

What is Parliament?

DEFINITION: *A parliament is a group of people representing a country, state or territory who have been given the authority to make laws. In Australia, these people are elected to their positions. Although the primary role of parliaments is to make laws, many other debates also take place.*

The modern Australian parliamentary system is a variation of the Westminster System which originated in Britain.

The British system has a very long history. Hundreds of years ago the Monarch ruled supreme. Then in 1215, King John agreed to the Magna Carta which was a charter of rights for barons and other noblemen. It also established a Great Council responsible to the State, not the Monarch. While there had been meetings between the Monarch and noblemen before, the Magna Carta made these gatherings official and mandatory, especially if the King wanted to impose or increase taxes.

Over time, the Great Council became known as Parliament. Changes resulted in what is now considered the first representative parliament, or Model Parliament, called together in 1295. This Parliament was significant because as well as being comprised of the Monarch, clergy and knights, it also included elected citizens representing their county, township or cities for the first time.

By the mid 1300s the Parliament had split into the House of Lords (noblemen) and the House of Commons (elected representatives) as upper and lower chambers. Modern democratic parliaments still retain some features of these early days: a one or two-house system; separate readings of bills; and assent of legislation. However, the Monarch was able to summon and dismiss Parliament at will.

By the 17th century, the English Civil War resulted in Parliament declaring certain conditions on King Charles I. The changes that were made are still in existence in modern democratic parliaments: Parliament became supreme over the Monarch; laws could only be made by parliament not the Monarch; the independence of the Speaker; the establishment of an Executive Government (Prime Minister and Cabinet); having an Opposition in Parliament; and publication of parliamentary debates in Hansard.

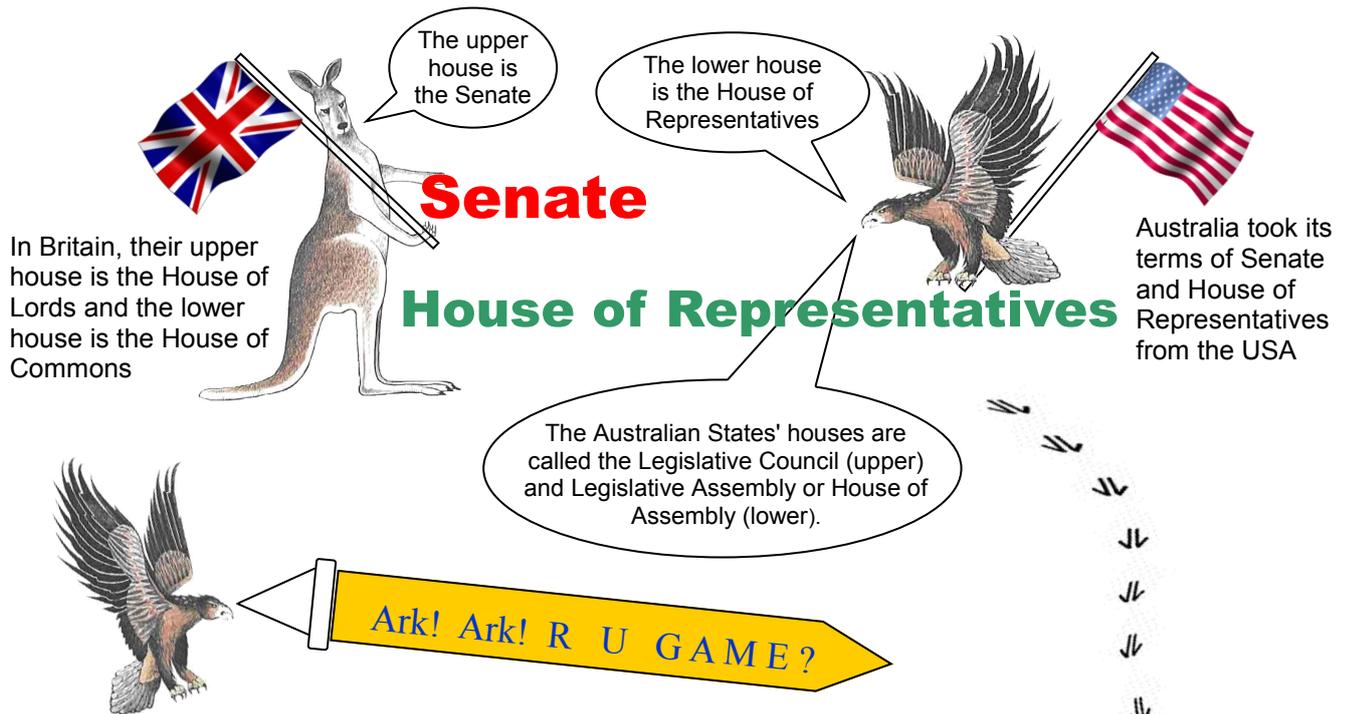
During the 1800s more changes occurred which, again, can be seen in today's democratic parliaments: set parliamentary procedures; the rise of political parties; public administration through government departments; and Ministers with portfolio responsibilities.

In Australia, our parliaments emerged with the establishment of each colony in the 1800s. Federation, in 1901, established the Australian Federal Parliament for the nation.

The word parliament comes from the French '*parlement*' which means discussion.



The Australian Parliament is made up of two chambers or houses



ACTIVITY ⇒ Match the definitions on the right with the words given below

PARLIAMENT
ASSENT
PORTFOLIO

WESTMINSTER SYSTEM
HANSARD
FEDERATION

MAGNA CARTA
BICAMERAL
CHAMBER

	Having two separate and distinct lawmaking assemblies or chambers (camera meaning 'chamber' in Latin).
	The official published record of what is said and done in the British, Australian, New Zealand and some other Parliaments.
	Approval by the Monarch (or their representative) of a bill which has been passed by parliament, after which it becomes law.
	A system of parliament founded in England in 1295 and is named after the part of London where the Model Parliament first took place, which is still home to England's Parliament.
	The coming together of the six separate British colonies (which became states) to form a federal system of government in 1901.
	Considered one of the most important documents in the history of democracy. In 1215, King John signed over political rights and freedoms to noblemen, limiting the power of kings.
	A 'house' or group that forms (part of) a parliament. Also refers to the room they officially meet in.
	A group of elected representatives that meet to discuss state matters and make laws for their country, state or territory.
	The office or post of a Government Minister for which they are responsible, for example, health, education, or the environment.

ANSWERS — Match the definitions on the right with the words

In order from top to bottom of completed table:

Bicameral

Hansard

Royal Assent

Westminster System

Federation

Magna Carta

Chamber

Parliament

Portfolio

