

Why have two Houses of Parliament?

There are three reasons for having two Houses of Parliament instead of one.

Limiting democracy

You have already seen that some people in Ancient Athens did not agree with democracy. In Britain one House of Parliament (called the House of Commons) is democratic, but any new law has to go through another house of parliament (called the House of Lords) which represents an aristocracy. In Australia in the 1800s, some people thought that Australia should develop its own aristocracy.

In the past it was often feared that ordinary people were too stupid to vote for the best people, or that they would be taken in by exaggerated promises, resulting in bad government. One way of controlling the power of ordinary people was to have a second House of Parliament representing only people who owned land. In Australia, until the 1960s, some States continued to have a second House of Parliament representing only people who owned land.

Making sure that small states are not dominated by states with big populations

When the Australian colonies were deciding whether they would agree to join together and become one nation, the colonies with the smaller populations were worried that they would be dominated by the colonies with bigger populations.

This problem was solved by having two Houses of Parliament, with the second House representing the States. This House, as we have seen, is the Senate, where each state has exactly the same number of senators. The two Territories are also represented, but by fewer Senators.

Re-checking new laws

It is often argued that the best reason for having the Senate is to have all proposed laws checked once again to make sure they are good ones.

For any new law to come into force, it must get a majority of votes in both Houses of Parliament.