of the Speaker.

Early concepts of the role of the Serjeant-at-Arms as ‘an attendant upon the Speaker’ and acting only ‘on the instruction of the Speaker’ still characterise the functions of the office today. Over the centuries the Serjeant, as bearer of the Mace, became identified with protecting the privileges of the Commons — the Speaker being the guardian and the Serjeant-at-Arms the enforcer.

The Mace

The Serjeant-at-Arms literally translates to ‘servant bearing arms’, the weapon used being the Mace. Appropriately ceremonial and suitable for an officer with royal authority, the Mace has evolved from the primitive ‘loaded club’ and is capable of denting a man’s armour.

The Mace as a weapon has an ancient history. Roman soldiers are pictured on stone tombs carrying such weapons. Bishop Odo, half-brother of William the Conqueror, favoured the Mace as a means of sidestepping the rules of medieval church which prohibited the shedding of blood by a priest. The Mace was particularly suited to those who had to command as well as fight.

Today’s Mace has evolved from its primary role as a weapon to become a symbol of the authority of the Speaker. The Victorian Parliament has had three Maces in its history. The first was a gilded wooden Mace used between 1857–65 and 1891–1901. This Mace was loaned to the Federal Parliament in 1901 when they sat in the Victorian Parliament. In 1927 it travelled to Canberra with them, until such time as the House of Representatives received a new Mace as a gift from the House of Commons.

The second Mace, engraved with the English and Victorian coats of arms and a headpiece decorated with the maltese cross, was famously stolen from its box in the Speaker’s chamber in 1891. It was never found, despite a widespread police search and a number of suspects, including the Speaker of the day!

The present Mace is 5 feet long, 18 pounds, made of silver and gilded to give the appearance of solid gold. It was first used in 1901 and features the symbols of the rose, thistle, harp and waratah, representing England, Scotland, Ireland and Victoria. It has a headpiece featuring a fleur-de-lis, and embossed in enamel are the United Kingdom and Victorian Coats of Arms. Encircling the staff are the names of the Speakers since 1856.

Ceremonial Duties

The Serjeant-at-Arms’ functions in the Chamber are associated mainly with the ceremony of Parliament and the maintenance of order. At the beginning of a sitting day, the Serjeant places the Mace on his or her right shoulder and leads the Speaker into the Chamber, announcing the Speaker to members present, who must rise in their places until the Speaker takes the chair. When the House adjourns, the Speaker rises and members stand again, the Serjeant shoulders the Mace and leads the Speaker from the Chamber.

On ceremonial occasions such as the Opening of Parliament, the Serjeant has traditionally worn Windsor Court dress including knee breeches, buckled

shoes, ruffled lace collar (known as a jabot) and cuffs, gloves and carries a cocked hat. For the opening of the 55th Parliament, however, the Serjeant wore a black lounge suit.

Role in the Chamber

The Serjeant-at-Arms attends in the Chamber at all times when the House is sitting and provides general assistance to the Clerks when needed. The duties of office include recording members' attendance and delivering messages to the Legislative Council.

On the Speaker's instruction, the Serjeant escorts suspended members from the Chamber, and also announces to the Speaker any stranger (person other than a member or Chamber officer) wishing to enter the House, such as the Usher of the Black Rod from the Legislative Council. Further responsibilities include maintaining order in the galleries and the taking into custody any stranger guilty of misconduct in the gallery or House.

The Office of the Serjeant-at-Arms

The office has a number of functions:

- It assists with the arranging and coordinating of ceremonial functions, members accommodation and travel requirements.
- The issue of security and identification passes.
- It maintains the Legislative Assembly Members List.
- Responsibility for works and services within the Assembly precincts, the supervision of the Assembly attendants and cleaning staff.
- The admittance and control of the public to the Parliament, including Parliament tours.
- It provides accreditation for all media representatives operating within Parliament.
- Monitoring public demonstrations and working to ensure such events run smoothly.
- In conjunction with Usher of the Black Rod, the Serjeant-at-Arms is also responsible for the security and fire protection of the Parliament building and its surrounds, emergency and evacuation procedures and the supervision of protective service officers stationed at Parliament House.

Further Reading

Laundy, Philip, *The Office of Speaker*, Cassell, 1st edition, London, 1964.

Marsden, John, *The Officers of the Commons*, Barrie and Rockliff, 1st edition, London, 1966.

Wright, Raymond, *Who Stole the Mace?*, Victorian Parliamentary Library, 1991.

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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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