

Parliament of Victoria



Parliament of Victoria: Glossary

Introduction

The Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council have similar roles and processes, but the names for some of these things have evolved and changed over time. The table below indicates the names and processes in the Legislative Assembly and the equivalent in the Legislative Council.

Legislative Assembly		Legislative Council
Speaker	↔	President
Serjeant-at-Arms	↔	Usher of the Black Rod
Leader of the House	↔	Leader of the Government in the Council
Consideration in detail	↔	Committee of the whole
Electoral districts	↔	Electoral regions

There are different roles a member of parliament can have, while the roles might be similar the names change depending on the party and the chamber.

Government	Opposition	Minor party
Premier	Leader of the Opposition	Party leader
Minister	Shadow minister	Spokesperson

People

The terms and definitions in this section relate to the people who work at parliament, either as members of parliament and their roles or parliamentary officers and the work they do to support parliament.

B

Backbenchers – Members of parliament who are not ministers or shadow ministers. The term originates from these members typically sitting behind ministers and shadow ministers, in other words, on the backbenchers.

C

Candidate – A person who is standing for election to parliament. In Victoria, anyone enrolled to vote in the state can stand for election unless they are a judge in a Victorian court, are a member of Federal Parliament, are going through bankruptcy or have been convicted of an offence punishable by five years' jail or more, under Victorian or any Commonwealth nation's law.

Clerks – The department heads of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council. They manage the operations of the department and advise the Presiding Officers and members on parliamentary procedures and policy matters.

Coalition – Parties that have made a formal agreement to work together in parliament, either in government or opposition.

Crossbenchers – Any member of parliament who is not part of either the government or opposition is known as a crossbencher. They can be a member of a minor party or an independent member.

F

Frontbenchers – Ministers and shadow ministers are known as frontbenchers, as they sit in the front row of seats in the chambers – literally the 'benches at the front'.

G

Government members – Members of parliament who belong to the party with the majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly. Government members sit in both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council.

Governor – The representative of the Sovereign (the Crown) in Victoria. Appointed by the Sovereign on the recommendation of the Premier, the Governor of Victoria gives Royal Assent to bills, opens parliament after each general election and represents Victoria at meetings, functions and official ceremonies.

I

Independent member – A member who does not belong to a party.

L

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council – The minister who leads the governing party in the Legislative Council chamber. They work with the government whip to organise government business in the Legislative Council chamber, including the sitting day schedule.

Leader of the House (Legislative Assembly) – A minister who organises government business in the Legislative Assembly, including the sitting day schedule. This role is different to that of the Premier who is the leader of the government.

Leader of the Opposition – The head of the largest non-government party (or coalition of parties) in the Legislative Assembly. The Leader of the Opposition is an elected member of parliament, chosen by other members of their party to lead them in opposition.

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council – A shadow minister who leads the opposition in the Legislative Council. They work with the Leader of the Government in the Council, the whips and members of the Council crossbench to negotiate the sitting day schedule.

M

Manager of Opposition Business (Legislative Assembly) – A shadow minister in the Legislative Assembly who organises opposition business in the Assembly and negotiates the sitting day schedule with the government.

Member of Parliament – Elected by the constituents (voters) from a particular electoral region or district, also referred to as a member or an MP. Each district (Legislative Assembly electorate) has one MP and each region (Legislative Council electorate) has five MPs.

Minister – Government members who have been allocated the responsibility (portfolio) for implementing government policy in specific areas, such as education, health or infrastructure. Ministers oversee the administration of their government departments and are accountable to parliament for their department's actions.

O

Opposition members – Members of parliament who belong to the largest non-government party or coalition in the Legislative Assembly. Opposition members sit in both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council. They present themselves as an alternative to the government party at the next election.

Opposition party – The political party with the second highest number of seats in the Legislative Assembly. The opposition party has an important role in holding the government to account and presenting itself as an alternative to the government party at the next election.

P

Parliamentary secretary – Government members who assist ministers with their portfolio responsibilities.

Premier – The leader of the party, or coalition of parties, that has formed government. By tradition, the Premier is always a member of the Legislative Assembly. They direct government policy, chair Cabinet and represent the Victorian government at meetings, functions and official ceremonies.

President – The Presiding Officer in the Legislative Council. They are a member of parliament who is responsible for maintaining order in the Council, ensuring debates and processes are conducted according to parliamentary rules.

Presiding Officer – The collective term for the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and the President of the Legislative Council. They preside over the proceedings of parliament, chair the meetings of their respective houses and may represent parliament in official parliamentary business.

S

Secretariat – The group of parliamentary officers who support the work of parliamentary committees. Secretariats comprise of the committee manager, research or inquiry officers and administration officers. The secretariat gathers evidence and works with committee members to produce a report on behalf of the committee. They also organise public hearings, including where applicable, regional or online hearings.

Serjeant-at-Arms – Historically responsible for security in the Legislative Assembly, serving as bodyguard to the Speaker. Today the Serjeant-at-Arms still has a role in security, along with supporting sitting day procedures, taking minutes, offering procedural advice and delivering messages between the chambers.

Shadow minister – Members of the opposition who have a responsibility for one or more policy areas, known as portfolios. Shadow ministers hold the government to account by presenting alternative ideas and policies about a portfolio area. A shadow minister may have a shadow assistant minister who assists with the portfolio responsibilities.

Speaker – The Presiding Officer in the Legislative Assembly. They are a member of parliament who is responsible for maintaining order in the Legislative Assembly, ensuring debates and processes are conducted according to parliamentary rules.

U

Usher of the Black Rod – Responsible for security in the Legislative Council and has a role in supporting sitting day procedures and delivering messages between the chambers.

W

Whip – A member of parliament chosen by their party to organise party members, making sure members are ready to speak in debates and vote in divisions.

Processes

The terms and definitions in this section relate to the processes and the official terms of the work of parliament, including the names of different types of documents, the different aspects of a sitting day and some of the lesser-known processes.

A

Act of Parliament – Legislation that has passed both houses (Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council) of parliament and received Royal Assent.

Appropriation bill – A sum of public money that parliament authorises for spending.

B

Bill – A proposed law that may become an Act of Parliament (also known as legislation). A bill may be a proposal for a new law or an amendment (change) to a current law. A bill may be introduced in either house of parliament. Generally bills will have:

- **an introduction print** – A version of the bill that is first introduced to parliament.
- **clauses** – Bills are divided into clauses that outline the details of the bill, which are numbered and titled. Once a bill becomes an Act of Parliament, clauses are known as sections.
- **explanatory memorandum** – A document which explains the purpose and intent of a bill.

Bicameral system – Means ‘two chambers’ or ‘two houses’ that function as a law-making body. The two chambers in Victoria are the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council. They are also referred to as ‘houses’, the ‘lower’ and ‘upper’ house respectively.

C

Cabinet – The principal decision-making body for the government and includes all ministers. Cabinet is chaired by the Premier and considers significant matters for the state, such as major policies and appointments.

Caucus – When members of parliament from one political party meet.

Commencement – The commencement of an Act of Parliament is the date from which it comes into effect, and therefore the date from which the law applies. In Victoria, this can be a day (or days) specified in the Act itself or on a day (or days) decided by the Governor on the advice of the government.

Committees – Groups of members from one house or both houses who conduct investigations (inquiries) into particular issues and call for input from the wider community. The inquiries are managed by the committee and are supported by a small team of researchers from parliament, referred to as the secretariat. Committees prepare reports for parliament, that include findings and recommendations.

- **Minority report** – Occasionally committee reports include a minority report written by one or more committee member/s, who express an alternative view to the majority of committee members.

Consideration in detail (Legislative Assembly) – This step is sometimes taken to examine and vote on each clause of the bill and any amendments. In the Legislative Council, this step is known as ‘Committee of the whole’.

Constitution – A document that outlines how an organisation or institution is to be governed, i.e. the powers and privileges of an organisation or institution. *The Constitution Act 1975* (known as Victoria’s Constitution) gives the Parliament of Victoria the power to make laws.

Committee of the whole (Legislative Council) – This step is sometimes taken to examine and vote on each clause of the bill. Amendments may also be debated and voted on. Any amendments must be agreed to by both houses. In the Legislative Assembly, this process is known as ‘Consideration in detail’.

D

Division – A formal vote in parliament that records the names of the members and how they voted on a question (as opposed to a vote that is agreed to on the voices). For example, they vote whether or not to pass a bill. Members must be in the chamber to vote in a division, and all members present in the chamber must vote.

- **Division bells** – The method for calling members to their respective chambers. They signal that a division is going to take place in one of the houses. At the Parliament of Victoria, the division bells generally ring for four minutes.

E

Electoral districts (Legislative Assembly) – Victoria is divided into 88 electoral districts for the Legislative Assembly. Voters in each district elect one member of parliament to represent them.

Electoral regions (Legislative Council) – Victoria is divided into eight electoral regions for the Legislative Council. Voters in a region elect five members of parliament to represent them.

Executive – Consists of the Premier and ministers responsible for implementing laws. Sometimes the executive is referred to as the ‘government’. The Governor is sometimes included as part of the executive when acting on the advice of the Premier.

G

Government – There are three different definitions for the term ‘government’

- **System of government** – A system of rule in a state or country.
- **The government** – In the Victorian Parliament it refers to the party, or coalition of parties (two or more parties) with the majority (50%+1) of seats in the Legislative Assembly who have the responsibility to lead the state. The government party may also have representatives in the Legislative Council, but this is not necessary.
- **The Executive** – Consists of the Premier and ministers responsible for implementing laws. Sometimes the executive is referred to as the ‘government’. The Governor is sometimes included as part of the executive when acting on the advice of the Premier.

H

Hansard – A full and accurate transcript of the sitting of the houses and public hearings of committees. It is used by members of parliament, parliament staff, members of the judiciary, and the broader public. Hansard reporters work alongside a team of broadcast and audio-visual specialists, so that members of the public can watch parliamentary debates and committee hearings.

Houses of parliament – An alternative name given to the chambers of parliament. In Victoria, the two houses are the Legislative Assembly, also referred to as the lower house, and the Legislative Council, also referred to as the upper house.

I

Independent – A member of parliament that does not belong to a political party.

J

Joint sitting – A meeting of both houses of parliament which has its own unique rules of procedure. One of the common reasons for a joint sitting is to elect someone to fill a Legislative Council seat when it becomes vacant during a term of parliament.

Judiciary – Also referred to as the courts. The judiciary includes the courts and judges, and is responsible for interpreting and applying the law.

L

Law – The system of rules which a country or community recognise as regulating the actions of its people and society, and which may be enforced by the imposition of penalties. A law is also the common name given to legislation; bills that have passed through parliament and received Royal Assent.

Legislation – A law made by parliament, also known as an Act of Parliament.

Legislative process – The sequence of steps required for bills to become laws, from an idea to passing through parliament, to being given Royal Assent by the Governor.

Legislative Assembly – Also known as the lower house. In the Parliament of Victoria, there are 88 members of parliament in the Legislative Assembly, one member from each of the 88 electorate districts. The government is formed by whichever party occupies the majority of seats. Most bills are introduced in the lower house and the colour of the lower house is green.

Legislative Council – Also known as the upper house. In the Parliament of Victoria, there are 40 members of parliament in the Legislative Council, five members from each of the eight electorate regions. It is not necessary for the government party to have a majority of seats in the upper house. The Legislative Council provides parliament with an opportunity to consider bills a second time, and therefore the upper house is often referred to as a ‘house of review’, examining the actions of the government. The Legislative Council Chamber is coloured red.

Legislature – Also known as parliament. The legislature is responsible for making laws through a process of passing bills through the parliament.

M

Minor party – A party with one or more members of parliament. They may form part of the government or the opposition through a coalition, or they may sit with independent members on the crossbench.

Minutes – Each house produces an official record of its actions and decisions. In the Assembly, the minutes are called the ‘Votes and Proceedings’. In the Council the minutes are called the ‘Minutes of the Proceedings’. These are separate from Hansard, which is the transcript of what was said in debate.

Motion – A proposal put to the house. Members can move motions on a variety of topics. Motions are moved to refer inquiries to parliamentary committees, to set the agenda for the week, or simply to note a certain event.

O

On the voices – One way to vote in parliament. Members verbally vote in favour or against a question by saying ‘aye’ or ‘no’ respectively, and the Speaker or President determines the outcome based on which was louder. If a member disagrees with the Speaker or President’s decision, they can ask for a division.

P

Private member’s bill – Any member may introduce a bill into parliament. A bill introduced by a member who is not a minister is termed a ‘private member’s bill’. Most private member’s bills are initiated by members of the opposition, minor parties or independents.

Political party – An organisation which has a particular philosophy and values that inform their objectives.

Proportional representation – A system of voting which is used in the Legislative Council elections. When voting for upper house members, voters have the option to select one candidate (voting ‘above the line’) or they must rank five or more candidates (voting ‘below the line’). Candidates win based on a share (quota) of the number of overall votes for the region.

R

Reading (of a bill) – A formal stage in the legislative process within each House that involves several key steps.

- **First reading: Introduction of the bill** – The long title of the bill is read (this is a short description of the main purposes of the bill).
- **Second reading: Examining the principles** – The general principles and purpose of the bill are explained and members give speeches to state their position.
- Consideration in detail (Legislative Assembly) or Committee of the whole (Legislative Council) occurs after the second reading. It includes an examination and vote on each clause of the bill and any amendments. The houses can decide to skip this stage if there are no amendments and if members do not want to debate individual clauses.
- **Third reading: Voting on the bill** – The bill may be debated again (although debate is limited) and members vote on whether to pass the bill. If the bill passes, it moves to the other house. If it passes the second house, it goes to the Governor for Royal Assent.

Royal Assent – The final step in a bill becoming an Act of Parliament. This role is performed by the Governor of Victoria, the state's representative of the Sovereign (Crown), who formally accepts the bill. No bill can become law until it receives assent from the Governor.

S

Scrutinise – The process of examining, inspecting or evaluating something closely or thoroughly. There are several processes in parliament to scrutinise the work of government, such as committee hearings and audit processes.

Secret ballot – A voting method in which a voter's choices in an election or a referendum are anonymous. Victoria was the first place in the world to have a secret ballot.

Separation of powers – The idea that there are three separate branches that make up our democratic system: the legislature, executive and judiciary. It is their separation and independence that allows them to act as a check and balance on each other.

- **Legislature (parliament)** – Makes laws. It includes all the elected members of the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council, as well as the Governor.
- **Executive (government)** – Is responsible for proposing bills and implementing laws. It includes the Premier and ministers, and sometimes the Governor when acting on advice of the Premier. Ministers are members of parliament who are responsible for running government departments.
- **Judiciary (justice system)** – Applies the law. It includes the courts and judges who interpret legislation and apply the law.

Shadow cabinet – When shadow ministers meet, they are called the shadow cabinet.

Sitting day/week – When members meet together, generally at Parliament House, to perform their legislative role. In Victoria, members usually spend approximately 50 days a year in parliament, which means that a significant part of their role takes place in their communities. Across a sitting week, there are several different components, listed below in alphabetical order:

- **Adjournment debate** – Takes place at the end of a sitting day and gives members a chance to raise issues with ministers. Ministers can respond immediately in the chamber or provide a written response within 30 days. The written response is then published online.
- **Formal business** – Covers the administrative issues that the houses deal with. It includes introduction of bills, giving notice of motions, tabling of petitions, tabling of committee reports and other documents required by law, and motions by leave.
- **General business** – Part of a sitting day dedicated to matters that non-government members have introduced to parliament, such as private member's bills and motions.
- **Government business** – Most of a sitting week is spent on government business, debating matters that government members have introduced to parliament. This can include bills and motions.
- **Members' statements** – Can address any topic of concern and has a time limit of 90 seconds. Members often use this time to speak about people, events or organisations in their electorate.
- **Question time** – Allows members to ask ministers questions about the government's decisions and actions. It takes place every sitting day in both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council. Question time includes questions and supplementary (follow up) questions as well as ministers' statements.

Standing orders – The permanent rules of procedure for the house. Each house has its own set of standing orders. Members can vote to change the standing (and sessional) orders as needed.

- **Sessional orders** – These are temporary rules of procedure. They only apply for the session (usually that is until the next election).

T

Tabled – The formal presentation of a document/s to parliament. Presenting a document to parliament is called 'tabling' and is a method of ensuring information is available to members of parliament and the public. It is called tabling because the document is put on the table in the middle of the chamber.

V

Voting – A formal method for registered voters to document their preferred representatives in the parliament. Victoria uses versions of the preferential voting system, which work differently for lower house and upper house elections. Both houses use the secret ballot in the election of their respective members.

- **Preferential voting** – A system of voting which is used in the Legislative Assembly where the voter must rank all candidates on the ballot paper in order of their preference.
- **Proportional representation** – A system of voting which is used in the Legislative Council elections. When voting for upper house members, voters have the option to select one candidate (voting ‘above the line’) or they must rank five or more candidates (voting ‘below the line’). Candidates win based on a share (quota) of the number of overall votes for the region.

Voting for members of parliament in elections is a different process to how members of parliament vote on bills before parliament, for example, by divisions where each members vote, 'aye' or 'no', are recorded.