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## The 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament: traits and trends

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## Introduction

In recent years, academics and media commentators have documented the rise of a professional political class and the apparent shrinking gene pool in parliament, where members of Parliament often have 'more in common with each other than with many of their constituents'.<sup>1</sup> This Research Paper examines the biographical details of the senators and members of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, and draws on the statistical tables featured in the 32<sup>nd</sup> edition of the *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*.<sup>2</sup> The paper focuses on the age, qualifications, previous employment and length of parliamentary service, and compares these characteristics with previous parliaments. A similar examination of the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament was published in 2006.<sup>3</sup>

## Composition of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament

The 21 August 2010 election saw 29 new members elected to the House of Representatives, together with the return of three Coalition members who did not retain their seats at the 2007 election, Warren Entsch (LIB, Leichhardt, Qld), Teresa Gambaro (LIB, Brisbane, Qld) and Ross Vasta (LIB, Bonner, Qld). This new component constituted approximately 20 per cent of the chamber. This compares with 39 new House of Representatives members at the 2007 election (26 per cent of the chamber). Of the 32 members who left the House at the 2010 election, 20 retired and 12 were defeated.

Of the 40 senators up for re-election in 2010, all but 12 were re-elected. Six did not contest the election and six were defeated. The 12 new senators, including David Fawcett (LIB, SA) the former Member for Wakefield from 2004 to 2007, equated to approximately 16 per cent of the chamber, compared with 14 new Senators (18 per cent) after the 2007 election.

The statistics and tables in this paper are based on data for the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament as at 1 July 2011 when the new senators commenced their term. Party representation for the two chambers is detailed in Table 1 below. During the course of the Parliament, there have been seven casual vacancies in the Senate, but no House of Representatives by-elections. Although party numbers remained the same in the Senate from 1 July 2011, some variations occurred in the House of Representatives. Bob Katter (Kennedy, Qld) announced the launch of his own party, and was formally listed as Katter's Australian Party from 27 September 2011. Peter Slipper (Fisher, Qld) resigned from the Liberal Party and became an independent on 24 November 2011. Craig Thomson (Dobell, NSW) resigned from the Australian Labor Party and became an independent on 29 April 2012. Tony Crook (O'Connor, WA) sat as an independent until 8 May 2012, and subsequently sat with The Nationals, but did not attend joint Coalition meetings.

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1. L Dodson, ['The new and the restless'](#), *Australian Financial Review*, 14 August 2010, p. 25.
  2. [Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia](#), Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2011.
  3. S Miskin and M Lumb, [The 41st Parliament: middle-aged, well-educated and \(mostly\) male](#), Research note, 24, 2005–06, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2006, accessed 1 August 2013.

**Table 1. Party representation in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament**

House of Representatives

Party	Pre-election	Post-election
Australian Labor Party	83	72
Liberal Party of Australia	54	60
The Nationals/Country Liberal Party	9	12
<i>Coalition</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>72</i>
The Nationals (WA)	–	1
Australian Greens	–	1
Independent	4	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>150</b>

Senate

Party	before July 2011	after July 2011
Australian Labor Party	32	31
Liberal Party of Australia	32	28
The Nationals/Country Liberal Party	5	6
<i>Coalition</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>34</i>
Australian Greens	5	9
Family First	1	–
Democratic Labour Party	–	1
Independent	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>76</b>

## Gender

Following the 2010 election, the number of women in Parliament declined slightly from 68 to 67, approximately 30 per cent of the Parliament.<sup>4</sup> The number of women in the House of Representatives declined from 41 (27 per cent) to 37 (25 per cent). When the newly-elected Senators commenced on 1 July 2011, the number of women in the Senate rose from 27 (35 per cent) to 30 (38 per cent). This higher proportion of women in the upper house is mirrored in Australian state parliaments. In the five states with upper houses, four (NSW, WA, SA and Tas) currently have a higher proportion of women in the upper house than the lower house, Victoria the only exception.<sup>5</sup>

## Ethnic background

Although detailed research on the ethnic background of the Parliament is limited, some indications can be drawn from *Parliamentary Handbook* statistics on the number of overseas born MPs. Nearly

4. For detailed statistics and information on the representation of women in Australian parliaments, see Dr J McCann and J Wilson, [Representation of women in Australian parliaments](#), Background note, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 7 March 2012, accessed 1 August 2013.
5. See [Composition of Australian Parliaments by Party and Gender](#), Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2013, accessed 1 August 2013.

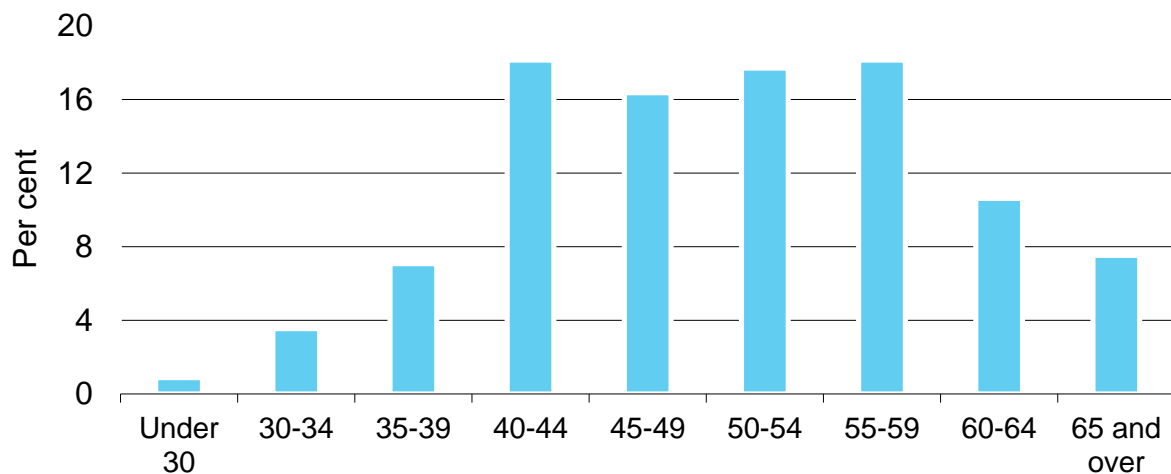
half of the members of the first Parliament (49 per cent) were born overseas, predominantly the United Kingdom. In the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament only 12 per cent were born overseas. Of the 29 senators and members born overseas, 13 were born in the United Kingdom; four in New Zealand; and one each from Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Nigeria and South Africa.<sup>6</sup> Place of birth, of course, does not necessarily reflect ethnic background. Additional research indicates that at least 13 per cent of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament were migrants from a non-English speaking background or children of migrants from a non-English speaking background.<sup>7</sup> Ken Wyatt (LIB, Hasluck, WA), elected in 2010, became the first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives.

## Age

Parliament remains the domain of the middle-aged: the number of members in the 40–59 age bracket in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament was 159, with only 26 (11.5 per cent) younger than 40, and 41 (18.1 per cent) aged 60 or older.

The youngest parliamentarian in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament was Wyatt Roy (LIB, Longman, Qld), also the youngest ever elected to Parliament—he was 20 when elected in 2010. The oldest member of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament was Alby Schultz (LIB, Hume, NSW), 71 when re-elected in 2010. Mr Schultz did not contest the 2013 election.

**Figure 1. Total MPs in each age bracket**



The average age was 51, slightly older than the previous parliament (50.1), but comparable with historical statistics. Since Federation, the average age of senators and members in any one Parliament has ranged between 47 and 52, fluctuating from 48.1 in 1901 to 51.8 in 1950 and down

6. For details, see [‘Overseas born’](#) in *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, op. cit.

7. This figure is based on information obtained from published biographical information and first speeches in Parliament.

to 47.5 in 1978.<sup>8</sup> The difference between the two chambers in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament was marginal: the average age of those in the Senate was 51.7 while the average age of those in the House was 50.6. Figure 2 illustrates the similarity in age distribution across both chambers, except for a peak in the 50–54 age bracket in the Senate not seen in the House.

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

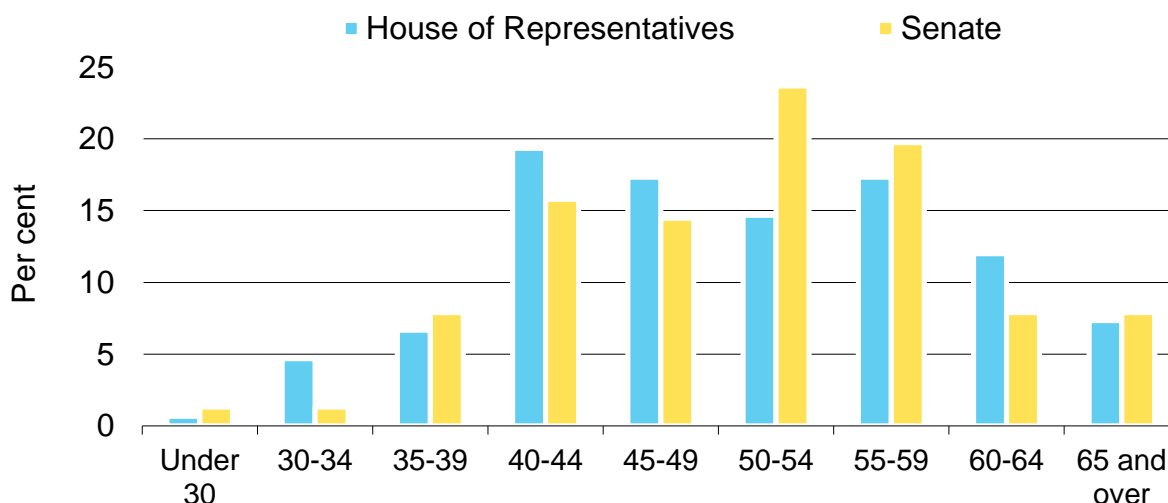
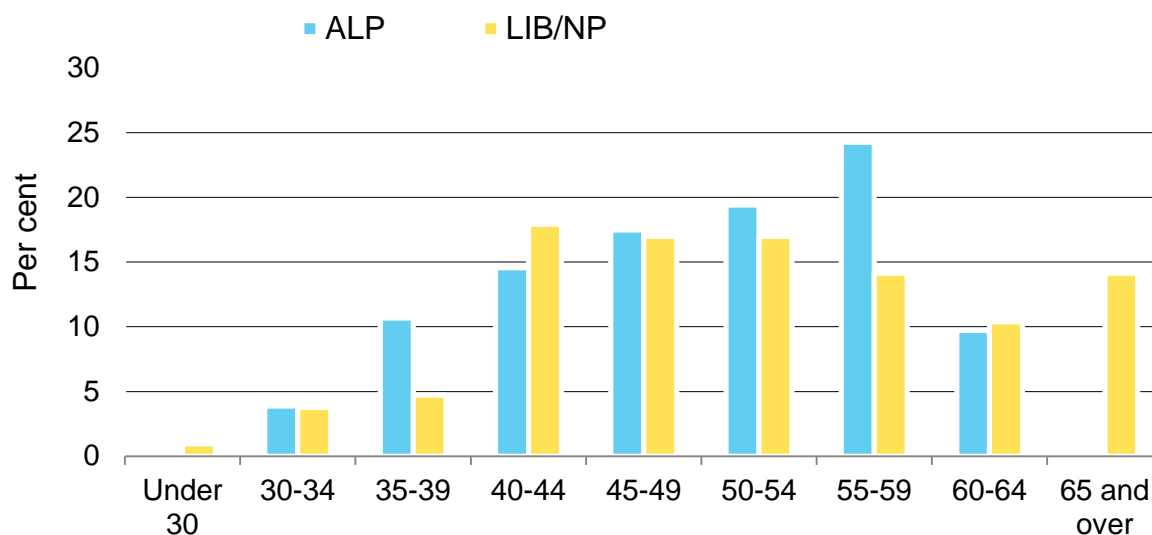


Figure 3 shows that the largest difference between the parties occurs in the over 65 age bracket. The Coalition has 14 senators and members over the age of 65, while the ALP has none.

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



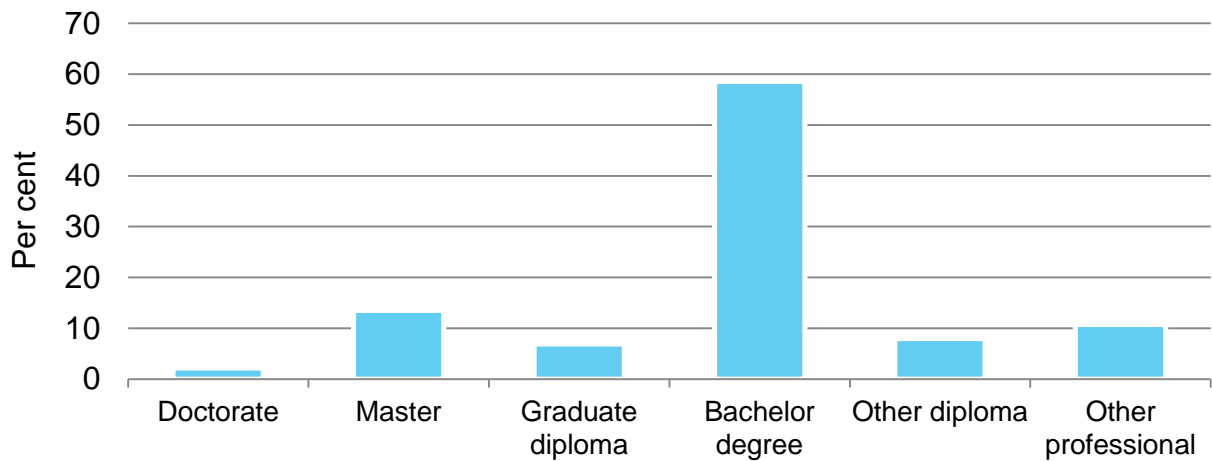
8. J Rydon, *A Federal Legislature: The Australian Commonwealth Parliament 1901–1980*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 47–49.

## Qualifications

The number of MPs with post-secondary qualifications has risen steadily since Federation: from approximately 15 per cent in 1901 to 41 per cent in 1980<sup>9</sup>, and now nearly 81 per cent (183 out of 226).<sup>10</sup> There was a slight difference between the chambers: 84 per cent of the senators and 79 per cent of the members of the House of Representatives had post-secondary qualifications.

Between them, the 183 politicians held 362 qualifications. The following breakdown explores the composition of the qualifications, looking at the *total number* of qualifications rather than the individuals who held them or the highest qualification that each person held. The most common qualification was a Bachelor degree, of which there were 212. In addition, there were eight doctorates, 49 Masters degrees, 25 graduate diplomas, 29 ‘other’ diplomas, and 31 ‘other’ professional/certificate qualifications (see Figure 4).

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

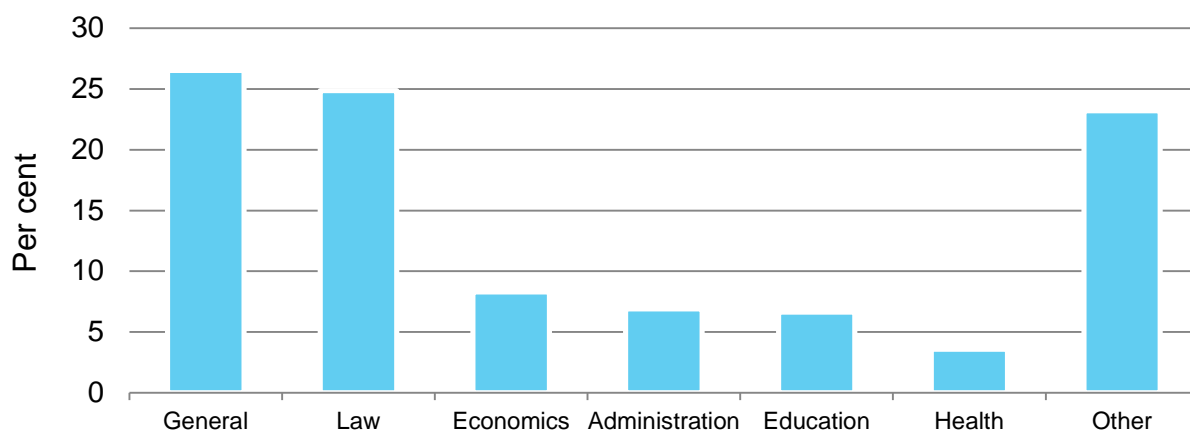


The most common field of qualification is what the *Parliamentary Handbook* categorises as ‘general’, which includes those degrees where the major field of study has not been specified (for example, Arts degrees and doctorates). Of the 362 qualifications, there were 96 in the ‘general’ category, 90 in law (a steep increase from 66 in 2005), 30 in economics/commerce, 25 in administration, 24 in education (a marked decline from 35 in 2005) and 13 in health (see Figure 5). In fields other than law and education, the fluctuations since 2005 are less pronounced.

9. J Rydon, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

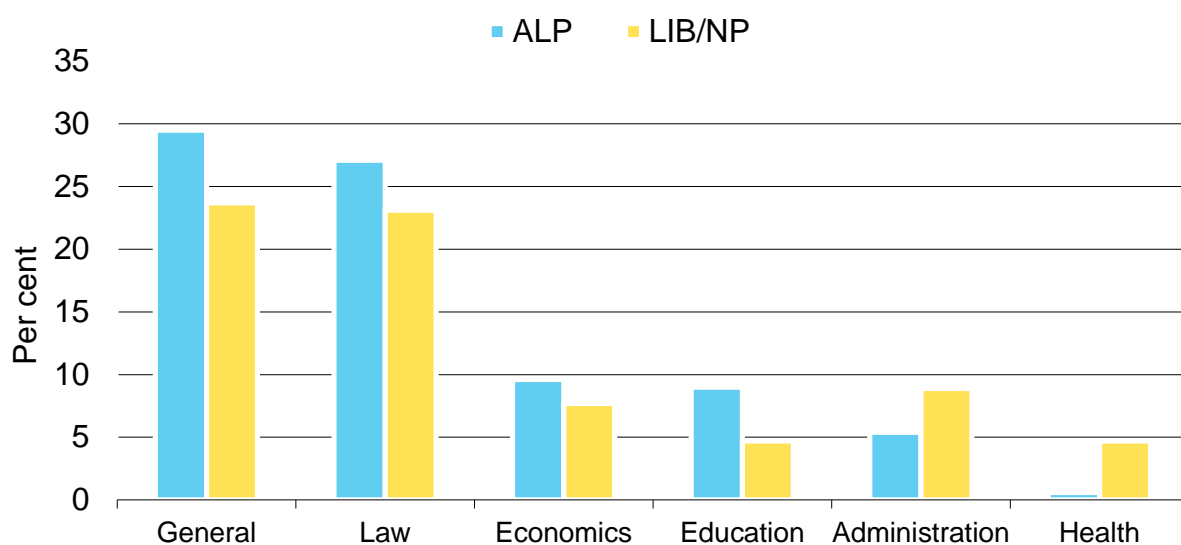
10. Fellowships, memberships, and associates of professional or other bodies are not counted.

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



A breakdown of the fields of qualification by party reveals some differences (see Figure 6). In 2005 more Coalition members had law qualifications than their Labor counterparts (23 per cent to 18 per cent), but in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament 27 per cent of Labor members had law qualifications, while the Coalition’s level of law qualifications remained at 23 per cent.

**Figure 6. Fields of qualification, by party (percentage)**



## Occupational background

Career paths are often complex: a member with legal qualifications may initially practise law, and then later become a business executive or a union official. The Handbook data on the previous occupation of members of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament describes the jobs they held immediately before their election to 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.) Details are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2. Previous occupation**

	Number	Percentage*
Business executives, managers, self-employed businesspeople, company directors, etc.	57	25
Political consultants, advisers and lobbyists	32	14
Barristers, solicitors, lawyers, legal officers, etc	30	13
Party and union administrators	22	10
Party and union officials	14	6
Members of state/territory legislatures	13	6
Public service/policy administrators	10	4
Other administrators/consultants	9	4
Farmers, graziers and other (full-time) primary producers	8	4
Researchers, research assistants, electorate and project officers	8	4
Lecturers, teachers, tutors	5	2
Medical practitioners, dentists, nurses	4	2
Local government officials	3	1
Other	11	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>100</b>

\* percentage of the total parliament

The 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament included 30 people who worked in the legal profession, 57 who were in business, eight who were in the farming industry, and 92 who worked in politics-related jobs. The latter category includes local government officials, 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 amounts to 41 per cent, an increase of 15 percentage points since 1988, when the figure was 26 per cent.

The statistics for previous employment by chamber indicate those who have been ‘party and union administrators and officials’ were much more prevalent in the Senate: 26 per cent of senators held such jobs immediately before entering parliament compared with only 11 per cent of lower house members (see Figure 7; for the purposes of this comparison, some of the employment categories have been conflated). ‘Business executives, managers, etc.’ were more likely to hold seats in the lower house.

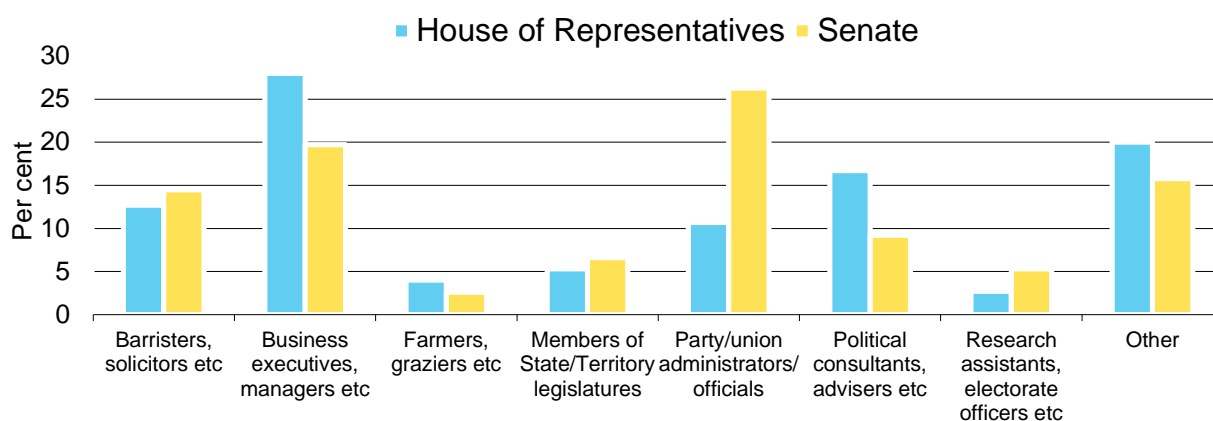
There were substantial differences in the backgrounds of Labor and Coalition members (see Figure 8), most notably in the categories of ‘party and union administrators and officials’ (predominantly Labor) and ‘business executive/managers etc.’ (predominantly Coalition).

Occupations which have seen the largest increase represented in Parliament are: political consultants and advisers (from 2 per cent in 1988 to 14 per cent in 2011); and business executives and managers (from 17 per cent in 1988 to 25 per cent in 2011).

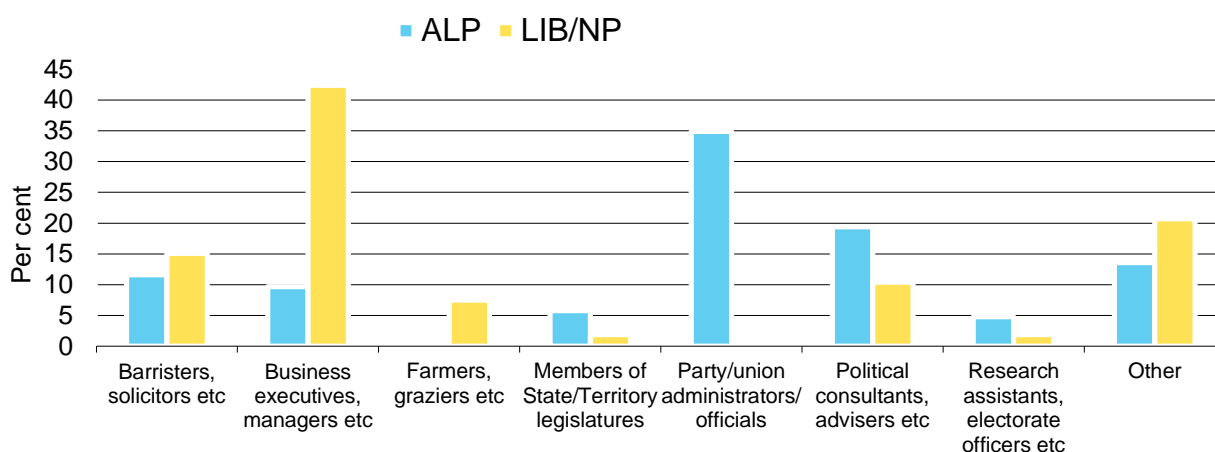


Occupations which have seen the largest decrease represented in Parliament are: lecturers and teachers (from 12 per cent in 1988 to 2 per cent in 2011); and farmers and graziers (from 8 per cent in 1988 to 3 per cent in 2011).

**Figure 7. Occupation, by chamber**



**Figure 8. Occupation, by party**



## Movement between parliaments

The first federal Parliament in 1901, not surprisingly, drew heavily on the experience of those who had served in state parliaments. Seventy-nine per cent of the first Parliament’s members and senators were previously in a state parliament.<sup>11</sup> This figure has dropped steeply since Federation. Among those elected from 1902 to 1948, 37 per cent were former state MPs; and among those elected from 1949 to 1980, 14 per cent were former state MPs.<sup>12</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number continues to decline: eight per cent of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament were former state MPs. The movement of former federal members to state parliament is less frequent, with no obvious trends over time.

11. J Rydon, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Local government service continues to play a significant role in the career path of federal members. In 1986 political historian Joan Rydon observed:

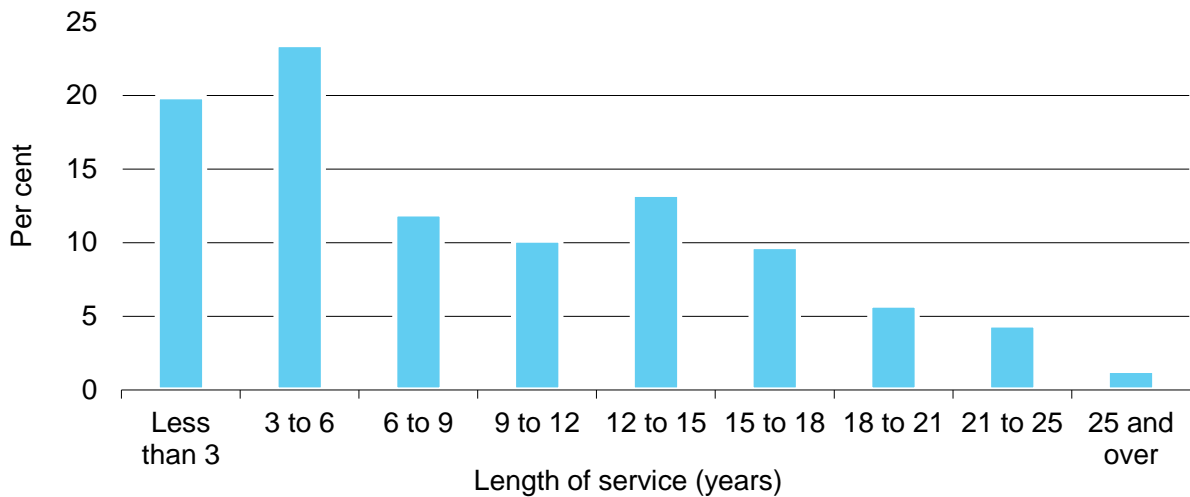
at one extreme [local government service] may be regarded as a training ground in politics...at the other it may be little more important than any other local activity or community service which contributes to public prominence and popularity'.<sup>13</sup>

Approximately 30 per cent of the first Parliament served in local government.<sup>14</sup> This figure, like the percentage of state MPs, has also declined over the years, but not as dramatically. The figure dropped to 19 per cent in 1980<sup>15</sup> and 15 per cent in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament.

## Length of service

As at 1 July 2011, of the 226 members of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, nearly two-thirds (148 MPs or 65 per cent) had served less than 12 years; 45 members (20 per cent) had served less than three years (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Length of service, total**



13. J Rydon, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

The longest serving members of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament are listed below in Table 3.

**Table 3. Longest serving members of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament**

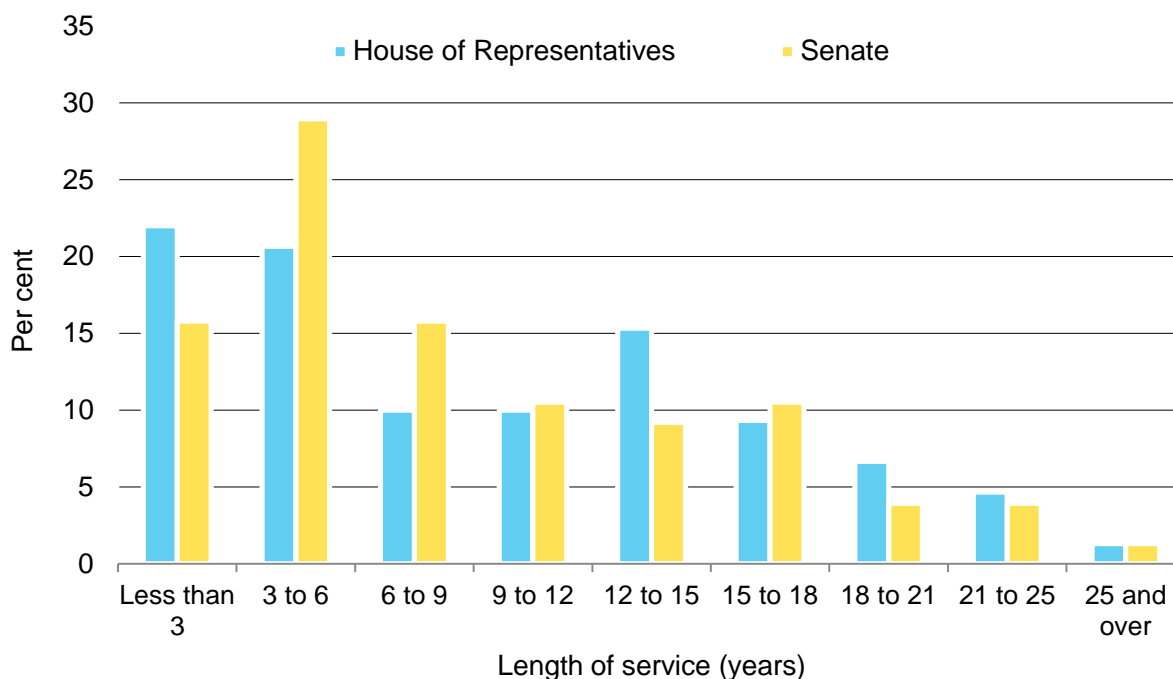
	Senate	House of Representatives
*Philip Ruddock (LIB, Berowra, NSW)		from 22.9.1973
‡Senator Ron Boswell (NATS, Qld)	from 5.3.1983	
‡Harry Jenkins (ALP, Scullin, Vic)		from 8.2.1986
Bronwyn Bishop (LIB, Mackellar, NSW)	11.7.1987–24.2.1994	from 26.3.1994
Warren Snowdon (ALP, Lingiari, NT)		11.7.1987–2.3.1996 and from 3.10.1998
Senator John Faulkner (ALP, NSW)	from 4.4.1989	
‡Simon Crean (ALP, Hotham, Vic)		from 24.3.1990
Laurie Ferguson (ALP, Werriwa, NSW)		from 24.3.1990
Daryl Melham (ALP, Banks, NSW)		from 24.3.1990
Bruce Scott (NATS, Maranoa, Qld)		from 24.3.1990
‡Alex Somlyay (LIB, Fairfax, Qld)		from 24.3.1990
Warren Truss (NATS, Wide Bay, Qld)		from 24.3.1990

\* Father of the House (the longest continuous serving Member of the House of Representatives)

‡ did not contest 2013 election

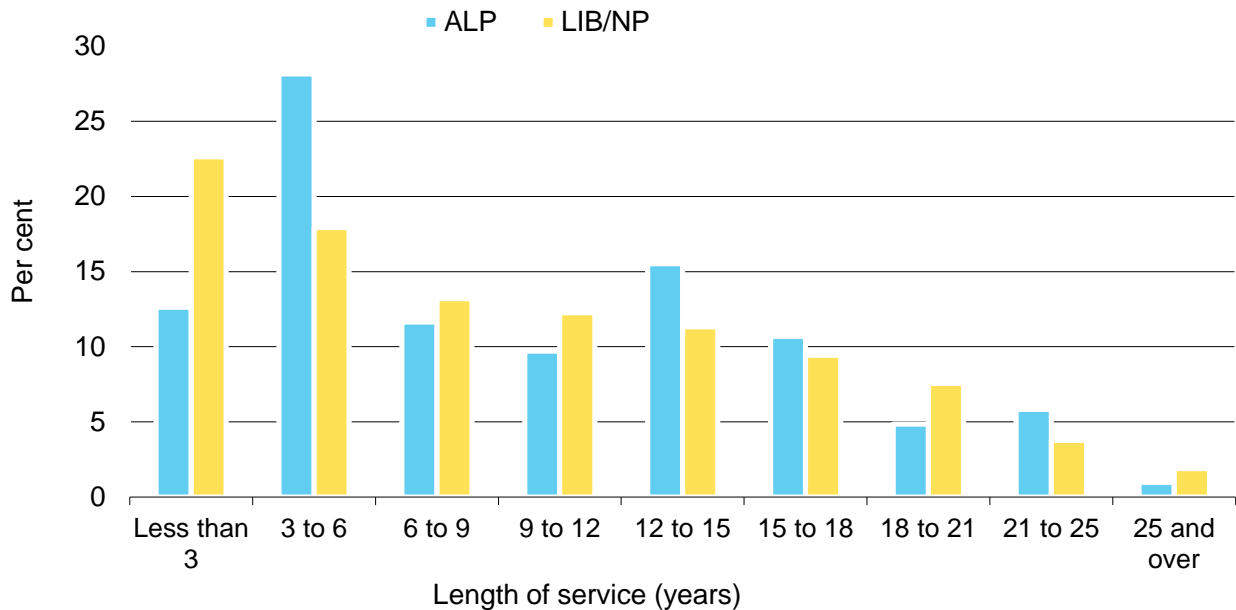
The length of service in each chamber is similar with some occasional fluctuations (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10. Length of service, by chamber**



Examining length of service by party, notable differences can be observed in the ‘three to six years’ and ‘less than three years’ categories. These differences are consistent with the 2007 and 2010 election results and the respective swings to and from the ALP. Clearly a number of factors are at work in determining career length, perhaps most obviously, electoral success and the prospect of being in government and/or the executive.

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



For those MPs elected between 1901 and 1909 the average completed length of service was 10.6 years.<sup>16</sup> This of course includes many MPs who had previously served in state parliament. For those elected between 1949 and 1954 the average completed length of service rose to 14.1 years.<sup>17</sup> More recently, between 2000 and 2012 the average completed term dropped to 13 years—12.6 years for members of the House of Representatives and 14 years for senators. Therefore there has been a slight if not substantial reduction in length of service. Given the increased ‘professionalisation’ of politics<sup>18</sup> and given that many MPs have served an apprenticeship in politics-related positions before entering the chamber, the era of the career politician is not over.

## Comparisons with other countries

A comparison with similar statistics compiled in other countries suggests these demographic trends are not unique to Australia, although there are interesting differences:

16. J Rydon, op. cit., p. 58.

17. Ibid.

18. See K Jones, ‘Professional politicians as the subjects of moral panic’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 43 (2), June 2008, pp. 243–258.

- the percentage of women in Parliament in Australia (30 per cent) is substantially higher than either the United Kingdom (22 per cent) or the United States (18 per cent), but far less than countries such as Rwanda (52 per cent), Cuba (49 per cent) and Sweden (45 per cent)<sup>19</sup>
- the United States, Canada and Ireland, like Australia, have a higher proportion of women in the upper house,<sup>20</sup> but this is by no means a global trend
- the average age of Australian MPs (51) is comparable with that of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom (50)<sup>21</sup> and Canada (52),<sup>22</sup> but considerably younger than the average age of Members of the United States Congress (57 in the House, 62 in the Senate)<sup>23</sup>
- average length of completed parliamentary terms in Australia between 2000 and 2013 was double that of the Canadian Parliament—12.6 years in the House of Representatives compared with six years in Canadian House of Commons; 14 years in the Senate compared with 7.6 years in the Senate of Canada<sup>24</sup>
- the percentage of post-secondary educated MPs in Australia (81 per cent) is not as high as that of the UK House of Commons (90 per cent)<sup>25</sup> or the US Congress (94 per cent)<sup>26</sup> and
- trends in occupational background are familiar: in Congress, law, public service/politics and business are the dominant professions.<sup>27</sup> In the UK House of Commons, there has been a significant rise in the number of MPs previously engaged in politics-related occupations.<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, to some extent the characteristics of the Australian Parliament reflect global trends in other parliaments.

## Conclusion

The 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament was prorogued on 5 August 2013. Twenty-five Members of the House of Representatives did not contest the 7 September election. This is the highest number of retirements in the House of Representatives at one election—the previous highest number was 21 in 2007. Similarly in the Senate, seven senators announced their impending retirement and a further three senators, David Feeney (ALP, Vic), Barnaby Joyce (NATS, Qld) and Matt Thistlethwaite (ALP, NSW)

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19. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), [Women in national parliaments](#), IPU website, 1 July 2013, accessed 1 August 2013. The individual chambers of bicameral Parliaments have been combined for ease of comparison.
  20. Ibid.
  21. [Characteristics of the new House of Commons](#), United Kingdom Parliament website, accessed 1 August 2013.
  22. [Members of the House of Commons - average age](#), Parliament of Canada website, accessed 1 August 2013.
  23. JE Manning, [Membership of the 113th Congress: a profile](#), Congressional Research Service, 2013 accessed 1 August 2013.
  24. Statistics provided by C Kam and F Pinar, Dept of Political Science, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, calculated from data published on the [Parliament of Canada website](#), accessed 23 September 2013.
  25. [Characteristics of the new House of Commons](#), United Kingdom Parliament website, accessed 1 August 2013.
  26. JE Manning, op. cit.
  27. Ibid.
  28. [‘Representatives of society: background and characteristics of MPs’](#) in *Olympic Britain*, United Kingdom Parliament website, accessed 1 August 2013.

resigned to contest the House of Representatives. This is also comparable with 2007, which saw the departure of ten senators. With such a sizeable turnover, it will be interesting to examine the characteristics of the 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, and to monitor its traits and trends. In 2006 it was observed that MPs were predominantly middle-aged, well-educated men, likely to have been employed in politics-related occupations, business or law before entering parliament.<sup>29</sup> The statistics indicate that for the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament this remained the case.

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29. S Miskin and M Lumb, *op. cit.*

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