

### PARTIES IN THE HOUSE

Given the dominance of the major political parties in the House of Representatives, it may be surprising to learn that they are almost entirely unrecognised in the rules (standing orders) which govern the work of the House.

In all of the 160 pages of procedural rules and practices which underpin the way the House operates, the words 'party' or 'parties' are only mentioned five times, and then only in reference to the make-up of certain committees and the broadcasting of parliament.

The standing orders extensively outline the rights and responsibilities of the government in parliament, but nowhere does it state that the government needs to be formed by a political party.

While political parties may lack recognition in the formal documents that govern the House of Representatives, in reality the contest between political parties decides who forms the government — and this has been true since the very first Australian federal parliament.

#### *In the beginning*

The first federal government was formed under Prime Minister Edmund Barton, who led a group of parliamentarians known as the Protectionists for their central policy of using trade tariffs to protect Australia's business from competing with cheap imported goods.

However the Protectionists won only 31 seats in the 75 seat parliament, and had to rely on the support of state based Labor parties to form government with a third party known as the Free Traders in opposition.

With the three major parties unable to command a significant majority over each other, let alone an overall majority in the House, instability reigned supreme.

In the first 10 years of the federal parliament the government changed seven times.

#### *The power of two*

In 1909 Protectionist leader Alfred Deakin made a decision which has shaped the Australian parliament ever since.

After years of largely working with the Labor party to form government, the Protectionists formed an alliance with the other non-Labor parties under the name the Commonwealth Liberal Party.

The new party quickly moved to test the incumbent Labor government's authority, and on 27 May 1909 it

defeated Labor on the floor of the House by 39 votes to 30.

The Labor government resigned, the new Liberal party took its place, and the precedent for a two party system was born, with Labor on one side and a coalition of non-Labor parties on the other (forerunners of today's Liberal and National parties).

#### *A force to be reckoned with*

Today the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal/National Coalition continue to be the two major forces in Australian politics.

While the Australian Greens have begun to grow their representation as an alternative party, especially in the Senate, the Labor party and the Coalition still hold more than 95 per cent of seats in the House of Representatives between them.

Every federal government since World War II has been formed by either the



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PARTY TIME: Political parties take centre stage in Australian politics

Labor party or the Coalition parties and their predecessors, and the vast majority of members ever elected to federal parliament have been members of political parties.

A question to consider is to what extent the party system has been good for Australian democracy.

Those in favour of strong political parties in the House of Representatives point out that parties provide a meaningful focus for public opinion and offer the voters real policy alternatives.

Parties keep the parliamentary system stable and help to organise and streamline the business of parliament. Unlike the shifting alliances that characterised parliament's first decade, a strong party system ensures that the government of the day is able to carry out its policy program.

People against the party based political system say it stifles debate and decreases government accountability.

They argue that party cohesion in the House of Representatives reduces the chamber to a 'rubber stamp' for government policies and activities and there is no real scrutiny because everyone votes as their party dictates.

## OVER TO YOU...

Divide your class into small groups as if you were forming a political party.

Decide what you would call your party and why.

Discuss what your three main policies would be.

Choose one of your group to outline your policies to the rest of the class.



POLL POSITION: Voters can face a choice between party and independent candidates

They also say that because backbenchers within parties are expected to follow the party line in the chamber, they cannot act as an independent voice for their electorate.

### *Minority and majority*

The control of the major parties has been challenged in the current parliament, with independent and minor party members of the House gaining more power and influence following the 2010 election.

In 2010 neither the Labor party nor the Coalition won enough seats to form government in their own right, the first time this had happened since 1940.

Eventually the Labor party won the support of three independent members

and the Australian Greens member Adam Bandt, allowing Labor to form government with a one seat majority in parliament.

This means Labor is governing from a minority of members, relying on independents and other parties to pass every piece of legislation through the House — just like Edmund Barton's first government back in 1901.

Some have hailed this as a victory for direct democracy; others say it has hamstrung the parliament and given the independents far too much say over national issues.

But whether this is really a step away from the power of parties or just a one-off event, we will have to wait and see until the next election.



PARLIAMENTARY PIONEERS: Australia's first prime minister Edmund Barton (fourth from left) with members of his cabinet.

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