

About Parliament II

Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries

Ministers

A minister is a high ranking government member and a member of the Cabinet (Executive Government).

Ministers are vested with the responsibility for administering one or more government departments (or portfolios), and are answerable to the Parliament for all actions taken by the department(s) under his/her authority.

According to the Constitution, all ministers must be elected members of Parliament and at least one minister must be a member of the Legislative Council (MLC).

In Western Australia the terms 'Ministry' and 'Cabinet' are used interchangeably. The Cabinet conducts most of its business in confidence, and it is here that major decisions of policy and administration are made.

If ministers publicly disagree with a cabinet decision they are, according to tradition, obliged to resign from the Ministry.

It is widely acknowledged that appointment as a minister demands a very busy work schedule, in addition to the usual obligations of a member of Parliament.

Through Questions without Notice and Question on Notice, members on both sides of the House, and on behalf of the constituents they represent, are able to ask questions of ministers.

These questions are usually answered by the relevant minister responsible for that portfolio. Questions asked in Parliament must conform to the rules or *Standing Orders* of the respective House.

With the growth of the State and the scale of government services in society the number of ministers was constitutionally increased and the number of portfolios was expanded.

In Western Australia the Constitution limits the size of the Ministry (Cabinet). Through amendments the Ministry has gradually increased from six in the 1890 Forrest

Government to 17 after one hundred years of responsible government.

The authority of ministers is issued by the Governor, giving them the right to be called Honourable, and the responsibility for a government department.

Various Acts of Parliament give ministers the power to make payments, effect appointments, and to delegate certain powers to officials to perform duties on their behalf. Ministers also keep Parliament advised of a department's activities by tabling annual reports.

Ministers rely heavily on the advice and expertise of officials within a department. They must not mislead the Parliament when providing information about a department.

History

When responsible government commenced in Western Australia in 1890 the *Constitution Act 1889* provided for six ministers.

The founding Ministry held very broad portfolios:

- Sir John Forrest, Premier and Colonial Treasurer;
- George Shenton, Colonial Secretary;
- Septimus Roe, Attorney General;
- William Marmion, Commissioner of Crown Lands; and
- Harry Venn, Commissioner for Railways and Director of Public Works.

In British parliamentary history a 'portfolio' was a term used to describe the collection of documents and papers connected with a government department.

In more modern usage a portfolio is used to indicate the departments for which a minister is responsible.

The number of ministers allowable rose to eight in 1927, to ten in 1950, to 12 in 1965, to 13 in 1975, to 15 in 1980 and to 17 in 1986.

At present the limit on the number of ministers is still 17, but there is no limit on the number of portfolios, or departments, for which a minister may be responsible.

Apart from expanding the number of Ministries and portfolios, some Cabinets have included Ministers without Portfolio, Honorary Ministers, and more recently Parliamentary Secretaries.

From 1901, for over half a century, many Cabinets included at least one Minister without Portfolio. A Minister without Portfolio sat and deliberated in Cabinet, in order to ensure broader community representation.

The first woman in Australian politics to become a minister was Florence Cardell-Oliver, who was appointed as a Minister without Portfolio from 1 April 1947.

Cardell-Oliver became an Honorary Minister for Supply and Shipping in 1948 before becoming the Minister for Health, Supply and Shipping in 1949.

Another designation in Western Australia has been the title of Honorary Minister.

Edmund Gray was an Honorary Minister in the Labor Governments of John Willcock and Frank Wise from 1936 to 1947. This was to help ensure that a member from the Legislative Council (MLC) had a voice in Cabinet.

Liberal MLA Jim Clarko was made an Honorary Minister for Education in January 1982 before becoming the Minister for Education in May of the same year. Richard Shalders, a Liberal MLA, was an Honorary Minister for the same period.

Ernie Bridge, a Labor MLA, was made an Honorary Minister in 1986 with the portfolios of Water Resources, North-West and Agriculture before later gaining full Ministry status.

In 1984 an amendment to the Constitution indicated that the designation of 'Honorary

Minister' should not receive remuneration other than expenses incurred in connection with such duties.

Parliamentary Secretaries

Parliamentary Secretaries in the Parliament of Western Australia are appointed by the Governor in Council to assist ministers in the performance of their duties.

Parliamentary Secretaries are elected members of the governing party in Parliament. They can be members of the Legislative Council (MLCs) or members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs).

Parliamentary Secretaries are sworn into office by the Governor. However, as they are not Cabinet ministers they do not receive an additional salary, but they do receive an allowance for expenses reasonably incurred in connection with their office.

In 1990 the *Constitution Acts Amendment Act 1899* was amended to enable the appointment of Parliamentary Secretaries.

Three Parliamentary Secretaries were subsequently announced by the Lawrence Labor Government, and were officially appointed by the Governor in Council.

By the beginning of the 38th Parliament in 2008 there were six Parliamentary Secretaries. There is no constitutional limit to this number.

Role

Parliamentary Secretaries are able to perform many of the functions of ministers, as directed by the ministers, and are able to stand in for a minister in the Chamber.

They can perform all the minister's duties on the floor of the House, such as taking carriage of bills, but they cannot answer questions on portfolio matters.

For some members the Parliamentary Secretary role has been a stepping stone to the Ministry; for other members the appointment has been to acknowledge their expertise in a portfolio or service to their political party.