

THE PEOPLE, THE PARLIAMENT AND THE COURTS

STUDENT LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Module 1: Introduction to parliamentary committees of the Victorian Parliament

Overview

The main function of the parliament is to make laws for and on behalf of the community. In undertaking this role, parliament needs to hear the views of the people, and to seek expert advice. These modules focus on the role parliamentary committees play in law reform. This meets the requirements of VCE Legal Studies unit 4: The People, the Parliament and the Courts, Area of Study 2, outcome 2.

After completing the modules in the lesson plan, you will be able to

- Understand and evaluate the role of one parliamentary committee of the Victorian Parliament and its ability to influence law reform
- Evaluate the ways a parliamentary committee can influence a change in the law by analysing a recent example of a recommendation for law reform

Parliamentary committees

Making laws that reflect the views and values of the community is one of the main functions of the Parliament of Victoria. It is the role of parliament to determine when new laws should be considered and when current laws need changing or modifying. But how does parliament do this? How does parliament find out what the views of the people might be, and when change is needed?

How can parliament get the best guidance and information?

Advice to parliament comes from a range of sources, including from committee inquiries. Through an inquiry, the role of a parliamentary committee is to investigate an area of law that needs to be introduced, reviewed or changed and to make recommendations to the parliament.

The Parliament of Victoria has an extensive system of committees, which hold inquiries into particular issues. They call for input from the wider community, including experts, individuals, business and government organisations.

Remember in this work, your emphasis is on the influence a parliamentary committee can play in law reform, through an example. You need to consider how a committee goes about its role, what steps it can take to research and investigate the issues and to evaluate how effective a committee can be in influencing change in the law.

How do committees operate?

Committees receive their terms of reference from the parliament or the Governor-in-Council, when issues of specific importance need investigating. Committees comprise a small number of members of parliament and this investigatory work suits a small group focus. By gathering and reviewing evidence from experts and the public, they work together to research issues in detail. Members from different political parties work on each committee and bring a range of skills to the research.

Visit www.parliament.vic.gov.au/committees to view an animated video on how committees work.

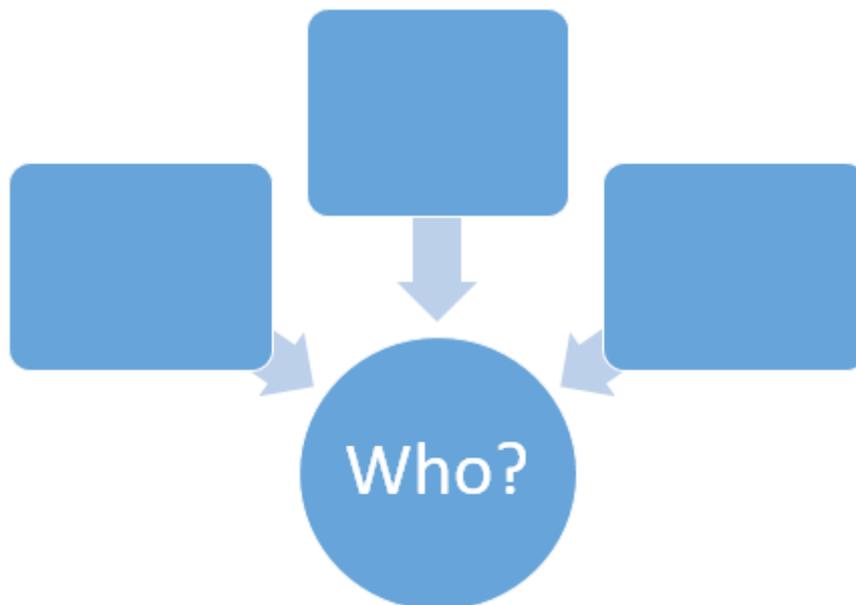
Public participation is a fundamental characteristic in the operations of a committee. It is usual for a wide cross-section of views to be sought, with the committee inviting people and organisations with relevant specialist knowledge to contribute. Discussion papers are sometimes published identifying key issues in order to assist those wishing to make a submission. Research into the area is conducted and the committee may hold public hearings that allow them to seek additional information. Unless there are special circumstances, committees take evidence in public and hearings are frequently attended by the media, ensuring that the process is transparent.

Upon completion of an inquiry, a report of findings and recommendations is tabled in parliament. These reports are an important resource in law reform and in the formation of government policy. The government is required to respond within six months of a committee report being tabled. While it does not have to act on, or implement, any recommendations made in a report, the government does have to give reasons for its decisions.

Check your understanding

Answer the following questions:

1. Who can contribute to a parliamentary committee?



2. Describe the role of a parliamentary committee.

3. Briefly outline who comprises parliamentary committees and how they operate.

Who is in a Parliamentary Committee	How do they operate

4. Discuss two benefits and limitations of how parliamentary committees are comprised.



5. Committees generally take evidence in public, but deliberate in private. Do you think this is a good, or bad, thing? Give reasons for your answer.

Taking evidence in public but deciding in private is...	
This is because...	
This means that...	
Another reason is...	
This means that...	

6. A key part of committee activity is public engagement, and consultation with the community. Explain why this is important and how it occurs.

What happens	Importance

7. What happens on the completion of an inquiry?

While there are four main types of parliamentary committees, you will now investigate the specific role of one committee.