

Australia's system of government

Australia is a **federation**, a **constitutional monarchy** and a **parliamentary democracy**. This means that Australia:

- Has a Queen, who resides in the United Kingdom and is represented in Australia by a Governor-General.
- Is governed by a ministry headed by the Prime Minister.
- Has a two-chamber Commonwealth Parliament to make laws.
- A government, led by the Prime Minister, which must have a majority of seats in the House of Representatives.
- Has eight State and Territory Parliaments.

This model of government is often referred to as the **Westminster System**, because it derives from the United Kingdom parliament at Westminster.

A Federation of States

Australia is a federation of six states, each of which was until 1901 a separate British colony. The states – New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania – each have their own governments, which in most respects are very similar to those of the federal government. Each state has a Governor, with a Premier as head of government. Each state also has a two-chambered Parliament, except Queensland which has had only one chamber since 1921. There are also two self-governing territories: the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. The federal government has no power to override the decisions of state governments except in accordance with the federal Constitution, but it can and does exercise that power over territories.

A Constitutional Monarchy

Australia is an independent nation, but it shares a monarchy with the United Kingdom and many other countries, including Canada and New Zealand. The Queen is the head of the Commonwealth of Australia, but with her powers delegated to the Governor-General by the Constitution. By convention, the Governor-General can act only on the advice of the elected government.

The **Governor-General of Australia** is appointed by the Queen on the advice of the Australian government. The Governor-General appoints the ministry and dissolves the parliament, acting on the advice of the Prime Minister.

In the early years of Federation, the Governor-General was appointed by the British government and was usually a British peer. In 1930 the Australian government asserted the right to make the selection, and Sir Isaac Isaacs became the first Australian to be appointed to the office. Since 1965, all Governors-General have been Australians.

The issue of Australia's constitutional status as a monarchy is a contentious one. Australia has a strong movement which advocates the establishment of a Republic. The movement to retain the monarchy is also strong. In 1999, voters rejected a proposal for a republic in a national referendum.



A Parliamentary Democracy

The Constitution defines the Parliament of Australia as the Queen, the **Senate** and the **House of Representatives**. Parliament is the basis of Australia's tradition of **responsible government**. In addition to making laws, Parliament holds ministers and the government accountable for their actions. Ministers must be members of the Commonwealth Parliament and regularly answer questions about their portfolios asked by other members.

The Senate

The Senate is the 'upper house' and represents the six Australian states and two self-governing territories. All states, regardless of population, elect twelve senators, while each territory elects two. There are 76 Senators in total. Senators serve six-year terms, except for territory senators, whose term is the same as the House of Representatives.

The Senate is elected by a form of **proportional representation** known as the **single transferable vote** model. A half-Senate election is normally held every three years.

The House of Representatives

Australia is divided into 150 single-member electorates, each representing about eighty to ninety thousand voters and each with a **Member of the House of Representatives**. Each state has a number of electorates proportional to its population. The largest state, New South Wales, has forty-nine electorates while the smallest, Tasmania, has five. Elections for the House of Representatives are usually held every three years.

See **Prime Facts #62 – Elections and Voting in Australia** for more information on elections for the Commonwealth Parliament.

Double Dissolutions

On rare occasions, the entire membership of both houses of parliament are dissolved at the same time. This **double dissolution** can only take place if the Senate rejects the same legislation twice over a period of three months. There have been only six double dissolutions held in Australia – in 1914, 1951, 1974, 1975, 1983 and 1987. On one occasion, in 1974, the legislation that had been rejected by the Senate was then passed by a joint sitting of both houses.

The Executive Council

The power to make government decisions rests with a body known as the **Executive Council**. The Governor-General presides over its meetings. The Executive Council is made up of all members of the federal Ministry. It is a separate body to Cabinet, and all decisions made by the government need to be confirmed by the Executive Council. This is almost always a formality.

Cabinet

Cabinet is where most significant government decisions are actually made. Cabinet consists of the most senior ministers in the government: the **Prime Minister** is its head and runs its meetings. Since 1949 the Cabinet has mostly consisted of only the senior ministers in a government, with the other ministers attending when business concerning their portfolio is on the agenda. The exception was 1972-75, when Prime Minister Whitlam appointed all his ministers to the Cabinet.

Neither Cabinet nor the Prime Minister are mentioned in the Constitution: their roles are a matter of long-established convention.

Further Reading

Parliament of Australia, *Parliamentary Handbook of the 42nd Parliament*, Parliamentary Library, 2007. Online version available at <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/handbook/>

Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia. Online version available at <http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/general/constitution/>

Reid, G.S., (ed.), *Australia's Commonwealth parliament 1901-1988: Ten Perspectives*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1989

Hirst, John, *The Sentimental Nation: the Making of the Australian Commonwealth*, South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000



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