

Australia's Government

Form of Government

Australia's six states represent the British colonies united to create the Commonwealth of Australia. These six states approved a constitution. The constitution gives the federal government the right to pass laws on certain subjects. It also allows the states to convene a state parliamentary and pass certain laws.

Any land within Australia's national border that is not claimed by one of the states is called a *territory*. Territories cannot convene their own government or pass laws. The Commonwealth makes the laws for the territories.

Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state for Australia. The Queen lives in England, not Australia. She does not run the country. The Queen signs laws and is the commander-in-chief of the army, navy, and air force. The Queen does approve elections. The Queen is not busy at any of these jobs, however. Australia's prime minister recommends someone to represent the Queen in Australia. This person, the governor-general, serves the Queen, represents her in Australia, and fulfills her duties and responsibilities there.

The head of government is the prime minister. This person is the leader of the political party with the most members in the Commonwealth Parliament. The person in this position is the most powerful political figure in Australia.

Type of Legislature

In Australia, an elected government operates the country. Every four years, Australians who are over age 18 vote for the people who will be in Parliament. People who are elected go to go to Parliament in Canberra, the national capital. The Parliament meets several times a year. Parliament makes laws that affect how Australians live. There are two houses of Parliament, House of Representatives and the Senate.

Australia is divided into areas called electorates. Each electorate has about the same number of people living in it. The people who live in each electorate vote for a person to go to Parliament to represent them. That elected person becomes the MP of the House of Representatives for that area. There is one seat in the House of Representatives for each electorate.

The other house of Parliament is the Senate. People of each state, the Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory elect twelve people to be their senators. No matter how big or small a state or territory, each has the same number of senators.

After an election, the political party that wins the most seats in the House of Representatives becomes the government. The winning party's leader becomes the prime minister. The prime minister is the head of the government. The party with the second highest number of seats in the House of Representatives is called the "Opposition." That party's leader is "the leader of the Opposition."

When a member of Parliament first suggests a law, it is called a bill. The bill is explained, discussed, and often changed. If the House members vote to pass the bill, it goes to the Senate. There the process repeats. If the bill passes the Senate vote, the bill becomes an "Act of Parliament." The governor-general signs the act, and it becomes a law that Australians must obey.

The Role of the Citizen

Australians have an important role in their government. Since they have a democratic form of government, the voters choose the lawmakers. In Australia, voters must be 18 years old or over to vote. Voting is compulsory. That means that everyone that is eligible to vote is required to vote unless there is a good reason, such as illness. Australians can be fined or may have to go to court if they do not vote.

Australians vote for members of Parliament, or MPs. The leader of the political party that gets the most votes becomes the prime minister.