

## Members of Commonwealth ministries

### Introduction

Many Members of Parliament (MPs) aspire to ministerial office. Kim Beazley Jr once said: ‘being a minister, that really was something special from the moment I got it’.<sup>1</sup> Garfield Barwick was said to have arrived at the Attorney-General’s office with ‘more ideas than a dog has fleas’.<sup>2</sup> A lack of preferment, on the other hand, can mean frustration for those MPs who do not receive the opportunity to show their abilities on the government front bench.

How many MPs achieve ministerial positions? How many women have done so? From which states have ministers come? Have there been different trends over time? How many Senators have held office? In answering such questions, this Research Note uses material gathered by the Parliamentary Library’s Politics and Public Administration Section for the production of the *Parliamentary Handbook*, as well as from research undertaken for Members and Senators. We do not include various offices associated with the Ministry, such as Parliamentary Secretaries and Vice-Presidents of the Executive Council. The information was current as at 30 April 2007.

### How many are chosen?

Since 1901, 421 men and women, or 28.2 per cent of the 1490 members of the two houses, have been appointed to executive office.<sup>3</sup> Over the years the opportunity for selection has been affected by various factors, including the number of ministers in each government. The Barton Government, for example, which was appointed on 1 January 1901, included just eight ministers, whereas the fourth Howard Government, appointed on 26 October 2004, comprised 30 MPs with the status of minister.

The size of the Commonwealth Parliament also has been relevant. Changes in the size of the Parliament in 1949 and 1984 had an impact upon the chances of achieving ministerial office. A suddenly-enlarged parliament reduces the ministerial chances of many who are currently occupying seats in the two houses.

A third factor has been the longevity of some governments which has blocked the chances of many Opposition aspirants, as well as the ambitions of restless government backbenchers. Long-term governments offer fewer ministerial opportunities, while a government’s electoral defeat will obviously increase the overall number of MPs

who are appointed to executive office. The combined total of ministers who served in the Page-Menzies-Fadden-Curtin-Forde-Chifley-Menzies ministries of 1939–49 was 65, whereas the Menzies governments of 1949 to 1966 totalled just 50 ministers.

### Women

It was not until 1943 that the first female MPs were elected, and it took a further 23 years before the first female minister was appointed—Annabelle Rankin (Lib), Minister for Housing in the two Holt ministries (1966–7).<sup>4</sup> By the end of the Keating Government in 1996, seven more women had served. Twelve of the total 21 women who have served as ministers have been appointed by the Howard Government.

### The oldest minister

Queensland ALP Senator Joseph Collings was 76 when he was appointed to the Curtin ministry as Minister for the Interior. His term ended on 13 July 1945, when he was 80 years and 2 months, the oldest-serving minister to date.<sup>5</sup>

### The youngest ministers

By contrast, four ministers have been appointed at the age of 30. The first, and youngest, was Charles Frazer (ALP, appointed April 1910). He was 30 years and three months of age when appointed Minister without Portfolio in the second Fisher Government. Of the others, Gary Punch (ALP, 1988) was 30 years and five months when appointed, Harold Holt (United Australia Party, 1939) was 30 years and eight months, and Andrew Peacock (Lib, 1969) was 30 years and nine months.

### The longest serving

Five men have served as ministers for 20 years or more, including four Prime Ministers.

### John McEwen (25 years)

John McEwen, the former leader of the Country Party (1958–71), held several portfolios between 1937 and 1971. His term as Minister for Trade and Customs is the second-longest continuous term of any portfolio since Federation. He was sworn in to the portfolio on 11 January 1956 and ended his term on 5 February 1971—a period of 5504 days or just over 15 years.

### **George Pearce (24.7 years)**

George Pearce, the second-longest serving minister, holds the record for service as Minister for Defence—5013 days, or 13.7 years. This was served in four periods.

Remarkably, his first term in the Defence portfolio was served in the Labor Government of Andrew Fisher (1908–09), while his final term was served in the UAP Government of Joe Lyons (1932–34).

### **Robert Menzies (23.1 years)**

Robert Menzies' first term as a minister began in 1934 and his last ended in 1966. He was the longest-serving Prime Minister (1939–41, 1949–66). His second term is also the longest continuous period as a minister in any portfolio. His 5883 days was over a year longer than John McEwen's term as Minister for Trade and Customs referred to above. Menzies is one of the few MPs to have become a minister as soon as he entered the Parliament, having served, immediately prior to his election, as a minister in the Victorian government of Stanley Argyle.

### **William McMahon (21.4 years)**

Although he served as a minister for over 21 years cumulatively, William McMahon did not serve as long in any single Executive role as any of the other four ministers discussed in this section. His ministerial career began in 1951 and ended with his defeat as Prime Minister in 1972. His longest-held office was as Minister for Labour and National Service under Robert Menzies from late 1958 until January 1966—a total of 2604 days or 7.1 years.

### **Billy Hughes (20.2 years)**

W. M. (Billy) Hughes's ministerial service began at the same time as Pearce's in 1908 and concluded in 1941, when Hughes was 79 years of age. Hughes holds the record as the longest-serving Attorney-General. In three terms, he was in office for a total of 4935 days (13.5 years). As with Pearce, he served in both Labor and non-Labor ministries.

### **Members or Senators?**

Ministers may come from either house of the Parliament, and there is no restriction upon how many may come from either. Some critics have, however, called for a ban on Senators serving on the grounds that the Senate would be better able to focus on its review role were it to contain no ministers.<sup>6</sup> One former Liberal MHR and Senator, David Hamer, has claimed that:

The whole political aspiration pyramid is skewed in the wrong direction. The Senate will not become a really effective legislature until ministers are removed from it.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this, it is inevitable in a Westminster-derived Parliament that, not only will most ministers come from the House of Representatives, but a disproportionate number will do so. Section 24 of the Constitution contains the so-called 'nexus', which requires that the number of Representatives 'shall be, as nearly as practicable, twice

the number of the senators'. If ministerial appointments matched this, obviously about 33 per cent would be Senators. In fact, of those who have been MPs only 110 (26.3 per cent) have come from the Senate, while 309 (73.7 per cent) were members of the House of Representatives.

### **Neither Member nor Senator**

Two of the 421 ministers never served in the Parliament. The former Queensland Premier (1898–9), James Dickson, was sworn in on 1 January 1901 as the Barton Government's Minister for Defence. Dickson became ill during the Inauguration ceremonies in Sydney and died nine days after his swearing-in. His few days in office remain the shortest period served by a defence minister.

Neil Lewis, Tasmanian Premier at the time of the Commonwealth Inauguration, was sworn in as Minister (without portfolio) on the same day as Dickson. However, Lewis did not seek a Commonwealth Parliament seat in the March 1901 elections, relinquishing his position on 23 April.

Seven other early appointees to the Barton ministry served as ministers prior to the first Commonwealth elections on 29–30 March 1901. These were: Edmund Barton (PM), Alfred Deakin (Attorney-General), William Lyne (Minister for Home Affairs), George Turner (Treasurer), Charles Kingston (Minister for Trade and Customs), John Forrest (Postmaster-General and Dickson's replacement as Minister for Defence), and James Drake (Forrest's replacement as Postmaster-General).<sup>8</sup>

Following the disappearance of Prime Minister Harold Holt on 17 December 1967, John McEwen was sworn in on 19 December and served as caretaker Prime Minister until 10 January 1968. Senator John Gorton became Prime Minister on that day (the only Senator thus far to hold the office). He later resigned from the Senate on 1 February 1968 in order to contest a by-election for the House of Representatives seat held by Holt. From 1 to 24 February 1968 (the latter being the date of Gorton's election to the House of Representatives) the Prime Minister was not a member of the Parliament. This is the only time since 1901 that a minister has not been a member of either house.<sup>9</sup>

That Dickson, Lewis and the others mentioned here could be ministers, despite not holding a parliamentary seat, was due to s.64 of the Constitution. This states that:

... no Minister of State shall hold office for a longer period than three months unless he is or becomes a senator or a member of the House of Representatives.

Only an emergency such as the disappearance of the head of a ministry is likely to see the repeat of the unique Gorton experience.

## A blink of an eye

In contrast, some ministerial appointments have been very short indeed. Four cases involved the relevant Prime Ministers in unwanted controversy.

Prime Minister Lyons (UAP) decided on a Cabinet reshuffle in November 1938, the most significant part of which was putting the Minister for Defence, Geoffrey Street, ahead of the Minister for Trade and Customs, Thomas White, in the order of seniority. John Perkins was appointed to the positions of Minister without Portfolio administering External Territories, and Minister without Portfolio assisting the Prime Minister. Lyons also created what was described as a 'senior Cabinet group', which would deal with 'major matters of national significance and government policy'. White responded by resigning his position and crossing the floor in a vote against the Government, with Perkins being appointed to White's portfolio. Perkins thus held his two ministerial positions for a single day.<sup>10</sup>

In June 1975 the Whitlam Government (ALP) Minister for Labor and Immigration, Clyde Cameron, refused to accept a ministerial reshuffle that would have seen him demoted. Whitlam had him removed from office by the Governor-General. At the 10.00 am swearing-in ceremony on 6 June, the new Defence Minister, Bill Morrison, also accepted the position of Minister for Science and Consumer Affairs. Then, at 12.30 pm on the same day, Cameron and Whitlam drove to Government House for Cameron's swearing in as Science and Consumer Affairs Minister. Morrison's term in this portfolio of less than three hours has been the briefest of any minister to date.<sup>11</sup>

On the evening of 22 February 1979, the Finance Minister in the Fraser Government (Coalition), Eric Robinson, suddenly announced his resignation. He stated in a letter to the Prime Minister that he could no longer give Fraser his 'unqualified support'. Four days later, however, he returned to office, with Fraser stating that 'there were no significant differences' between the two men. In the intervening four days, the Treasurer, John Howard, was also Minister for Finance, the briefest term in this portfolio.<sup>12</sup>

On 3 June 1991, Prime Minister Hawke was confronted by the resignation of his Deputy PM and Treasurer, Paul Keating. Hawke served officially as Treasurer until the swearing-in of John Kerin on the following day.

## 'Sacking' ministers

The stripping of Cameron's ministerial position was the second such 'sacking' following the refusal of a minister to accept a Prime Ministerial instruction to resign his portfolio. In December 1918 a Royal Commission investigating defence contracts referred critically to Jens Jensen, Minister for Trade and Customs. Jensen refused an instruction to resign, so Prime Minister Hughes advised the Governor-General to withdraw his commission.<sup>13</sup>

## States and territories

Table 1 shows the state and territory representation in the nation's ministries since Federation.

**Table 1: State and territory ministers (1901–2007)**

State/territory ministers	% ministers	% MPs
NSW	32.0	35.8
Vic	25.1	26.6
Qld	14.0	14.8
SA	10.0	8.8
WA	10.0	7.7
Tas	7.6	4.6
ACT	0.9	0.8
NT	0.5	0.8

The three most populous states of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland have provided 77 per cent of the Parliament's members, but slightly fewer ministers (71.1 per cent). New South Wales has had the most obvious disparity of the three.

Some state figures have been consistent over time, while others show some variation according to the period. NSW has had relatively fewer ministers since 1984 than before this date, whereas Tasmanian MPs were more likely to achieve ministerial office between 1901 and 1949 than in the years since. Since 1984 South Australia (11.1 per cent) and Western Australia (11.7 per cent) have had individual tallies almost the size of Queensland (12.6 per cent), despite returning fewer MPs.

## The 'Big Four'

Some qualification needs to be made, however. NSW and Victoria have provided 57.1 per cent of all ministers. These two states have also dominated the major Cabinet ministries of Prime Minister (80 per cent from these two states), Treasurer (77 per cent), Minister for External/Foreign Affairs (70 per cent),<sup>14</sup> and Minister for

**Table 2: Holders of the major portfolios by state (1901–2007)**

Office	No.	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	ACT	NT
PM	25	11 (44%)	9 (36%)	3 (12%)	-	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	-	-
Treas.	35	14 (40%)	13 (37%)	4 (11%)	1 (3%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)	-	-
F Affairs*	34	12 (35%)	12 (35%)	2 (6%)	3 (9%)	5 (15%)	-	-	-
Defence+	48	17 (35%)	9 (19%)	7 (15%)	5 (10%)	7 (15%)	3 (6%)	-	-
A-G	32	12 (38%)	12 (38%)	4 (13%)	2 (6%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	-

\* There was no holder of this office between 14/11/1916 and 21/12/1921.

+ Including a single Minister for Defence Co-ordination

Defence (54 per cent) (Table 2). Another significant Executive office dominated by the largest states has been the Attorney-Generalship. Three-quarters of the chief law officers have come from NSW and Victoria.

## PMs' backgrounds

One factor in ministerial appointments might be the state background of the Prime Minister. There have been too few Prime Ministers from the four smallest states to justify any comment, but the position is different for the two largest states.

The six Victorian Prime Ministers (Deakin, Bruce, Menzies, Gorton, Fraser, Hawke) have appointed 180 Victorian-based ministers, and only 176 NSW-based ministers. In the governments of the 11 NSW Prime Ministers (Barton, Watson, Reid, Cook, Hughes, Page, Chifley, McMahon, Whitlam, Keating, Howard) ministers from NSW have predominated, and far more disproportionately than in the Victorian case (Table 3).

**Table 3: Appointments by NSW PMs**

NSW PMs	NSW mins	Vic mins
Barton	3	2
Watson	2	1
Reid	3	3
Cook	3	3
Hughes	17	11
Page	6	3
Chifley	13	12
McMahon	14	12
Whitlam	27	8
Keating	29	26
Howard	44	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>113</b>

Much of the NSW distortion occurred in the Whitlam years with 27 NSW ministers and only eight Victorian ministers. In the case of Victorian Prime Ministers, Prime Minister Hawke showed the strongest positive home state bias. By contrast, significantly more of the Menzies-appointed ministers came from NSW than from Menzies' home state of Victoria (Table 4).

**Table 4: Appointments by Victorian PMs**

Vic PMs	NSW mins	Vic mins
Deakin	8	10
Bruce	7	7
Menzies	60	49
Gorton	29	28
Fraser	39	43

## Conclusion

The Commonwealth Ministry will remain the career pinnacle for most MPs. The story of who is appointed—and who is not—will continue to be an important part of the Australian political story.

1. Peter FitzSimons, *Beazley*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 1998, p. 197.
2. David Marr, *Barwick*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, rev. edn 2005, p. 141.
3. W. M. Hughes has been counted twice due to his serving as a minister while representing seats in both NSW and Victoria.
4. Rankin was not the first woman to serve in Cabinet. This honour fell to Enid Lyons, Vice-President of the Executive Council 1949–51.
5. Collings in fact served in the first Chifley Government as Vice-President of the Executive Council for another 15.5 months.
6. Scott Bennett, 'The Australian Senate', *Research Paper*, no. 6, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2003–04, p. 19.
7. David Hamer 'Parliament and Government: Striking the Balance', in Julian Disney and J. R. Nethercote (ed.), *The House on Capital Hill. Parliament, Politics and Power in the National Capital*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1996, p. 74.
8. Richard O'Connor was also in the Barton Cabinet but as Vice-President of the Executive Council, rather than as a minister.
9. It has been claimed that Michael Lavarch was Attorney-General while waiting for a special election in Dickson which followed the death of a candidate in the 1993 Commonwealth election, see Imre Salusinszky, 'Catch 22 for a seatless PM', *Weekend Australian*, 26 May 2007. In fact, Mr Lavarch was not appointed until after the election.
10. 'Mr White's Dramatic Resignation', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 November 1938.
11. Jack Allsopp, 'Cameron fiasco!', *Sun*, 6 June 1975.
12. Michael Prain, 'Robinson bounces back', *Sun-Pictorial*, 26 February 1979.
13. Geoffrey Sawyer, *Australian Federal Politics and Law 1901–1929*, Melbourne, MUP, 1956, p. 161.
14. The title was changed to 'Foreign Affairs' in 1970.

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