

# CANBERRA, the SEAT of GOVERNMENT

The founding of Canberra followed the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January 1901. The federation of the six Australian colonies meant that the new nation needed a national capital to represent its aspirations and to become the Seat of Government. Section 125 of the Australian Constitution provided that the Commonwealth Seat of Government should be in Commonwealth Territory, not less than 100 square miles (258 square kilometres) in area, situated within the state of New South Wales not less than 100 miles (160 km) from Sydney.

The competitive spirit between the two most influential colonies, New South Wales and Victoria, meant that the Federal Government would not be located in either Sydney or Melbourne. Therefore, one of the first tasks of the new Commonwealth Parliament, sitting temporarily in Melbourne, was to decide on a site. After investigating a number of alternatives in 1908, the parliamentary committee chose the site of modern-day Canberra. It was officially named by Lady Denman (wife of the Governor-General) on 12 March 1913 – now celebrated as Canberra Day.

In the Australian colonies the 1890s was a decade of intense political activity. The period involved several official constitutional conventions, street meetings, and ultimately ratification of a draft constitution by citizen referenda in each colony (1897–8). The Commonwealth of Australia Act 1900, an act of the British Parliament in London, is the Australian Constitution. The passage of the Act and the royal assent given by Queen Victoria on 9 July 1900 followed a long period of debate about the terms under which the colonies would federate. The long process came to fruition when a delegation of colonial leaders took the draft Constitution to London and convinced the British government to adopt it.

The Australian Constitution creates the institutions of central government and the powers that those institutions possess. These powers, found in Part V, Section 51 of the Constitution, are broadly those of a national and international nature, such as defence, foreign affairs and trade, as well as those for which national standards are necessary, such as currency.

The Constitution sets up a Commonwealth Parliament with two houses. The House of Representatives, the lower house, is elected on the basis of population. It is known as the 'peoples house' and is the larger of the two chambers with 150 Members. By convention the Prime Minister is a member of the House of Representatives and most legislation originates there. Budget legislation, so-called 'money' bills, must originate there.

The Senate, known as the 'states house', comprises an equal number of members from each state to protect the smaller states from being overwhelmed by the numerical predominance of the states with larger populations. There are now 12 senators from each of the six states and two from each of the two territories.

The Constitution also made provision for a court. In 1903, the Commonwealth Parliament inaugurated the new High Court of Australia. Its role is to adjudicate disputes between the Commonwealth and State governments by interpreting the Constitution, and to act as a court of appeal from State Supreme Courts.

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Since 1913 Canberra has actively developed its role as national capital. The first major step occurred when the Parliament moved from Melbourne to Canberra in 1927 - to the building now known as Old Parliament House. But Canberra remained a small 'bush' town for many years and its growth was hindered first by the 1930s Great Depression and then by World War II, as well as by the limitations of transport and communications.

From the 1950s Canberra grew quickly. The Menzies Government accelerated the transfer of the public service departments from Melbourne to Canberra. Australia's growing, independent international identity encouraged a large diplomatic community. As this occurred, Canberra's physical growth took shape, especially in the 1960s with initiatives such as the new Lake Burley Griffin. In 1980, the High Court moved to a new building in Canberra on the lake edge and, in 1988, the permanent new Parliament House was officially opened.

Canberra is the major centre for social and cultural institutions of national significance. The first to be built was the Australian War Memorial (1941), and this was followed in the coming decades by many others including: the Australian National University, National Library, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, National Archives and the National Museum. Other important institutions include the Commonwealth Scientific, Industry and Research Organisation (CSIRO), the Royal Australian Mint, the Australian Defence Force Academy, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Australian Institute of Sport.

As the centre of national politics, Canberra also houses the national headquarters of each of the major political parties, as well as organised national groups such as the National Farmers Federation and the Returned & Services League.

Canberra is not only the national capital but, as the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), it is a self-governing city-state of more than 300 000 citizens. Long administered by the Federal Government, it achieved representation in the House of Representatives in 1949 and, with the Northern Territory, in the Senate in 1975. The first general election for the Legislative Assembly, the ACT's own parliament, was held in March 1989.

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## Further Reading

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