



about Australia

system of government

- Australia's system of government is founded in the liberal democratic tradition. Based on the values of religious tolerance, freedom of speech and association, and the rule of law, Australia's institutions and practices of government reflect British and North American models. At the same time, they are uniquely Australian.

Responsible government

One of the oldest continuous democracies in the world, the Commonwealth of Australia was created in 1901 when the former British colonies—now the six states—agreed to federate. The democratic practices and principles that shaped the pre-federation colonial parliaments (such as 'one man, one vote' and women's suffrage) were adopted by Australia's first federal government.

The Australian colonies had inherited an electoral tradition from Britain that included limited franchise and public and plural voting. Abuses such as bribery and intimidation of voters stimulated electoral change. Australia pioneered reforms that underpin the electoral practices of modern democracies.

In 1855, Victoria introduced the secret ballot, which became known throughout the world as 'the Australian ballot'. In 1856, South Australia eliminated professional and property qualifications and gave the vote to all adult men, and in 1892 gave adult women the vote. In the 1890s the colonies adopted the principle of one vote per person, stopping the practice of plural voting.

Australia's government is based on a popularly elected parliament with two chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate. Ministers appointed from these

key facts

- The Commonwealth of Australia was created in 1901 when the former British colonies—now Australia's six states—agreed to federate.
- Although Australia is a fully independent parliamentary democracy, Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom is also formally the Queen of Australia.
- All citizens over the age of 18 must vote in both federal and state government elections.

chambers conduct executive government, and policy decisions are made in Cabinet meetings. Apart from the announcement of decisions, Cabinet discussions are not disclosed. Ministers are bound by the principle of Cabinet solidarity, which closely mirrors the British model of Cabinet government responsible to parliament.

Although Australia is an independent nation, Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain is also formally Queen of Australia. The Queen appoints a Governor-General (on the advice of the elected Australian Government) to represent her. The Governor-General has wide powers, but by convention acts only on the advice of ministers on virtually all matters.

A written constitution

Like the United States and unlike Britain, Australia has a written constitution.

The Australian Constitution defines the responsibilities of the federal government, which include foreign relations, trade, defence and immigration. Governments of states and territories are responsible for all matters not assigned to the Commonwealth, and they too adhere to the principles of responsible government. In the states, the Queen is represented by a Governor for each state.

The High Court of Australia arbitrates on disputes between the Commonwealth and the states. Many of the court's decisions have expanded the constitutional powers and responsibilities of the federal government.

The Australian Constitution can be amended only with the approval of the electorate through a national referendum in which all adults on the electoral roll must participate. A bill containing the amendment must first be passed by both houses of parliament or, in certain limited circumstances, by only one house of parliament. Any constitutional changes must be approved by a double majority—a national majority of electors as well as a majority of electors in a majority of the states (at least four of the six). Where any state or states are particularly affected by the subject of the referendum, a majority of voters in those states must also agree to the change. This is often referred to as the 'triple majority' rule.

The double majority provision makes alterations to the Constitution difficult. Since federation in 1901, only eight out of 44 proposals to amend the Constitution have been approved. Voters are generally reluctant to support what they perceive as increases in the power of the federal government. States and territories may also hold referendums.

Parliamentary sovereignty

The Australian Constitution sets out the powers of government in three separate chapters—the legislature, the executive and the judiciary—but insists that members of the legislature must also be members of the executive. In practice, parliament delegates wide regulatory powers to the executive.

Government is formed in the House of Representatives by the party able to command a majority in that chamber.

Minority parties often hold the balance of power in the Senate, which serves as a chamber of review for the decisions of the government. Senators are elected for six-year terms, and in an ordinary general election only half the senators face the voters.

In all Australian parliaments questions can be asked without notice, and there is a strict alternation between government and Opposition questions to ministers during Question Time. The Opposition uses its questions to pursue the government. Government members give ministers a chance to put government policies and actions in a favourable light, or to pursue the Opposition.

Anything said in parliament can be reported fairly and accurately without fear of a suit for defamation. The rough-and-tumble of parliamentary Question Time and debates is broadcast and widely reported. This has helped to establish Australia's reputation for robust public debate, and serves as an informal check on executive power.

Frequent elections

A national general election must be held within three years of the first meeting of a new federal parliament. The average life of

parliaments is about two-and-a-half years. In practice, general elections are held when the Governor-General agrees to a request from the Prime Minister, who selects the date of the election.

The governing party has changed about every five years on average since federation in 1901, but length of hold on government has varied greatly. The Liberal Party led a coalition with the longest hold on government—23 years—from 1949 to 1972. Prior to World War II, several governments lasted less than a year, but since 1945 there have been only seven changes of government.

Voting

For all citizens over the age of 18 it is compulsory to vote in the election of both federal and state governments, and failure to do so may result in a fine or prosecution.

Parties

Relative to some other countries, Australia's political parties and their internal operations are comparatively unregulated, but internal party discipline is extremely tight. There is an official system of party registration and reporting of some party activities through the Australian Electoral Commission and its state and territory equivalents.

Australia has four main political parties. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) is a social democratic party founded by the Australian labour movement. The ALP has governed since late 2007. The Liberal Party is a party of the centre right. The National Party of Australia, formerly the Country Party, is a conservative party representing rural interests. The Australian Greens is a left-wing and environmentalist party.

Australia's major political parties have structured ways to involve their members in developing party policy on issues. Elected politicians rarely vote against their parties in parliament.

Although Australian commentators observe that elections have become more 'presidential' in the sense that some American campaign methods are used, the basic structure of the Australian system tends to emphasise policy stances rather than the character of individual politicians.

As in other democracies, the cost of election campaigns and the source of funds for political activity are issues in Australia. Since 1984, a system of public funding (administered by the Australian Electoral Commission) and disclosure for election campaigns has been in place. Parties must receive at least 4 per cent of the valid vote in the elections they contest to receive this public funding.

Parties must disclose campaign expenditures and sources of donations above a specified threshold. Individual candidates must also disclose sources of donations above a certain threshold. Parties and individuals contesting non-consecutive elections must disclose gifts and donations received between the campaigns.

Relations between levels of government

State parliaments are subject to the national Constitution as well as their state constitutions. A federal law overrides any state law not consistent with it.

In practice, the two levels of government cooperate in many areas where states and territories are formally responsible, such as education, transport, health and

law enforcement. Income tax is levied federally, and debate between the levels of governments about access to revenue and duplication of expenditure functions is a perennial feature of Australian politics. Local government bodies are created by legislation at the state and territory level.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is a forum to initiate, develop and implement national policy reforms requiring cooperative action between the three levels of government: national, state or territory, and local. Its objectives include dealing with major issues by cooperating on structural reform of government and on reforms to achieve an integrated, efficient national economy and a single national market.

COAG comprises the prime minister, state premiers, chief ministers of the territories, and the president of the Australian Local Government Association.

In addition, ministerial councils (comprising national, state and territory ministers, and, where relevant, representatives of local government and of the governments of New Zealand and Papua New Guinea) meet regularly to develop and implement inter-governmental action in specific policy areas.

Further information

Australian Electoral Commission
www.aec.gov.au

Australian Parliament House
www.aph.gov.au

National Library of Australia
www.nla.gov.au/oz/gov

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