

Question Time



As custodian of the Mace, the Serjeant-at-Arms undertakes various ceremonial duties. Pictured above: current Serjeant-at-Arms, Judy Middlebrook.

Question

What does the Serjeant-at-Arms do?

Answer

The Serjeant-at-Arms is a parliamentary officer with an important place in Parliaments throughout history. Most Parliaments in the world have a Serjeant-at-Arms, especially those, like Australia's Parliament, which derived from the Westminster tradition.

The name Serjeant-at-Arms comes from the Latin word *serviens* or servant. Dating from medieval times, when monarchs used *serjeanties* or *serjeants* as attendants, the Australian Serjeant-at-Arms reflects the British House of Commons tradition of having an officer of the Parliament who attends upon the Speaker and the House. Serjeants have been carrying out some of their duties for hundreds of years.

As custodian of the Mace, which is the symbol of the authority of the House of Representatives and the Speaker, the Serjeant undertakes various ceremonial duties. This includes carrying the Mace into the House of Representatives Chamber at the beginning of each day's proceedings and removing the Mace at the end of the day's sitting.

Within the Chamber, the Serjeant assists the Speaker in maintaining order in the House. The Serjeant controls admission to the public galleries, maintains custody of the Members' attendance register, coordinates the allocation of seats to Members in the Chamber and delivers messages from the House to the Senate. (Messages are the formal way in which the two Houses of Parliament communicate with each other when legislation and motions are being passed from one House to the other.)

The responsibilities of the Serjeant-at-Arms have evolved over time and now include a wide and varied range of duties in keeping with the needs of the House of Representatives as a modern organisation.

Security of the House of Representatives Chamber is one responsibility of the Serjeant-at-Arms. In conjunction with Parliament's Security Controller and the Senate's Usher of the Black Rod, the Serjeant maintains security throughout the parliamentary precincts.

The Serjeant-at-Arms also advises the Speaker on radio broadcasting and televising policy in relation to the House. The Serjeant is Secretary to the Joint Committee on Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings, which is a committee of Members and Senators who oversee and provide advice on the broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings.

A number of services for Members and their staff are coordinated by the Serjeant, including office accommodation within Parliament House, mail delivery services, information databases, committee room bookings and car transport. Further, the Serjeant-at-Arms' Office provides a booking service for school visits to Parliament House and for seats in the public galleries of the House of Representatives at Question Time.

The Serjeant-at-Arms' Office can be contacted on (02) 6277 4889. There is also a free call number for school bookings: 1800 646 337.