

## FEDERAL PARLIAMENT

Parliament's main task is to make laws. Those who wrote the constitution decided that the new federal parliament, whose laws would apply to all of Australia and not just a particular colony or state, would consist of Britain's monarch (the King or Queen), a Senate (the 'upper house') and a House of Representatives (or 'lower house'). Since it was clear that the monarch could not or would not live in Australia, a governor-general was to represent him or her. The constitution states that the governor-general is to be appointed by the monarch, but in practice the King or Queen has always accepted the recommendation made by the Australian **prime minister**. The Senate and the House of Representatives are made up of politicians elected into power by the people.

### THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

The House of Representatives — the lower house of the federal parliament — consists of 148 representatives who are each elected for a three-year term. Each electorate has approximately the same number of voters.

In practice, the House of Representatives is more powerful than the Senate and can be looked at as the 'engine room' of parliament. In the first place, only the House of Representatives can decide to impose **taxation** and spend money (that is, pass money bills). Secondly, the government is created by the political group or groups which have a majority of politicians in the House of Representatives. If, for example, the Labor Party has the most members in the House of Representatives, Labor forms the government and its leader becomes prime minister. The party or parties with a minority of members in the House of Representatives is called the **Opposition**.

The prime minister selects some members of parliament (from his or her own party) to be **ministers**. These men and women manage different government responsibilities. Their portfolios include defence, foreign affairs and Aboriginal affairs, but the most important minister after the prime minister is the **treasurer**. The treasurer is responsible for raising and spending money. The prime minister and senior



The front bench and speaker in the House of Representatives

ministers meet together as the **cabinet** to make government policies.

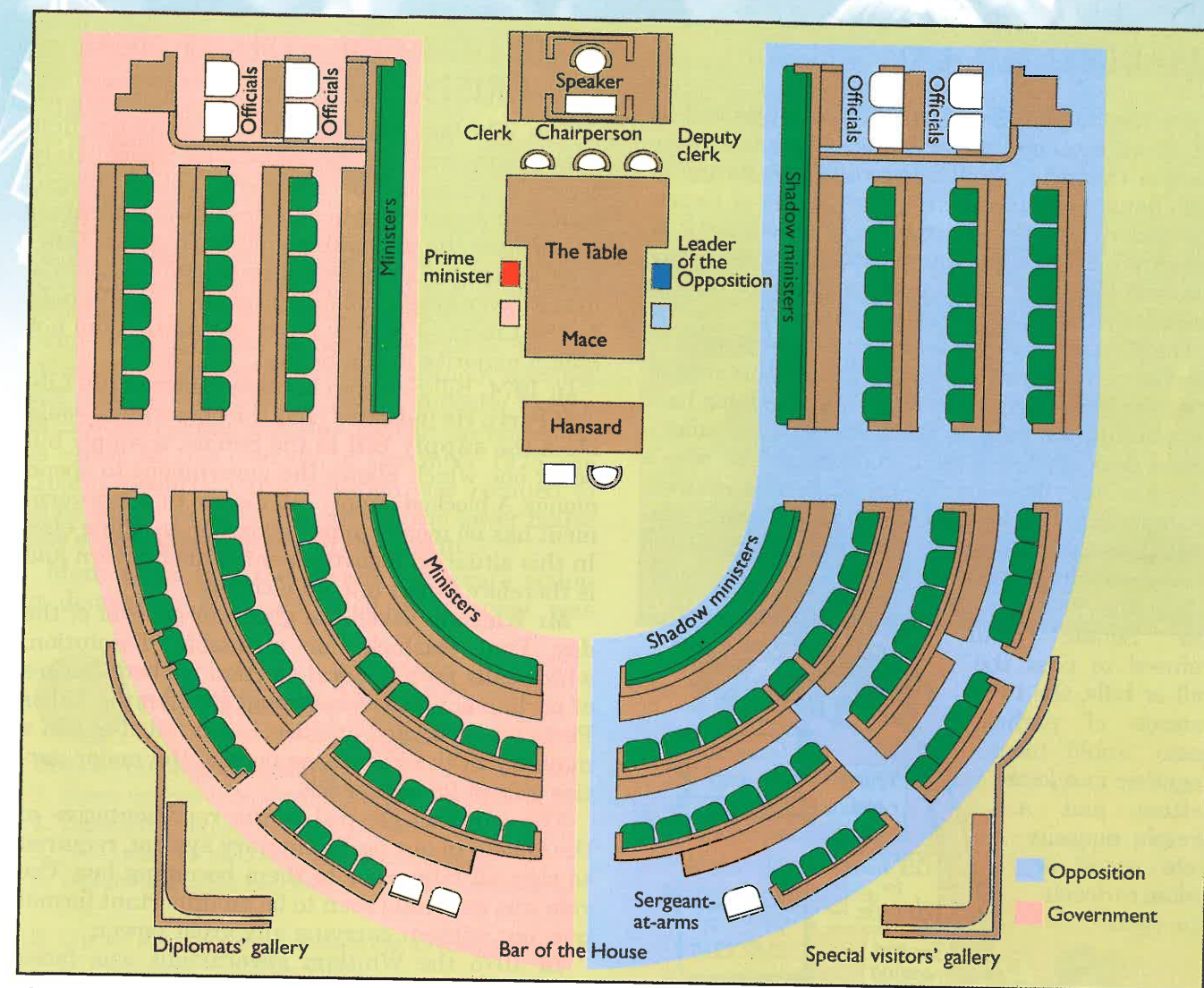
Other important roles and elements of the House of Representatives are outlined below.

A **shadow minister** is a member of the Opposition who has been made responsible for a particular area. His or her job is to criticise the government's policies in this area and to provide alternative policies. The shadow ministers sit on the front benches directly opposite the government ministers.

The shadow cabinet contains the senior shadow ministers. It is this group that decides on many of the Opposition's tactics and policies.

A **backbencher** is a member of parliament who is not in the cabinet or the shadow cabinet. As the name implies, these people sit on the back benches of the House.

The **speaker** acts as the chairperson in the House of Representatives. This person is elected by the House. It is the duty of the speaker to ensure that the rules of the House are obeyed. In the upper house, the president of the Senate fulfils these same duties.



The floor plan of the House of Representatives

**Hansard** is the record of everything that occurs in parliament. The Hansard reporters sit at a table near the prime minister and leader of the Opposition and write down everything that is said. Can you imagine why?

The sergeant-at-arms wears a long, black coat and a white bow tie. He is a permanent parliamentary officer in the House of Representatives, and has the responsibility of keeping order in the House at the direction of the speaker. In other words, the sergeant-at-arms acts as the 'bouncer'. In the Senate this role is filled by the usher of the black rod.

### THE SENATE

Senators are elected for six years. There are an equal number of senators — originally six and now 12 — elected from each state, regardless of

each state's population, and two from each of the territories. The decision to have equal numbers of senators was made because some states, such as Tasmania, had a small population and therefore fewer voters than other states. People from these small states were concerned that their interests would not be looked after if they had (in addition to only a few members of the House of Representatives), only one or two senators. They considered that they would be swamped by politicians from the larger states of Victoria and New South Wales.

The Senate has different purposes from the House of Representatives; its functions are to:

- restrain the power of the government
- protect the interests of all states
- review, change, pass or reject **bills** coming from the lower house
- initiate some laws, but not those that would provide finance to the government
- protect the rights of all Australians.