

What happens when the voting is over?

From now until election day, sometime later this year, speculation will be rife about the likely result.

But what happens when the final votes have been cast and the polling booths shut their doors?

Getting Elected

Counting of votes begins as soon as the polls close at 6pm on election day. Although preliminary results for most of the 150 House of Representatives seats are known on election night, the count in close contests may not be completed for a number of days.

Once the count in each electorate ('Division') is complete, the Divisional Returning Officer – an official of the Australian Electoral Commission – formally 'declares' the result. After all 150 poll results have been declared, the Australian Electoral Commissioner completes the legal paperwork of the election, certifying the name of the successful candidate for each Division on the writs issued for the election. The writs are then returned to the Governor-General who passes them on to the Clerk of the House. Writs must be returned within 100 days of their issue (writs are the formal order from the Governor-General to the Electoral Commissioner to conduct an election, and are generally issued on the day the election is announced).

The political party with the most Members in the House of Representatives becomes the governing party. Its leader becomes the Prime Minister and Ministers are usually appointed quite soon after the election so that the business of government can continue with as little disruption as possible.

Learning the Ropes

Before the new Parliament meets, those Members who have been elected to the House for the first time are given detailed briefings on the operations and procedures of the House so that they can operate effectively from the very first sitting day. While all Members would be familiar with our parliamentary system of government, not all would have a detailed knowledge of the rules and practices under which the House operates. Members come from a variety of backgrounds such as business, law, trade unions, farming, accounting, teaching and

nursing, to name a few. Prior knowledge of parliamentary procedure is not a prerequisite for election as a Member.

New Members will also be using this time to establish their electorate and Parliament House offices, including employment of staff. They are always keen to have their electorate offices up and running as soon as possible after the election result is declared.

Parliament Begins

The time and date for a new Parliament to assemble is fixed by the Governor-General by proclamation, acting on advice from the Prime Minister. The new Parliament may meet as soon as the writs have been returned but, under the Constitution, must meet no later than 30 days after the last day appointed for the return of writs.

A new Parliament begins with a day of ceremony to introduce Members to their important role. For all Members it is a time to reflect on the responsibility bestowed on them and to contemplate the task ahead. For new Members it is a particularly significant day. Most Members invite their families to attend the opening ceremonies and see the environment in which they will be working.

A number of crucial events take place on this first day of a new Parliament.

First, before taking their seat and taking part in proceedings of the House, all Members must be sworn in. In the House of Representatives Chamber they publicly take an oath or make an affirmation of allegiance in terms described in the Constitution. Once they have done this they are able to take part in the business of the House such as participating in debates, placing questions on the notice paper, lodging petitions and serving on committees.

Other events which take place on the first day include the election of the Speaker by secret ballot and the opening speech by the Governor-General. In his speech the Governor-General gives a brief review of the

affairs of the nation and outlines the proposed program of the incoming government.

For a first-time Member a priority will be to make his or her first speech in the House. Most Members use that opportunity to outline the issues they believe are important and which they will be working on during their term of office.

Once the formalities are over, the House generally gets straight down to the business of considering legislation. If the previous government is returned, it will have legislation that was prepared during the previous Parliament ready to introduce immediately. A new government will need a bit of time to prepare legislation to implement its major policies, but there will be other important legislation to keep the House busy.

Any legislation that was prepared by the previous government and which is supported by the new government can be introduced immediately. In addition, government departments will have a range of legislation waiting to deal with administrative matters. The House always has plenty of business to undertake.

Members are also keen to establish parliamentary committees so that they can begin investigating issues of interest and concern to them and their constituents. Most committees are set up by the rules of the House (the standing orders) which operate from one Parliament to the next. Those committees can start work once Members are appointed. Members are selected to serve on committees by their parties, with the selection formally confirmed by the House. This usually takes place within a week or two of the first meeting of the new Parliament. Some committees, such as certain joint committees that are made up of Members and Senators, need to be established by resolution. This can require some negotiation behind the scenes to get agreed membership and terms under which the committee will operate.