

# Parliament of Victoria

## On the steps: Celebration, protest and commemoration



# About this resource

This resource focuses on the stories of people meeting on the steps of Parliament House, looking at how public spaces are used, by whom they are used and for what purposes.

The activities encourage students to explore the different historical events on the steps and consider how spaces are used for different purposes. The scenes have been chosen because of a connection to Parliament of Victoria.

A list of scenes have been provided, along with an explanation, a selection of supporting resources, and photographs that can be found in the *Scenes from the steps* slide deck. The activities that follow the scene descriptions can be used in conjunction with any or all of the photos.

**Note:** Not all scenes may be appropriate for your class. For example, Oscar’s law does relate to puppy farming and cruelty towards animals. While some reporting focused on the community advocates and the work that was been done to change the law, some reporting did include details of animal abuse; it may be worth providing students with information rather than conducting their own research.

## Table of Contents

Exploring scenes from the steps.....	3
Activities.....	7
Key questions for exploring the scenes .....	7
Predict, Observe, Explain.....	7
Tableaux reflections .....	8
Soundscapes .....	9
Changing spaces over time .....	10
Thinking routines.....	11
Researching other scenes .....	12

## Exploring scenes from the steps

The steps of Parliament House have long been used as a place for people to gather in celebration, to protest and commemorate important events. While construction of Parliament House commenced in 1855, the iconic bluestone steps and lamps were not completed until 1892.

Before investigating the different scenes from the steps of Parliament House, you may like to ask students whether they have either attended or watched an event held on the steps:

- What was it?
- What groups of people may have attended?
  - Were there any groups who may have been excluded or not welcomed?
  - Were there any groups who people thought should be excluded from attending?

## Eight-Hour Workday 1856

In the 1850s, many Victorians worked for 14 hours a day, six days a week. They had no holidays and could be fired without warning or reason. Hundreds of children also worked under these conditions. The stonemasons, who were building the University of Melbourne, were unhappy with their conditions - The stonemasons were working with huge sandstone blocks and often watched as the 16 students who attended the university walk to class. The workers were annoyed that the students had time for an education. The stonemasons decided it was time to protest. They put down their tools, and marched to Parliament House, demanding an eight-hour workday.

## Prime Minister announcing the death of King Edward VII

On the 9 May 1910, the Sydney Morning Herald reported that King Edward VII had died of a heart attack. A memorial service was held on the steps of Parliament House in Melbourne eleven days later. A huge crowd gathered and lined the streets, with the memorial service taking place on the steps with federal and state Members of Parliament and the Governor General and the Governor of Victoria. Army and Navy officers provided security and participated in the memorial service, standing along the streets and at the front of the steps.

## Royal Visit, 1954

In February 1954 Queen Elizabeth II was the first reigning monarch to visit Australia. She travelled over 16,000 km by air and 3,000 km by road to visit more than 70 Australian towns. While in Melbourne she opened the Parliament of Victoria by reading a speech written by the government about the laws they planned to pass. It is estimated that around 75% of the Australian population went out to see the Queen at least once.

## Bali Memorial

In October of 2002, terrorists set off two bombs in Bali nightclubs. The explosions killed 180 people, including 88 Australians, and injured many more. Soon afterwards, people began placing flowers on the steps of Parliament House. After three days the entire space was covered, except for a roped off walkway. After nine days the flowers, cards and toys were collected. The flowers were composted and used to help establish a memorial garden.

## Live at the steps

*Live at the steps* was an all-ages concert held at Parliament House in 2016 and 2016, as part of Melbourne Music Week. It was organised by parliament, Triple J radio station and a youth group called, The Push Inc. The festival was a chance for people to come to parliament for a different reason other than watching parliament work, protesting or to meet Members of Parliament. It was an all-ages event that went from 5pm to 9pm, so many people attended with their children and families. The festival included bands and comedy acts, with hundreds of people watching, dancing and singing along.

## Oscar's law

Oscar's Law was a lobby group to stop puppy farming, a practice where dogs are kept solely to breed puppies. The dogs on puppy farms are often kept in small spaces, without proper hygiene, medical care or attention. In the 2010s Oscar's Law held several protests on the steps of parliament to highlight the issues with puppy farming and to also ask parliament to pass a law to ban puppy farms. Many people brought their dogs to the rallies. People carried signs, dressed up as dogs and wore red t-shirts to show their support for the cause.

## Community artwork (Chalk drawing)

In 2021 as part of an art exhibition, and to encourage people to visit the Spring St end of Melbourne, Artist Kerrie Poliness created a large-scale chalk drawing across the steps. The drawing was designed to have the public help colour in the giant geometric shapes that Poliness had created. There were lots of people, including children and adults, that helped create the drawing. There were even some people who were just walking by who stopped to help out. While some rainy Melbourne weather looked like it was going to wash away the artwork before it was finished, the chalk drawing was completed.

## Photo 2022

In 2022, as part of a month-long international festival of photography, the steps of Parliament House featured a large-scale installation of photographs focused on the theme of meetings places. The photographers—Alana Holmberg, Abigail Varney, Rachel Mounsey and James Bugg—were part of a group called Oculi Collective, and together their photographs explored the places, reasons and ways in which people living in regional Victoria gather together.

## Opening of Parliament

After each state election, every four years, the new parliament is officially opened by the Governor of Victoria. This is a traditional ceremony that comes from Westminster in the United Kingdom. The Governor opens parliament as a representative of the Queen. The governor arrives on the steps and is met by guards from the Shrine and the Usher of the Black Rod (700 years ago, this would have been a knight). More recently, the Opening of Parliament has included a Smoking Ceremony conducted by an Aboriginal Elder, welcoming the Governor and Members of Parliament onto Country.

## Yoorrook Justice Commission, Walk for Truth

To raise awareness and mark the closure of the Yoorrook Justice Commission's four year Aboriginal-led truth-telling process, Yoorrook Commissioner Travis Lovett embarked on a 25 day walk from Portland on Gunditjmarra Country in Victoria's west, to Parliament House in Naarm (Melbourne). Over the 500 plus km walk, Commissioner Lovett was joined by more than 12,000 people, arriving at Parliament House on Wednesday 18 June, 2025, present Message Sticks to representatives of parliament. The Walk for Truth was part of the Victoria's four-year truth-telling Yoorrook Justice Commission, ahead of an official report detailing the impacts of colonisation on Victoria's First Peoples.

## Activities

### Key questions for exploring the scenes

- Who are the key people in these scenes?
  - What might they be feeling?
  - How would you describe what they might be seeing and/or hearing?
  - What are some of the different reasons people might have attended this event?
  - What interactions might be happening between people in the scene?
- What might different groups of people think about this scene?
  - Are there groups that might support or disapprove of this event? Who are these groups and what do you think they might think or feel about the event?
- How might these scenes be connected to Parliament of Victoria?
  - Think about the work parliament does, as well as the symbolism or authority parliament has for the state.
- What might be some different ways to commemorate, protest or celebrate?
- What are some other ways you can draw attention to moments, people or issues you care about?

### Predict, Observe, Explain

There are a collection of photos and explanations of different events—commemorations, protests and celebrations—that have happened on the steps of Parliament House.

Each event includes a title, a photograph and description. Students can:

- Predict: from the title predict what the event is and what details they might see in the photograph
- Observe: looking at the photograph, write down anything they observe and/or find interesting
- Explain: write an explanation of the event from their predictions and observations

Finally, students can compare their explanations with the explanation provided for the event.

## Tableaux reflections

Through the tableaux students' can demonstrate their understanding of perspective, celebration, protest and commemoration, and develop their understanding of how the same space can be used in multiple ways by multiple people.

Place the students into groups and provide each group with a different 'Scene from the steps'. You may wish to provide both photos and descriptions, or one or the other.

### Preparing the tableaux

- Students spend some time creating their scenes, considering
  - Whether their scene is a celebration, protest or commemoration
  - Evidence from the pictures that they can use in the tableau
  - Key characters to be included
  - Gestures, poses and facial expressions that help to convey the meaning

### Performing the tableaux

- Each group takes it turn to perform their scene to class
- The class observes the scene and discusses what they notice. The students in the tableau can either:
  - Not talk or offer any explanation
  - On request from either the class or teacher, offer a short statement about their character
  - Answer questions from the class about what is happening
- The class creates a description of the scene and summarises what they think is happening
  - The descriptions can be used by the group to reflect on how well they were able to convey the key messages from the scene

Tableaux are useful in developing students' visual literacy, in both understanding pictures, and extracting and reproducing/translating key information. Students need to think about how visuals (gestures, poses, positions of characters in relation to one another) help to create meaning, and therefore demonstrating whether they understand the differences between, and the potential complexities of, celebrations, protests and commemorations.

## Soundscapes

Soundscapes provide an alternative way for students to understand and experience an event. This can help to provide different perspectives on the event and how sound can be an important, but perhaps not often considered, part of making someone feel included and safe or excluded and uncertain.

Looking at the different pictures, and whether they are celebrations, protests or commemorations, students need to think about what sounds might they have heard if they were standing on the steps at the time the picture was taken.

Students can be divided into groups and given either:

- One photo to focus on
- The concept of celebration, protest or commemoration
  - Students could be given a photo or collection of photos, or select from the side deck which photos would be most appropriate to use

From the photo/s, students can consider:

- What are all the different sounds they might be able to hear?
  - How loud might it be? Are all sounds of equal volume?
  - Are there other sounds? Traffic, music, other noises?
- Is the sound moving or stationary?
- Does it change in volume over the event?
- What might people be saying? Are they speaking, yelling, chanting, singing, or not saying anything at all?
  - Is there one person talking to a crowd or multiple people talking at once? How might the crowd respond?
  - Are people making no sound, or little sound? What might you still be able to hear?
- What fragments of sound would help to recreate the atmosphere of being on the steps?

Each group performs their soundscape in turn. The other students sit with their eyes close, trying to identify the different sounds.

Once each group has performed their soundscape, students:

- write down their observations
- how the soundscape made them feel
- what they think was happening at the event

## Changing spaces over time

It's worth noting that the way we commemorate important events such as the passing of dignitaries has changed over the years. With television broadcasts in the 1950s and the more recent 24-hour news cycles, large crowds no longer need to gather to hear the confirmation of an important person's death, as they did with King Edward VII's death in 1910. While flags are still flown at half-mast, the use of floral tributes and different coloured lighting used on the façade of Parliament House, are a couple of examples of how significant events are commemorated on the steps today.

- Have there been similar changes to how we celebrate and protest?
  - Why or why not have these things changed over time?
  - What evidence can you find that the way we celebrate, protest and commemorate have changed over time?
- What examples can you think of from your community or local area of spaces that have been used for different purposes?
  - What were the different purposes?
  - Why were those spaces used? Consider size of the space, location, familiarity, formality, and relationship to the event.

The thinking routine *Projecting Across Time* might be helpful for students when considering how the use of the steps might have changed over time, and how they might continue to change.

[pz.harvard.edu/resources/projecting-across-time](https://pz.harvard.edu/resources/projecting-across-time)

## Connecting places

Students can extend their learning by considering:

- How have certain places been an important aspect of political and social change?
  - For example, the Women's Suffrage movement and the Aboriginal Rights Movement
- How do places in your school and community compare to parliament as a place where people gather? What makes each place different?
  - You might like to consider who has access, how do people get access, who is excluded, barriers, how the different spaces are used and for what purpose, what are the rules of the different spaces.

## Thinking routines

The thinking routines from Harvard Project Zero can be used to explore the scenes in different ways and in more detail.

### See, think, me, we

This routine can be used to explore images or artwork, and encourage students to make connections between the image, themselves and wider contexts.

[pz.harvard.edu/resources/see-think-me-we](https://pz.harvard.edu/resources/see-think-me-we)

### Values, identities, actions

This routine encourages students to consider the civic aspects of images by extending the discussion to consider how the audience may participate in any actions suggested by the image.

[pz.harvard.edu/resources/values-identities-actions](https://pz.harvard.edu/resources/values-identities-actions)

### Seek to see

This routine can be used to explore the perspective of a person in an image, such as how a person in the image might be feeling, who they might be connected with and what their strengths might be. For example, what might prompt someone to participate in a protest.

[pz.harvard.edu/resources/seek-see](https://pz.harvard.edu/resources/seek-see)

## Researching other scenes

You may want students to conduct their own research into different commemorations, protests or celebrations that have happened on the steps of Parliament House. This could be:

- an event they have attended
- something they have seen or heard about
- based on one of the additional events listed below

### Further scenes

- Commemoration
  - The death of Queen Elizabeth II
  - Remembrance Day
  - Historic ANZAC Day ceremonies
- Celebrations
  - Melbourne Henge
  - Art exhibitions
  - AFL Grand Final
- Protests and activism
  - Housing
  - Wildlife protections
  - Environmental protections

### Conducting the research

This research task is designed to help students investigate significant events or moments from the steps of Parliament House, however you may like students to choose a place in their local community and adapt the activities accordingly. Some questions to begin with might include:

- Who are the key people?
- What might they be feeling?
- What might they be doing?
- How might the different people involved be interacting with each other?
- Was it a celebration, protest or commemoration, or maybe a combination of purposes?
- Was the scene connected to Parliament of Victoria apart from happening on the steps of Parliament House?
  - Think about whether it was celebrating or commemorating a person or people significant to Victoria, or relevant to the work of parliament, such as law making

You may like to create expert groups (jigsaw groupings) within your class and allocate an event for each group to research instead of each individual student choosing a scene.

The Question Matrix may be useful in helping students to develop their own research questions and students can also complete a KWL Chart ('What I know, What I want to know, What I learned'), either individually, in small groups or as a class, as a way of tracking and sharing information.

More information about jigsaw grouping, question matrix and KWL chart is available on the [Supporting resources](#) page

[parliament.vic.gov.au/teach-and-learn/Resources/supporting-resources](http://parliament.vic.gov.au/teach-and-learn/Resources/supporting-resources)

### Reflecting on the research

To conclude the research task, the following questions and activities can be used for students to reflect on what they learnt.

- What were the most significant pieces of information you learned about your selected event?
- Were you surprised by anything that you learnt? What was surprising about it?
- How did the event create a sense of community?
- How might the event excluded people or made people feel excluded?
  - Was excluding some people helpful in creating community? Does everyone always have to be included to create community? When might it be okay to exclude people and when is it not okay? Who gets to decide?
- Why are places like the steps of Parliament House important as places for people to gather?

## Sharing the research

Once students have completed their research and reflections, they can share what they've learnt by:

- preparing a presentation, including what they have learnt about your chosen event, including interesting facts, stories and perspectives
- designing a poster including pictures of the scenes and annotations to describe what was happening and why
- using audio recordings (soundscapes) along with pictures to create a picture montage of the event
- filming a news report from the event including some of the research and reflections
- creating an art project to reflect their knowledge of how different spaces, such as the steps of Parliament House, is used.