

Parliamentary Government in Western Australia

It is often said that Western Australia has a parliamentary system of government. This has two main strands which are known as responsible government and democratic government.



Crests of each House of the Parliament

Responsible Government

Responsible government, based on British constitutional practice, was adopted in Western Australia in 1890 and is a political system in which, to have power, a government must have the confidence of a majority of members of the Legislative Assembly (the lower house of Parliament). Under this system, executive power is formally held by the British monarch (King or Queen) represented by the Governor of Western Australia. The Governor is expected to act on the advice of the Premier and the ministers (the cabinet) of the state. Therefore, in practice, real executive power is held by the ministry or cabinet. Ministers may be appointed from either house, but may only hold office while retaining the confidence (majority) of the lower house.

Ministerial Responsibility

A key element of responsible government is known as collective ministerial responsibility, whereby the ministry or cabinet is expected to 'speak with one voice', and any minister unable to publicly support a key ministry or cabinet decision is obliged to resign. Collective ministerial responsibility works under the principles of 'unity, solidarity and secrecy'. Apart from no public disagreement with a ministry

or cabinet decision, it is understood that cabinet decisions are made 'behind closed doors' and its discussions remain 'secret'. Taken together these practices are known as 'cabinet solidarity'.

Another key element of responsible government is the principle of individual ministerial responsibility. A minister is responsible to the Parliament for the management and administrative decisions in matters under the minister's control. With the increasing size and complexity of government, it is often difficult to define a minister's responsibility as compared to that of their staff in the public service or government agencies. Another important aspect of individual ministerial responsibility is the expectation of integrity. Some of the primary expectations regarding ministerial integrity have been described in the Ministerial Code of Conduct. Ministers must not mislead Parliament nor use their position for personal gain. They should avoid any conflict of interest between their private actions and their official duties. Nor should they engage in any unethical behaviour which is unacceptable to the community. It is very rare for a censure motion against a minister to be passed. However, when the opposition or the media are successful in raising a breach of individual ministerial responsibility, ministers are sometimes forced to resign.

Responsible government also carries the meaning of responsiveness to public opinion. Members of Parliament are representatives of the people, and they are responsible to their electors through the mechanism of elections. As such, responsible government in Western Australia is also expected to be conducted in the context of parliamentary democracy. This broadly raises the question: **what is a democracy?**



Parliamentary Government in Western Australia

Democratic Government

Democratic principles can be traced back to Ancient Greece. The term democracy is derived from the Greek demos (people) and kratos (rule).

A democracy, meaning 'people's rule', is a set of ideals and a system of government said to require:

- equal voting rights for all adult citizens with relatively frequent and transparent elections;
- political parties that are able to compete freely with each other for legal control of the institutions of state power;
- a government elected by a system that provides (approximately) for majority rule and minority consent;
- agencies to review government decisions; and
- an independent judiciary employing 'due (or proper) process' and the 'rule of law', which is based on the view of equality before the law for all citizens.

Some of the ideals include the freedom of the media, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of religion and conscience and freedom of information.

Other more modern concepts include equality of opportunity, which precludes discrimination on grounds such as gender, sexual harassment, age, pregnancy, family status, impairment and marital status.

Equality of opportunity also includes the view that citizens, including children, should be provided with minimum standards of health, education and social services.



South-west corner of Parliament House



Bust of Sir John Forrest. The first Premier of Western Australia

