

## The 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament: middle-aged, well-educated and (mostly) male

Australia is a representative democracy in which citizens elect senators and members to represent them in parliament. Academics have long argued over the extent to which such representatives can—or should—‘mirror’ their populations.<sup>1</sup> In Australia, as in other Western liberal democracies, politics traditionally has been the domain of white, middle-aged men. Although there are now more women in the national parliament, and a greater degree of ethnic diversity among its members, parliament still cannot be said to ‘mirror’ the Australian population.

This Research Note examines the biographical details of the 226 senators and members of the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, as contained in the 30<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia* (2005). The Note outlines the age, qualifications, previous employment and length of parliamentary service of the current politicians. It shows that, generally, they are middle-aged, well-educated men, many of whom have worked in politics-related occupations immediately before being elected. The Note concludes with an overview of the debate about the increase in the number of ‘professional politicians’ in parliament.

### Composition of the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament

As at the time of writing, the composition of the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament was as follows:<sup>2</sup>

Party	Senate	H of R	Total
Liberal	34	74	108
Nationals/Country Liberal	5	13	18
Coalition	39	87	126
ALP	28	60	88
Democrats	4	—	4
Greens	4	—	4
Family First	1	—	1
Independent	—	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>226</b>

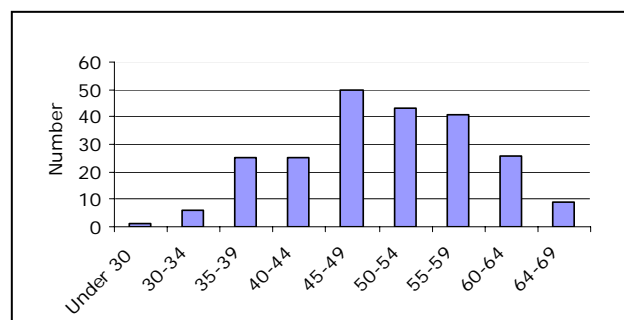
In total, there are 162 men and 64 women: 49 men and 27 women in the Senate and 113 men and 37 women in the House of Representatives. Women comprise 28.3 per cent of the parliament, which is a smaller percentage than the 32.7 per cent average across state and territory parliaments. It is, however, a slight increase on the 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament, which comprised 26.5 per cent women at its dissolution.

### Age: middle-aged spread

While the definition of ‘middle-aged’ often depends on the age of the person using the term, in this Note it is used to describe those in the 45–59 age bracket. The number in this group in the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament gives credence to the claim that politics is the domain of the middle-aged. As can be seen in Figure 1, 134 of the 226 members (59 per cent) are middle-

aged, with 57 (25 per cent) aged 44 or younger and 35 (15 per cent) aged 60 or older.

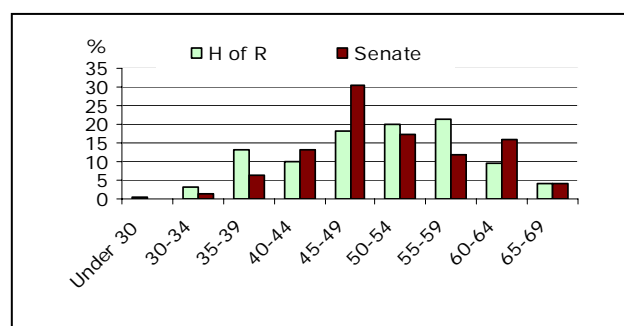
Figure 1. Total MPs in each age bracket



The youngest parliamentarian is Kate Ellis (Labor), who was 27 years old when elected to the seat of Adelaide in October 2004, and the oldest is Wilson Tuckey (Liberal), who was 69 when he was re-elected to the seat of O’Connor in 2004.

The average age is 50.6 years. In contrast to earlier parliaments, today’s senators are not considerably older than their counterparts in the lower house: the difference between the two averages is only 0.5 or six months. The average age of those in the Senate is 50.8 years while the average age of those in the House is 50.3 years. Figure 2 reveals that the age distribution is similar across both chambers, although there is a peak in the early middle-age bracket (age 45–49) in the Senate that is not seen in the House.

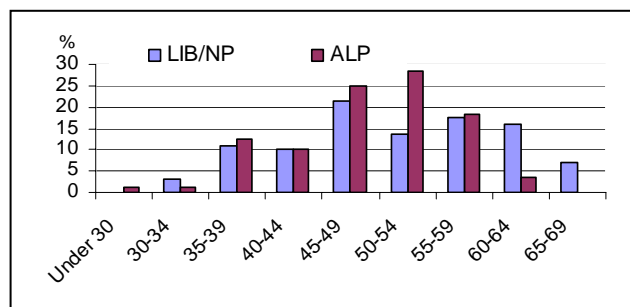
Figure 2. Age of MPs (percentage), by chamber



Looking at the age distribution by party, on average Labor members of parliament are slightly younger than their Coalition colleagues: the average age of Labor members is 48.8 years while the average age of Coalition members is 51.7 years.

Figure 3 shows that the largest differences between the parties occur in the 50–54 and the 60–64 age brackets. Labor has more people in the younger group (28 per cent of its members are in this age bracket compared to 14 per cent of the Coalition’s members) while the Coalition has more people in the older group (16 per cent as opposed to Labor’s 4 per cent).

**Figure 3. Age of MPs (percentage), by party**



It may be that the significant differences between parties in terms of the occupational backgrounds of their members can account for these variations (see the discussion below).

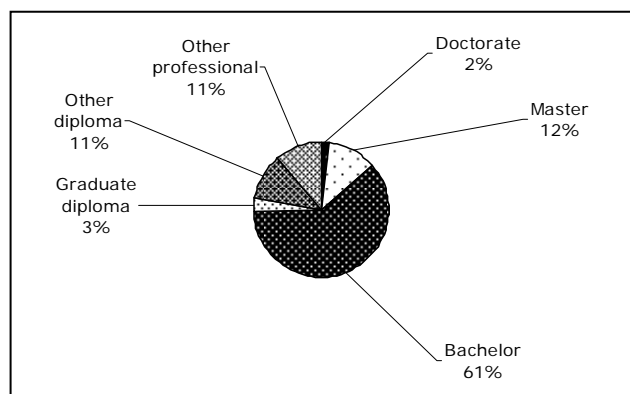
### Qualifications: an educated group

More than three-quarters of the members of the current parliament have post-secondary school qualifications. In total, 177 of the 226 politicians (78 per cent) have such qualifications. (Fellowships, memberships, and associates of professional or other bodies are not counted.)

There is little difference between the chambers or between the parties: 80 per cent of the senators and 77 per cent of the members of the House of Representatives have post-secondary qualifications; 78 per cent of Labor’s members and 77 per cent of the Coalition’s members have such qualifications. Within the Coalition, more Liberals (81 per cent) have post-secondary qualifications than do their counterparts from The Nationals (53 per cent).

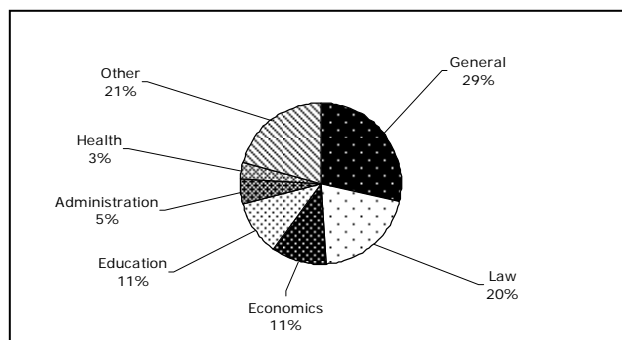
Between them, the 177 politicians hold 323 qualifications. The following breakdown explores the composition of the qualifications, looking at the *total number* of qualifications rather than the individuals who hold them or the highest qualification that each person holds. The most common qualification is a Bachelor degree, of which there are 196. In addition, there are six doctorates, 39 Masters degrees, 10 graduate diplomas, 36 ‘other’ diplomas, and 36 ‘other’ professional/certificate qualifications (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Qualifications held (percentage)**



The most common field of qualification is what the *Handbook* categorises as ‘general’, which includes those degrees where the major field of study has not been specified (for example, Arts degrees and doctorates). Of the 323 qualifications, there are 92 in the ‘general’ category, 66 in law, 36 in economics/commerce, 35 in education, 16 in administration and 11 in health (see Figure 5). The final 67 fall into the ‘other’ category, which includes such subjects as accountancy and engineering.

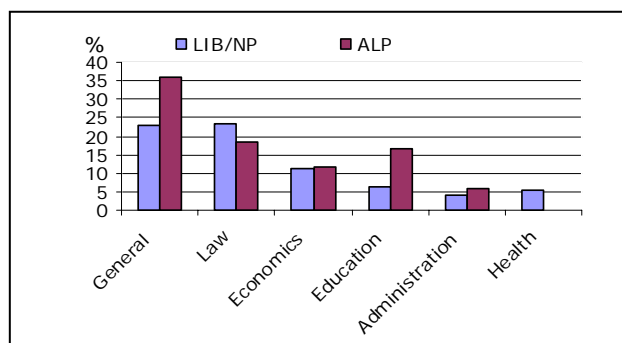
**Figure 5. Fields of qualification (percentage)**



A breakdown of the fields of qualification by party reveals differences in three areas (see Figure 6):

- Labor members have more ‘general’ qualifications than their Coalition counterparts (36 per cent to 23 per cent)
- Coalition members have more ‘law’ qualifications than their Labor counterparts (23 per cent to 18 per cent)
- Labor members have more ‘education’ qualifications than their Coalition counterparts (17 per cent to 6 per cent).

**Figure 6. Fields of qualification, by party**



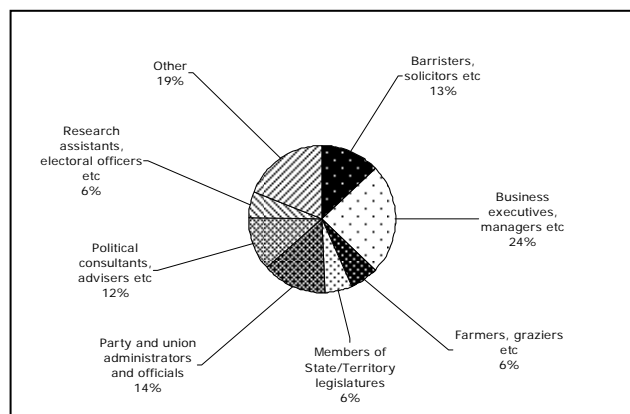
### Employment: working towards parliament

The *Handbook* data on the ‘previous occupation’ of members of the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament describes the jobs that they held immediately before their election to the Commonwealth Parliament. It does not say how long members held these jobs before they entered parliament, nor does it include details of any earlier employment. (The latter can be found in the individual entries in the biographies section of the *Handbook*.) As a result, there are limits to some of the conclusions that can be drawn, as will be outlined below.

The current parliament includes 29 people who worked in the legal profession, 55 who were in business, 14 who were in the farming industry, 43 who worked in areas including the public service, academia and the health profession, and 85 who worked in politics-related jobs. The latter category includes those who worked for a party or union, or a political lobbying or consultancy firm, or in a political research or electorate office position. This group comprises 38 per cent, or more than a third, of the total parliament. Figure 7 shows the occupations as percentages, with politics-related jobs separated into the divisions described in Tables 1 and 2.

The *Handbook* sorts occupations into three categories: managers and administrators (153), professionals (69), and other (4). The third category includes a motivational speaker, a public servant (not elsewhere included), and two real estate agents. The divisions in the first two categories are given in Tables 1 and 2.

**Figure 7. Occupation, total (percentage)**



**Table 1. Managers and administrators**

	Number	Percentage
Business executives, managers, self-employed businesspeople, company directors, etc.	55	36
Farmers, graziers and other (full-time) primary producers	14	9
Members of state/territory legislatures	14	9
Party and union administrators	25	16
Political consultants, advisers and lobbyists	26	17
Public service/policy administrators	7	5
Other administrators/consultants	12	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>100</b>

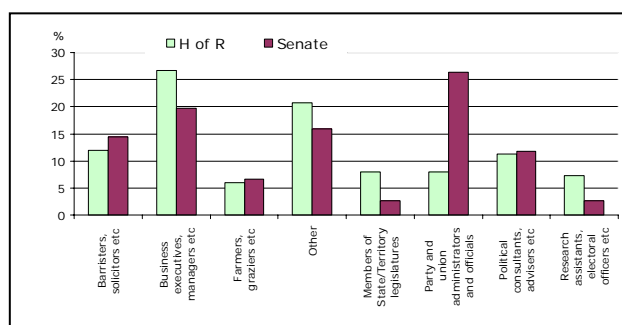
**Table 2. Professionals**

	Number	Percentage
Barristers, solicitors, lawyers, legal officers, etc	29	42
Lecturers, professors, tutors	8	12
Medical practitioners, dentists, nurses	5	7
Party and union officials	7	10
Researchers, research assistants, electoral and project officers	13	19
Other	7	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>100</b>

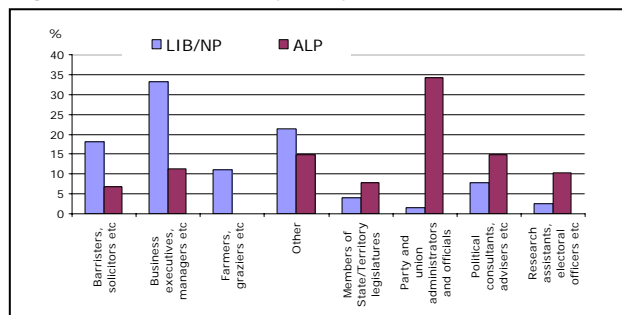
Looking at the previous employment of members of the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament by chamber shows that those who have been ‘party and union administrators and officials’ are much more prevalent in the Senate: 26 per cent of senators held such jobs immediately before entering parliament compared to only 8 per cent of lower house members (see Figure 8; for the purposes of this comparison, some of the employment categories have been conflated). ‘Business executives, managers, etc’ and ‘members of State/Territory legislatures’ are more likely to hold seats in the lower house.

A breakdown by party reveals a considerable difference in the backgrounds of Coalition and Labor members (see Figure 9). Nearly 70 per cent of Labor’s parliamentary members held politics-related jobs immediately before entering parliament, whereas less than 20 per cent of the Coalition’s members did so (67 per cent to 16 per cent).

**Figure 8. Occupation, by chamber**



**Figure 9. Occupation, by party**



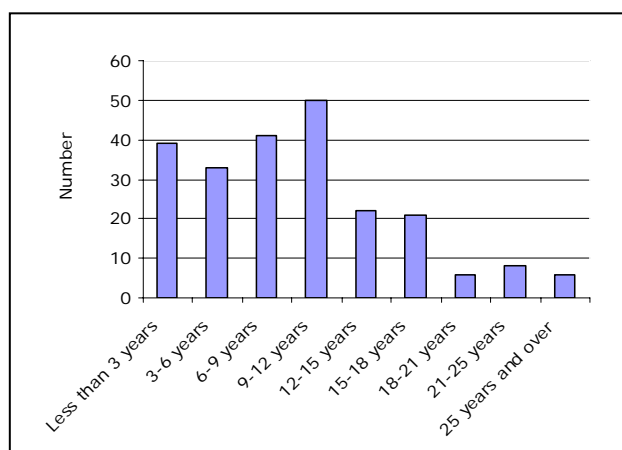
Not surprisingly, given the underlying philosophy of each party, the largest difference occurs in the ‘party and union administrators and officials’ category: 34 per cent of the Labor members held such jobs, compared to just 2 per cent of their Coalition colleagues. The figures are reversed, though with a smaller percentage point spread, in the ‘business executives/managers, etc’ category: 33 per cent of the Coalition members held jobs in this category compared to 11 per cent of their Labor counterparts.

As noted above, it could be that this difference in occupational backgrounds partially explains the variations in age distribution; it may be that Coalition members enter parliamentary politics later in life, after they have reached senior levels in the business world. Evidence in the next section supports this hypothesis in that Coalition politicians serve similar terms in office to their Labor colleagues, and not longer terms that would take them into the older age bracket.

**Length of service: a 12-year itch?**

Of the 226 members, nearly three-quarters (163 or 72 per cent) have served 9–12 years or less; just over one-quarter (63 or 28 per cent) have served 12–15 years or more (see Figure 10).<sup>3</sup> Of this latter group, 43 (or 19 per cent of the

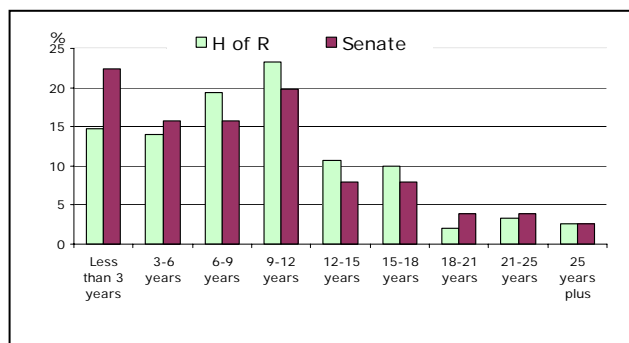
**Figure 10. Length of service, total**



total) have served 12–18 years and only six (or 3 per cent of the total) have served 25 years or more. The longest serving member in the 41st Parliament is Philip Ruddock, who has been in the House of Representatives for 32 years.

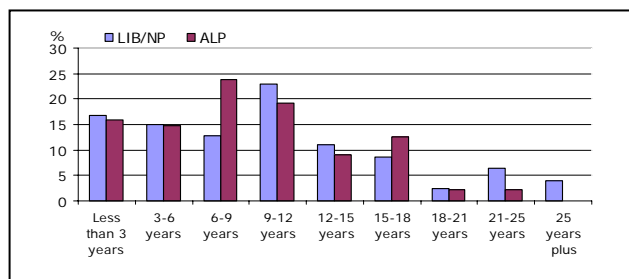
The length of service in each chamber is fairly similar, except for the shortest period—less than three years (see Figure 11). Nearly one-quarter of the senators (22 per cent) have served less than three years compared to only one-sixth (15 per cent) of their lower house counterparts. This difference reflects that, as a result of resignations and defeats, the 2004 election resulted in the largest intake of new senators since 1987.

**Figure 11. Length of service, by chamber**



Looking at length of service by party, the largest difference occurs in the 6–9 years bracket: 24 per cent of Labor’s politicians have served 6–9 years compared to 13 per cent of their Coalition colleagues (see Figure 12). The difference probably reflects the entrance of a new group of Labor politicians in 1998 when the large margin between the parties after the Coalition’s win in 1996 narrowed.

**Figure 12. Length of service, by party**



The length-of-service statistics suggest that being a parliamentarian is a relatively short career—generally lasting no more than 12 years—for politicians of all political hues.

## Conclusion

Members of the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament tend to be middle-aged, well-educated men, who are likely to have been employed in politics-related occupations, business or law before entering parliament in the last decade.

The high proportion from politics-related backgrounds suggests that those who argue that ‘the professional political class has taken over our national Parliament’ may be correct, especially given that the statistics presented in this Note count only those who worked in political fields immediately before their election and not those who have worked in politics at any point in their careers.<sup>4</sup> An examination of the latter group may reveal that the difference between Labor and the Coalition is not as great as it first appears.<sup>5</sup>

Some people have expressed concern at the apparent rise in the number of ‘professional politicians’. Prime Minister John

Howard has warned of the ‘danger for both parties’ of a ‘narrowing of the gene pool’ for political candidates to those ‘whose only life experience has been working in politics’.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Labor MP Carmen Lawrence has queried the level of representation that can be achieved when candidates do not mirror society and ‘are not even remotely typical of the wider society, even using crude indicators such as: age, gender, income and occupation’.<sup>7</sup>

However, others have argued that long engagement in political activity may create the best politicians. Former Victorian Liberal Party state president Michael Kroger has observed:

... it is much harder to determine whether a self employed dentist will make a good politician than it would be to determine whether a union official or an employer spokesman may make a success of a political career.<sup>8</sup>

In a spirited defence of parliamentarians with party, union and other political backgrounds, Labor’s national secretary, Tim Gartrell, notes that such people bring valuable skills and experience to parliament.<sup>9</sup>

Given the steady decline in membership of political parties and unions, it may be that future debate focuses less on the ‘professional politician’ and more on the decreasing size of the pool from which tomorrow’s politicians can be drawn.

\*For a more detailed breakdown of the statistics given in this Note, see pp. 308–24 of the [Handbook](#).

1. See, for example, D. Jaensch, *Getting Our Houses in Order*, Penguin Books, Victoria, 1986, pp. 53–6, and M. Sawer, ‘Representing trees, acres, voters and non-voters’, in M. Sawer and G. Zappala (eds), *Speaking for the People*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 2001, pp. 57–61.
2. Senator Julian McGauran, who resigned from The Nationals on 23 January 2006, was accepted as a member of the Liberal Party on 3 February 2006.
3. These figures are based on the total time in parliament, not continuous service.
4. M. Grattan, ‘Demise of the artisan politician’, *Sunday Age*, 30 October 2005, p. 10.
5. The individual biographies in the *Handbook* reveal that several politicians are in this category. See, for example, the entry for Tony Abbott (Lib., Warringah).
6. P. Starick, ‘MPs need life experience’, *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 13 December 2003, p. 34.
7. C. Lawrence, ‘Renewing democracy: can women make a difference?’, *The Sydney Papers*, vol. 12, no. 4, Spring 2000, p. 60.
8. M. Kroger, ‘The Liberal Party: the long and winding road’, *The Sydney Papers*, vol. 5, no. 4, Spring 1993, p. 90.
9. T. Gartrell, ‘Could Chifley win a Labor preselection today?’, Address to the NSW Fabian Society, 20 April 2005.

### Sarah Miskin and Martin Lumb Politics and Public Administration Section Information and Research Services

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