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# **Chamber Seating Plan**

**Cross-Parliamentary Research**

**August 2003**

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## Scope of Research

- This document provides information on the chamber seating arrangements of a range of parliaments and assemblies across the world. The research has centred on those structures with a horseshoe or hemicycle layout in their chamber and has not extended to any of the more 'adversarial' chamber designs (such as the British House of Commons).
- The information is presented according to the nature of the structure (divided into sections as shown overleaf). For each parliament/assembly, a diagram of the chamber seating arrangements, if available, is preceded by details of the seating allocation system and any information gathered regarding steps taken to resolve problems in this area.
- Much of this research has been reliant on colleagues in other legislatures providing information. Because of time/language factors and the sensitive nature of this research, the extent of the information gathered varies across the legislatures.

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A UK regions

## London Assembly

### ***Chamber layout – Horseshoe***

#### ***Allocation of seats***

There is no fixed seating plan for the London Assembly. However, Members sit in party groupings.

The Assembly chamber can be laid out in 2 ways:

- A 'perfect circle', which is used for debating motions, discussing bills etc.
- A horseshoe, which is used when the Assembly questions the Mayor or other officials.

The layout is restricted to these 2 options because of the need to connect desks to a power supply.

#### ***Resolution of problems***

There have been no seating disputes as yet. The Assembly Secretariat advised, however, that seating arrangements are an ongoing topic of discussion and are likely to be subject to some change.

## Northern Ireland Assembly

### Chamber layout – *Horseshoe*

#### ***Allocation of seats***

Despite the horseshoe configuration, the current seating plan in the Assembly is relatively adversarial as a result of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the third largest Party, choosing to sit on the side of the Chamber opposite the nationalist/republican members (the government). The smaller parties then filled the gaps in the middle of the horseshoe.

Differing political views within parties are usually dealt with internally. However, it has sometimes been the case that 'shades of opinion' within a Party can manifest themselves by Assembly Members sitting on the margins of the Party allocation.

For the first day of sitting of the Assembly, the seating plan was devised by the Speaker and was based on the allocation of front and second row seats according to Party strengths. The two largest Parties were allocated blocks of seats closest to the officials' boxes on either side of the Chamber. Members were free to sit within these blocks as they wished and were not allocated seats. Each Party was given at least one front bench seat.

#### ***Resolution of problems***

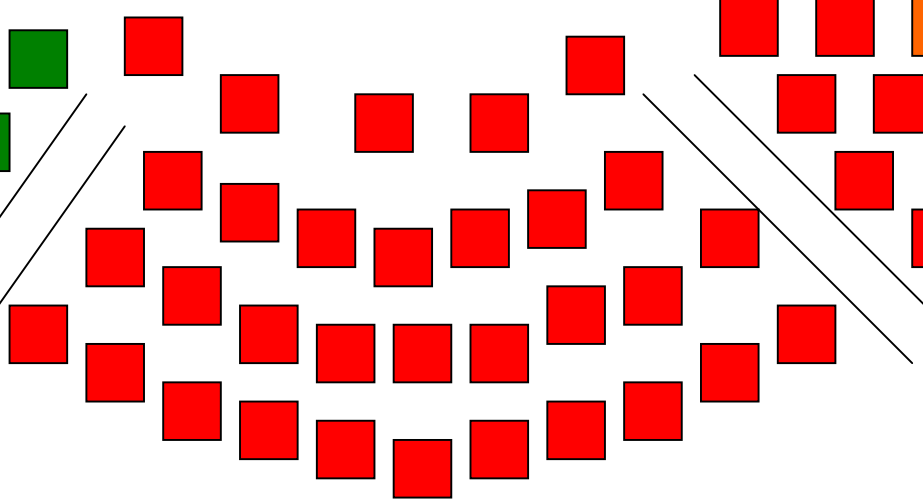
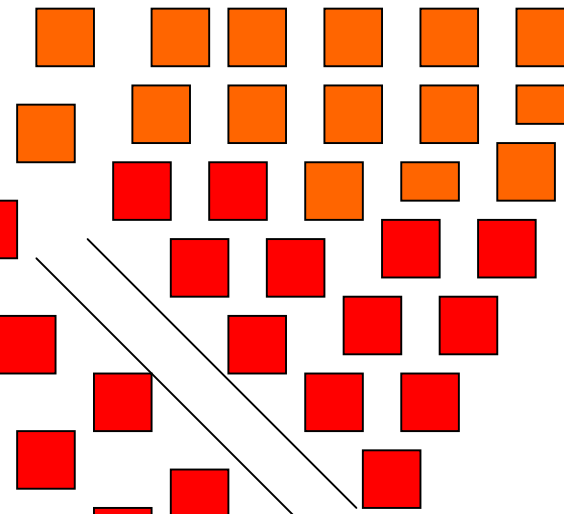
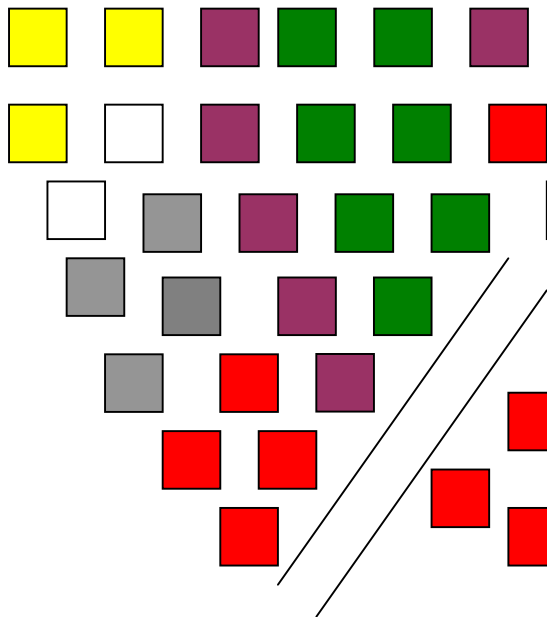
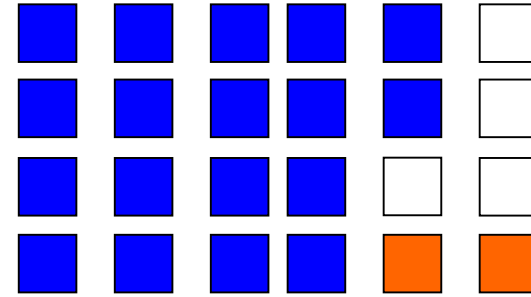
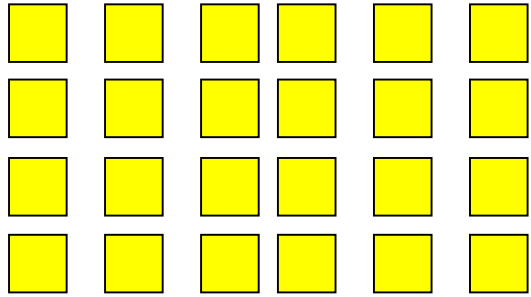
This original plan was only intended to deal with the first actual sitting, and the Speaker gave an undertaking that the seating arrangement could be reviewed at any time, at the request of any Party. The only change in the plan came about when Sinn Fein requested a change in the plan, to avoid one of its front bench team being separated from the rest of the Party by a gap in the front benches. This was resolved by filling this gap, and also one on the opposite side of the Chamber, with another seat. Members have since continued to use the same blocks of seats.

## Scottish Parliament

### Chamber layout – *Horseshoe*

***Allocation of seats*** In the first session of the Scottish Parliament, the seating arrangements were left to the Members (MSPs) to decide. This worked well and there were no seating disputes.

***Resolution of problems*** In the current session, although seating is still generally unassigned, two smaller parties have claimed front bench seats against a general consensus that they were not entitled to do so. To resolve this, the Clerks, Deputy Presiding Officers and Parliamentary Bureau drew up schematics of possible solutions. There is now only one front bench seat still in dispute, as the leader of the Scottish Socialist Party is unwilling to vacate it.



Lab

SNP

Con

LD

8

Grn

SSP

Ind

Members' Research Service

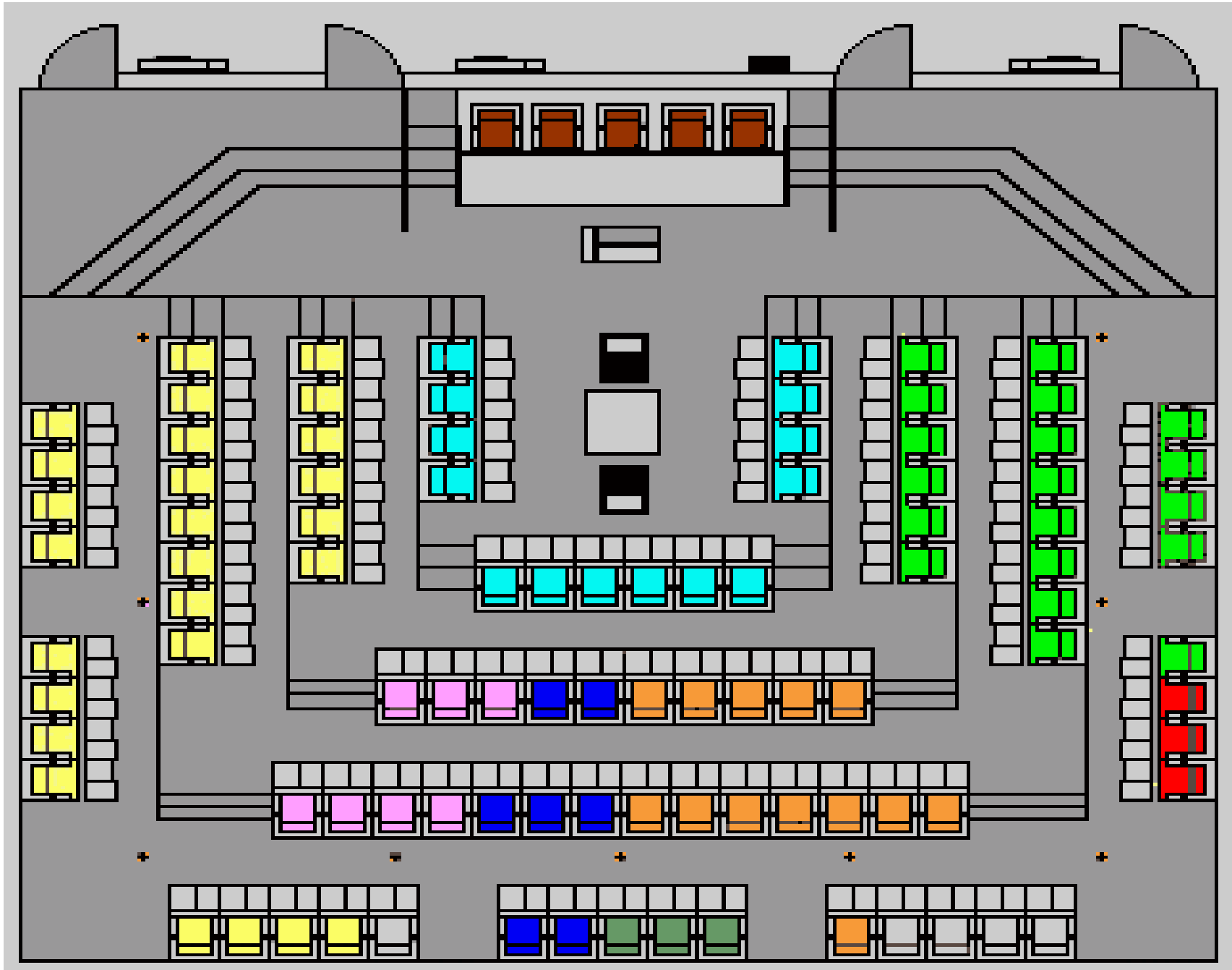


B European national/regional parliaments  
and the European Parliament

## Basque Parliament

### Chamber layout - *Horseshoe*

<b><i>Allocation of seats</i></b>	<p>The Basque Government Ministers sit in the front row of seats around the horseshoe.</p> <p>Behind the Ministers, the Members sit in party groupings. Two lawyers sit in the centre of the horseshoe.</p>
<b><i>Resolution of problems</i></b>	<p>There are currently five vacant seats in the Basque Parliament. This allows for some flexibility when formulating seating arrangements for Members.</p>



## Key to Political Parties in the Basque Parliament

	<i>Party</i>	<i>Description</i>
	Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea - Partido Nacionalista Vasco (EAJ-PNV)	Basque National Party
	Partido Popular (PP)	
	Partido Socialista de Euskadi - Euskadiko Ezkerra Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol (PSE-EE/PSOE)	Socialist Coalition
	Eusko Alkartasuna (EA)	Basque National Party focused on achieving full national and social freedom of the Basque Country.
	Euskal Herritarrok	Left-Wing Basque Nationalist Coalition
	Ezker Batua - Izquierda Unida / Berdeak (EB-IU)	
	Table of the Basque Parliament	
	Basque Government	
	Senators	
	Lawyers	

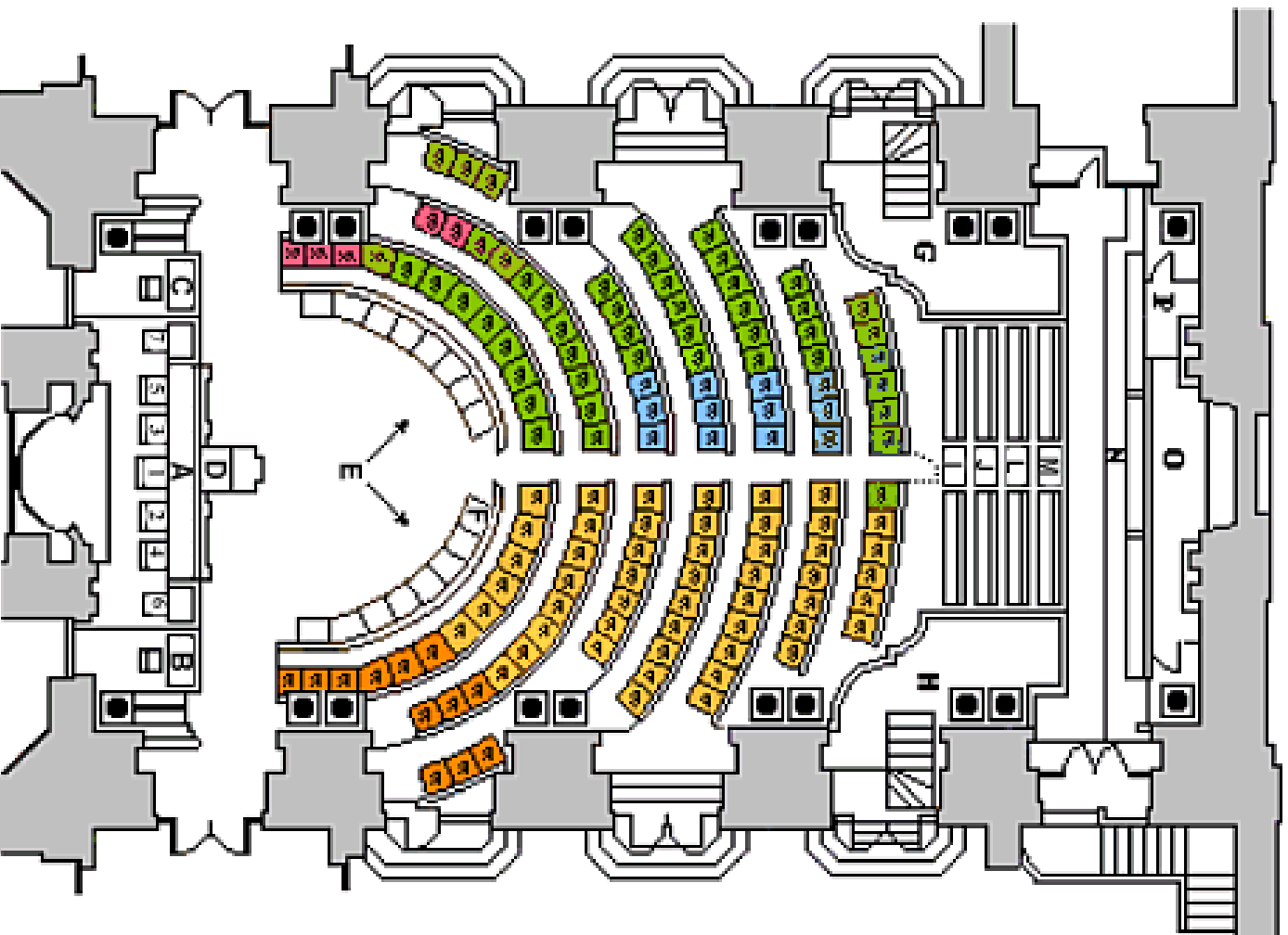
## Catalan Parliament

### Chamber layout - *Hemicycle*

**Allocation of seats** MPs sit in a hemicycle, divided by an aisle down the middle. All MPs face the Presidential Bench.

**Resolution of problems** No information.





- |                               |                                |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 President of the Parliament | E Executive Council            |
| 2 First Vice-president        | F President of the Generalitat |
| 3 Second Vice-president       | G Ceremonial box               |
| 4 First Secretary             | H Box for Authorities          |
| 5 Second Secretary            | I - J Press                    |
| 6 Third Secretary             | L-M-N Public                   |
| 7 Fourth Secretary            | O Broadcast booth              |
| B House Clerk                 | P Sound operator               |
| C Attorney                    |                                |

**Distribution of the seats in the Sala de Sessions**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <span style="color: yellow;">■</span> Parliamentary Group<br>Convergència i Unió       | <span style="color: blue;">■</span> Parliamentary Group<br>Esquerra Republicana<br>de Catalunya   |
| <span style="color: green;">■</span> Socialist Group in<br>the Parliament of Catalonia | <span style="color: orange;">■</span> Parliamentary Group Iniciativa<br>per Catalunya - Els Verds |
| <span style="color: orange;">■</span> Parliamentary Group<br>Partido Popular           |   |

## Cyprus House of Representatives

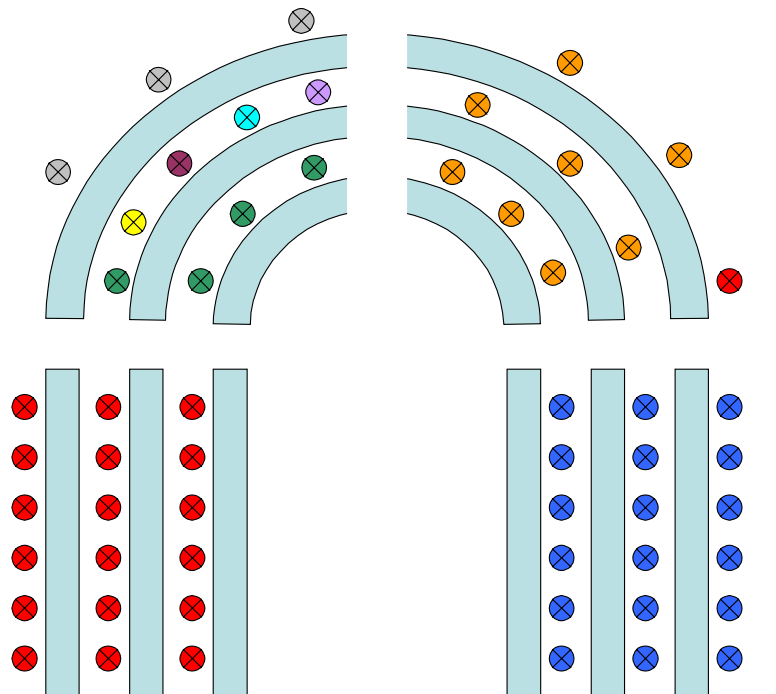
### Chamber layout - *Horseshoe*










**Allocation of seats** There are 54 current Members of Parliament (MPs) in the House of Representatives, although the Chamber is able to sit 80 (the extra seats are to provide for the 26 seats for the Turkish Cypriot community, and have been empty since 1963).

Traditionally, the AKEL-Left-New-Forces party takes the left section of the House, the Democratic Rally takes the right, and the other smaller parties take the centre.

**Resolution of problems** The empty seats and resulting flexibility in the Chamber make it easy to arrange the seats among the various parties.





- |   |   |
|---|---|
|  AKEL-Left- New Forces            |  Cyprus Green Party                  |
|  Democratic Rally                |  New Horizons                       |
|  Democratic Party                |  United Democrats                   |
|  EDEK Social Democratic Movement |  Fighting Democratic Movement       |
|   |  Representatives of Religious Group |

## European Parliament

### Chamber layout – *Hemicycle*

**Allocation of seats** Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) sit according to their political groups, not their nationality.

The composition, from left to right, is:

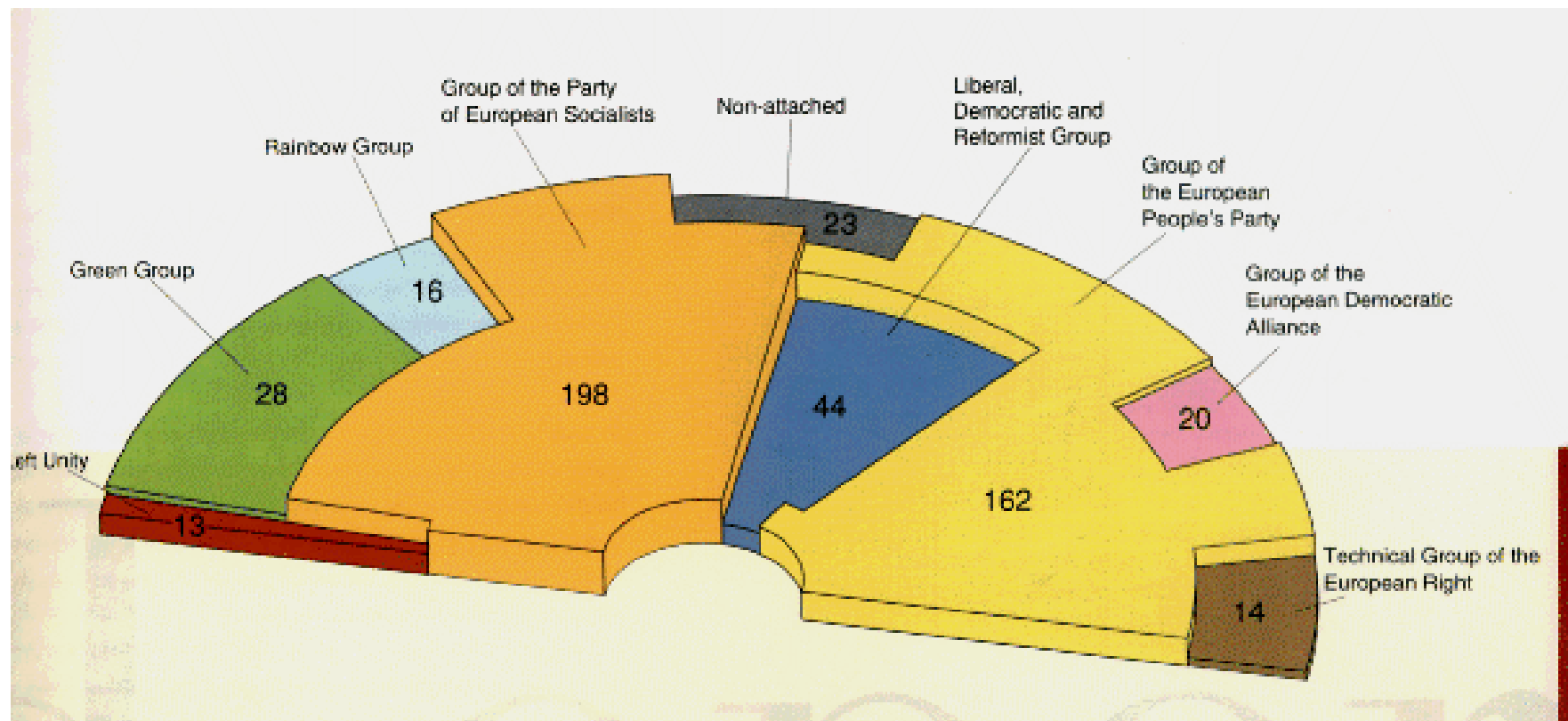
- Radical Left (Communist, former Communist or Extreme Left, plus Nordic Green Left);
- Party of European Socialists (PES);
- Greens and Allies;
- Regional parties from Spain/Wales;
- ELDR;
- EPP-ED;
- Eurosceptic Gaullists;
- Other rightist groups;
- Non-affiliated.

The shape of the Chamber is a compromise between differing national parliamentary arrangements. Although it is essentially semi-circular, the opposite ends of the political spectrum do face one another.

The Group leaders sit in the front row allocated to the Group. Next to them, or immediately behind them, are the vice-chairs and other members of the bureau of the Group (normally including leaders of the national delegations within the Group).

**Resolution of problems**

No information



## Finnish Parliament

### Chamber layout – *Hemicycle*

**Allocation of seats** Facing the Speaker, party groupings sit from left to right according to their political viewpoint. Generally, the most experienced Members of Parliament (MPs) have the front rows.

Party groups are allocated a certain number of seats and can decide within the Party who sits in which seat.

The seating plan, from left to right (facing the Speaker), is as follows:

- Section 2: 19 MPs of the Left Alliance and 53 MPs of the Social Democratic Parliamentary Group (extending into Section 3);
- Section 3: the Green Parliamentary Group (14 MPs), True Finns (3 MPs) and Center Party (55 MPs, extending into Section 4);
- Section 4: Christian Democratic Parliamentary Group (7 MPs);
- Section 5: National Coalition Party (40 MPs) and the Swedish People's Party Parliamentary Group\* (9 MPs).

\*The Swedish group has to be located at the far right to be as close as possible to their interpreters.

**Resolution of  
problems**

No information

## Flemish Parliament

### Chamber layout – *Hemicycle*

#### **Allocation of seats**

The current distribution of seats in the Flemish Parliament is as follows:

- Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP) – the Christian People’s Party (originally the Flemish counterpart of the French-speaking Christian Social Party). Currently in opposition for the first time since 1958. 37 seats.
- Vlaams Blok (VB) – the Flemish Bloc. Ultra-nationalist. 17 seats.
- Socialistische Partij (SP) – the Socialist Party. 26 seats.
- Volksunie (VU) – People’s Union. Nationalist Party seeking autonomy for Flanders. 9 seats.
- Anders Gaan Leven (AGALEV) – Live Differently. Flemish environmentalist formation. 7 seats.
- Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (VLD) – Flemish Liberals and Democrats Citizens’ Party. 27 seats.
- UF - 1 seat.

Members generally sit in party groupings.

Ministers are not members of the Parliament, but according to the constitution they must be present so that they can explain and defend their policies.

‘Ministers’ benches’ are next to the Speaker’s chair at the front of the hall.

#### **Resolution of problems**

No information

## Norwegian Storting

### Chamber layout – *Horseshoe*

<b><i>Allocation of seats</i></b>	Members of the Storting sit according to which geographical area they represent, not according to Party affiliation. This means, for example, that a Labour member may sit next to a Conservative member.
<b><i>Resolution of problems</i></b>	No information

## Swedish Riksdag

### Chamber layout – *Hemicycle*

**Allocation of seats** The 349 MPs in the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) are seated by constituency, and within constituencies by seniority. The seating arrangements have been the same since the Riksdag was first established.

**Resolution of problems** No information.

## C Non-European structures



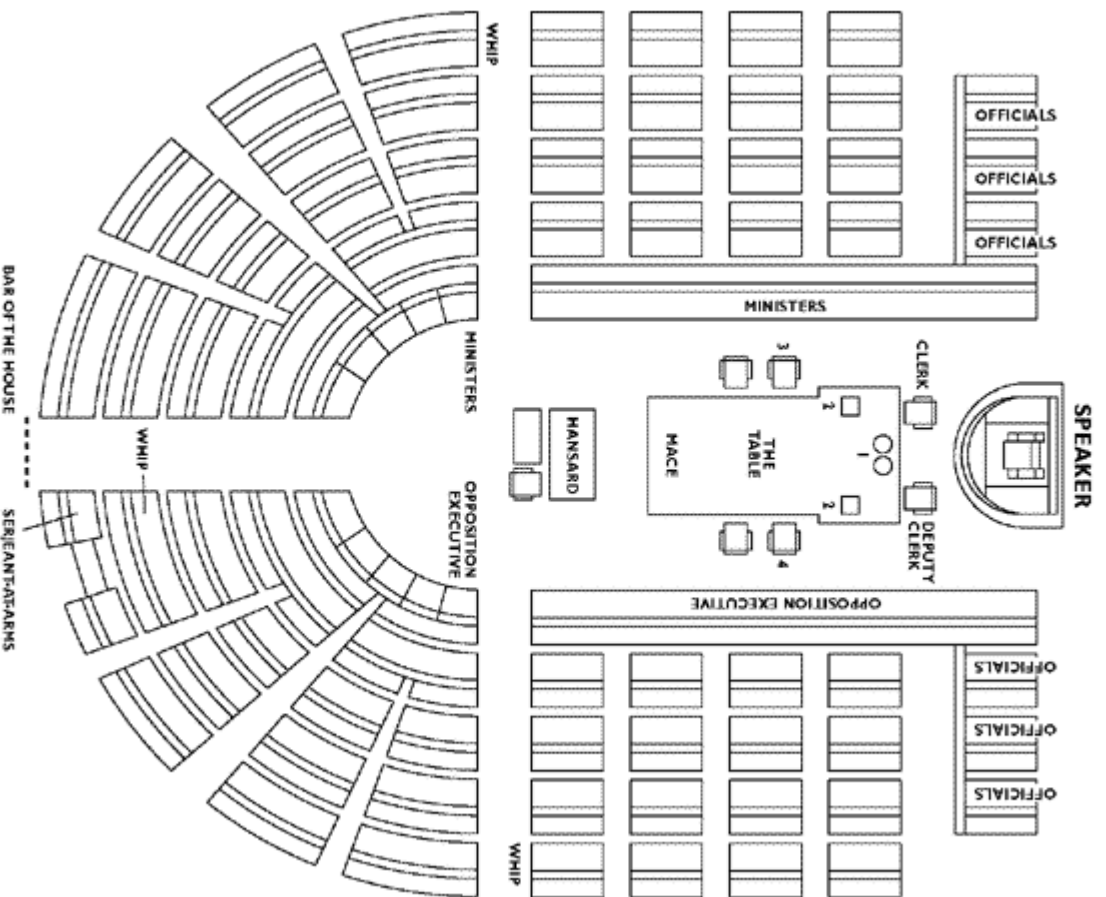
## Parliament of Australia (House of Representatives)

### Chamber layout – *Horseshoe*

***Allocation of seats*** Chamber officials sit with the Speaker at the front of the horseshoe. Government Ministers sit to the right of the Speaker, and the opposition executive (shadow Ministers) sit to the left. Other parties sit in party groupings behind them.

***Resolution of problems*** No information.

## The House of Representatives Chamber



1. Sandglasses
2. Despatch Boxes
3. Prime Minister or Minister in charge of business
4. Leader of the Opposition or Member of the Opposition Executive

## New South Wales Legislative Assembly

### Chamber layout – *Horseshoe*

#### ***Allocation of seats***

Standing Order 29 gives the only guidance on seating arrangements. It states that the front bench to the right of the Speaker shall be reserved for Ministers during question time. Ministers sit in descending order of seniority from the Speaker.

Because of this, Shadow Ministers sit mirroring their ministerial counterparts across the Chamber.

The House consists of one government party and a coalition of two parties in opposition. There are also six independent members who sit on the back row on the opposition side. New members, whether government or opposition, tend to sit on the furthest back benches. Members also establish, by habit, a favourite seat as there is no formal seating plan.

#### ***Resolution of problems***

Disputes are resolved internally through the Whip.

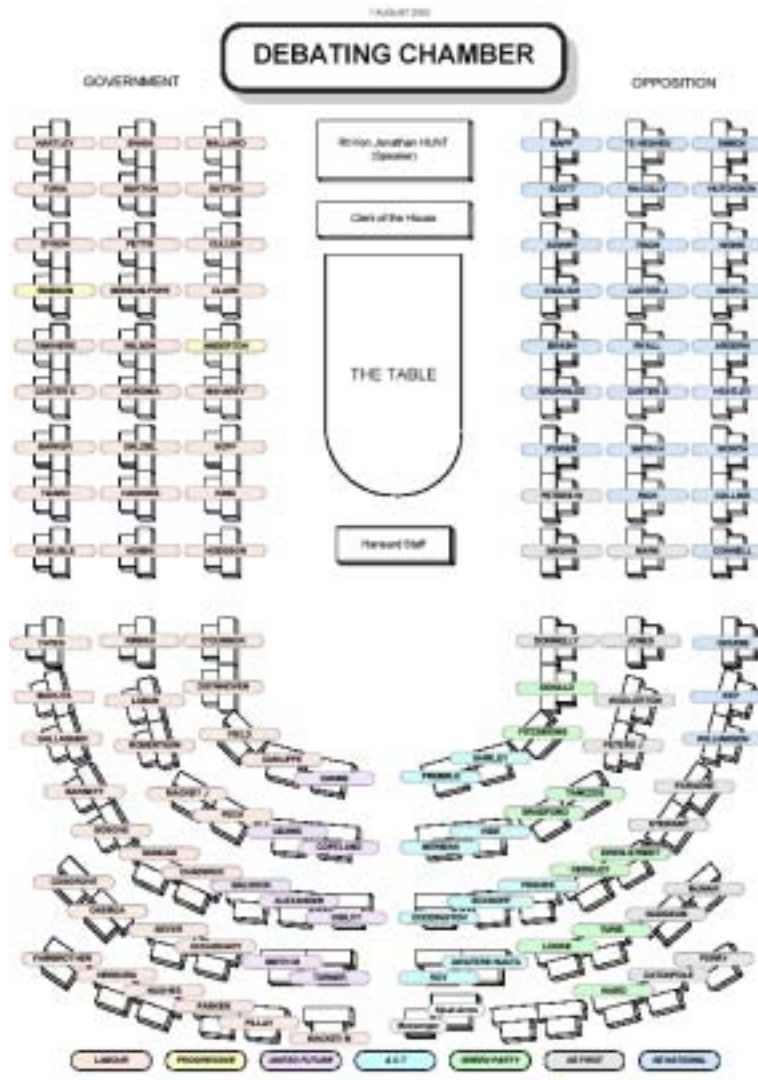
## New Zealand Parliament

### Chamber layout - *Horseshoe*

**Allocation of seats** Although the Chamber layout is a horseshoe, the situation is relatively adversarial due to the government occupying one side and the main opposition facing them, on the other straight edge of the horseshoe.

Members generally sit in party groupings. All parties have at least one seat on the front row.

**Resolution of problems** No information.



## National Assembly of the Republic of South Africa

### Chamber layout – *Horseshoe*

**Allocation of seats** Seating arrangements are decided informally between parties. The Whips of different parties meet among themselves to reach consensus on new seating arrangements if there is a need for change.

**Resolution of problems** In March-April 2003 there was a 15-day 'floor-crossing' window, where Members were allowed to leave their party and join another/form a new party. Seating arrangements had to be re-arranged but there was generally no problem reaching a consensus. Only one party was not satisfied with the new arrangements. The issue was referred to the Chief Whips' Forum (a weekly meeting of all chief whips), who discussed and resolved the matter.

If consensus cannot be reached, the majority party can use its numerical advantage to pass a motion to force other parties to accommodate its proposals. However, this is seen as a last resort.

## Legislative Council of South Australia

### Chamber layout – *Horseshoe*

#### ***Allocation of seats***

According to the Standing Orders:

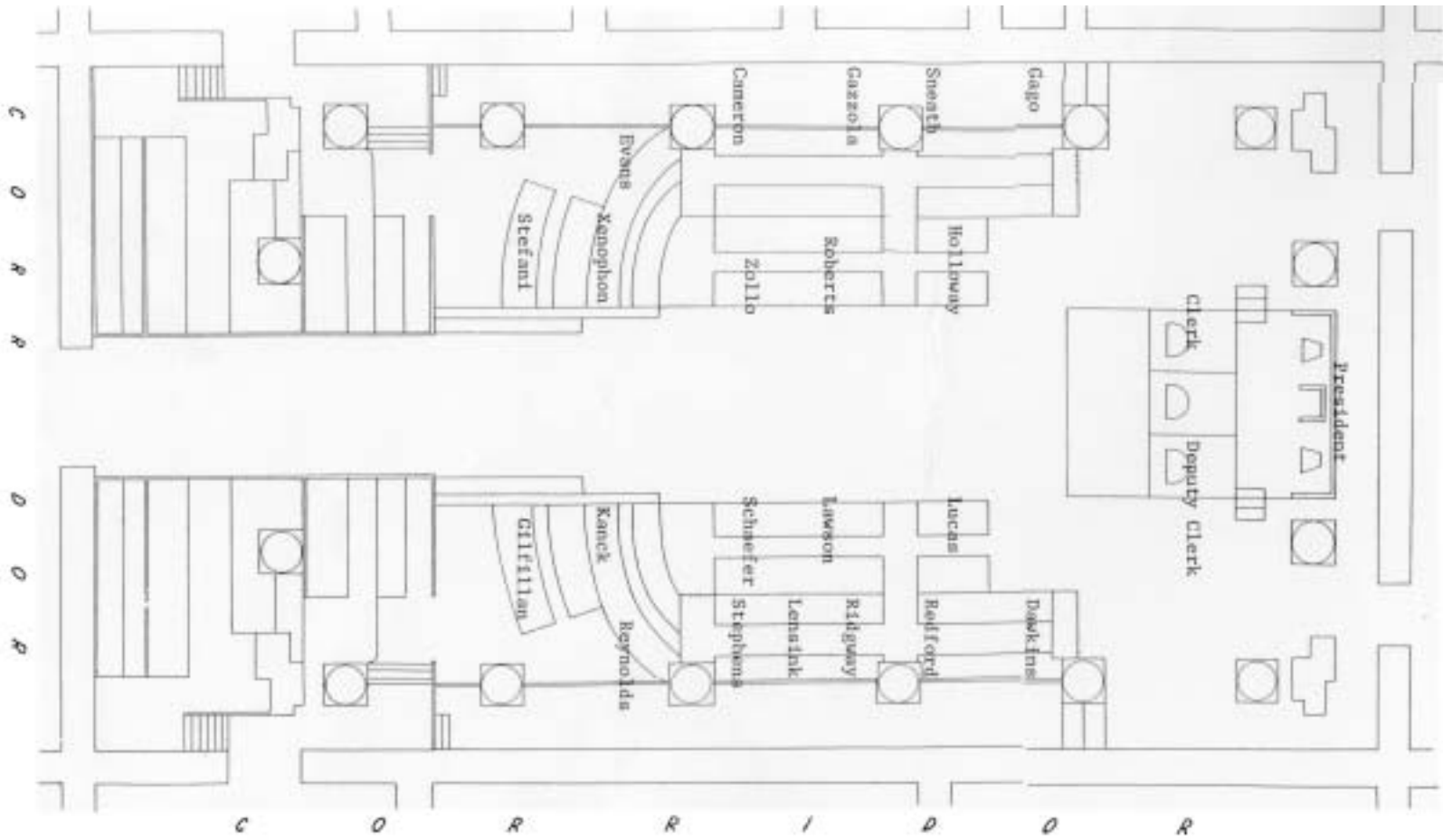
- The seats nearest to the right hand of the President shall be reserved for Ministers of the Crown (so the governing party sits to the right of the President);
- If a ministerial change takes place, the outgoing Minister is required to take the seat vacated by his successor;
- The President makes all decisions regarding the seating of new Ministers;
- Members are allowed to retain the seats occupied by them at the time of their election.

The Legislative Council currently has two Ministers, with four members of the governing party sitting behind them (the other is the President). On the opposite side there are eight Liberal members and three Australian Democrats. The remaining seats on the right hand side are taken by Independents and Minor Party representatives (four in total).

#### ***Resolution of problems***

There have been some recent problems with seating, as two members voted against their party and wished to be seated as far away as possible from their former colleagues. One has been able to do this, but the other still sits with his former colleagues. A hole has been cut in the woodwork to allow the other members to access their seats without having to cross in front of their former colleague, at great expense.

# LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL CHAMBER





## Tasmanian House of Assembly

### Chamber layout - *Horseshoe*

<b><i>Allocation of seats</i></b>	The government of the day sits to the right of the speaker, the opposition to the left. Any third party is at present also seated to the left.
<b><i>Resolution of problems</i></b>	Any 'loose ends' with this system are tied up by confidential negotiation between parties after each election. The Speaker assists the process if needed. Any impasse is decided by a resolution of the House.