Fact Sheet 12

Opening of Parliament

Opening a new Parliament combines traditional, ceremonial and important procedural events. Members give their allegiance to the Queen, and the Governor makes a speech outlining the government’s agenda for the Parliament. Members also elect a Speaker. The day’s celebrations involve invited dignitaries, a garden party and music performed by armed forces bands.

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Arranging the first sitting day
After a general election, the Governor sets the first sitting day of a new Parliament by issuing a formal notice known as a proclamation. That proclamation states the date and time of the first sitting day. Usually this is a Tuesday at 11.00 am.
Start of the day
The Clerks ring the bells of both Houses at the time set by the Governor. Members of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council gather in their respective Chambers.
In the Assembly, the Clerk reads the Governor’s proclamation.

Governor’s Commissioners open Parliament
The Governor does not attend at the start of the day but appoints two representatives to act on his behalf. They are normally judges and are known as Commissioners, as the Governor ‘commissions’ them to open Parliament and swear in members.
One Commissioner goes to the Legislative Council Chamber and the other to the Legislative Assembly Chamber. In the Assembly, the Serjeant-at-Arms announces when the Commissioner arrives, and escorts him or her to the Speaker’s chair.

Commissioners swear in members
The Governor authorises one of the Commissioners to swear in Legislative Assembly members. They can either take an oath, or an affirmation, of allegiance.
The Clerk reads the names of each member and their electorate.
Each member recites the oath or affirmation, and signs the members roll. Members cannot take part in Assembly business until they have been sworn in.
After all members have been sworn in, the Serjeant-at-Arms escorts the Commissioner from the Chamber.
The Commissioner only swears in new members on opening day. The Governor gives power to the Speaker to swear in new members elected at by-elections during the parliament.

ELECTING THE SPEAKER
Members must choose a Speaker before Legislative Assembly business can begin. Until then, the mace rests on brackets below the table in the centre of the Chamber.
The Clerk chairs the election, and calls for nominations for the position. Nominated members are usually experienced, with excellent knowledge of the Assembly’s rules. If there is more than one nomination, members vote by secret ballot.
Once a Speaker is elected, the Serjeant-at-Arms puts the mace on top of the table, signifying the Assembly can now conduct business. The Speaker’s proposer and seconder lead him or her to the Speaker’s chair at the head of the Chamber. Members make short congratulatory speeches.
The Premier announces that the Governor will meet the Speaker later that day in the Parliamentary Library, and invites all members to attend. The Speaker suspends the sitting until after this meeting.
Find out more about the Speaker’s role: Fact Sheet H2: The Speaker.
The Governor arrives

The Governor arrives at Parliament House to much pomp and ceremony. Armed forces bands and an indigenous smoking ceremony provide an impressive welcome. The Governor also inspects a guard of honour.

Speaker meets the Governor in the Library

Members meet in the Library and wait for the Speaker to arrive. The Speaker, accompanied by the clerks, greets the Governor who congratulates the Speaker.

The Clerk returns to the Legislative Assembly Chamber and switches on bells which ring throughout Parliament House. This lets members know to return to the Chamber.

The sitting resumes and the Speaker advises members of the meeting with the Governor.

Governor’s speech in the Council

Guests such as judges, religious leaders and representatives from the armed forces sit in the Legislative Council Chamber. Wearing ceremonial dress or uniforms, they add to the colour and spectacle.

Legislative Assembly members wait in their Chamber for the Usher of the Black Rod, a Council officer with a role similar to the Serjeant-at-Arms, to bring a message from the Governor. To show the Assembly’s independence, the Serjeant-at-Arms shuts the Chamber door, and only opens it after the Usher has knocked three times with the black rod.

Like many opening day traditions, the process for allowing the Usher into the Assembly Chamber is inherited from the United Kingdom. The door to the House of Commons is actually slammed in the Usher’s face. It is only opened after he or she has knocked on the door with the black rod.

In Victoria, the Serjeant-at-Arms announces the Usher’s arrival, and the Speaker tells the Serjeant to let the Usher into the Chamber. The Usher then delivers the Governor’s message, inviting members to the Council Chamber to hear the Governor’s speech.

The Serjeant-at-Arms leads the Speaker, the clerks and members to the Council Chamber to hear the Governor’s speech. The speech describes the government’s legislative program. At the end of the speech, the Governor presents a copy to the Speaker.

After the Governor’s speech, Assembly members return to their Chamber and the Speaker suspends the sitting until later in the afternoon.

Members and invited guests attend a garden party in the parliamentary gardens to celebrate the new Parliament.

Time for Assembly business

The sitting resumes with question time. The Legislative Assembly then deals with administrative issues known as ‘formal business’ (see Fact Sheet A1: A Typical Sitting Day in the Assembly). This is an expression of the Assembly’s independence from the Queen, as it chooses to deal with its own business before responding to the Governor’s speech.

Formal business may include ministry announcements, other party leader appointments and tabling documents. Members introduce bills and give notice of motions to debate, like on normal sitting days.
Responding to the Governor’s speech

The Speaker announces that the Governor made a speech in the Legislative Council Chamber. Members can now get copies of the speech.

At this point a member, usually a new member, moves a motion expressing loyalty to the Queen, and thanking the Governor for the speech. This motion is called the address-in-reply to the Governor’s speech. Debate on the motion provides a chance for new members to make their inaugural speeches in the Chamber.

Opening by the Queen

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II officially opened the 2nd session of the 39th Parliament on 25 February 1954. This was during the Queen’s first visit to Melbourne and is the only time a sovereign has opened the Victorian Parliament.

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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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