

Democracy in Australia

Australia is a stable democratic society with a skilled workforce and a strong economy. This means the people have opportunities for employment, where the money they earn can be used to live a happy and healthy life.

With a population of 25 million people, Australia is the only nation to govern an entire continent and is the sixth largest country in the world in land area. Australia's multicultural society includes its Indigenous peoples and migrants from over 200 countries.

Australian democracy includes:

- *The system of government, where ministers who are responsible for certain areas of government, are elected by the people to become members of parliament*
- *The federal system shares governing between the national government and the smaller state governments*
- *The system of two houses of parliament, which means proposed laws are checked and refined*
- *Compulsory voting for individuals over the age of 18 years, to ensure maximum participation in the election process every four years*
- *Changes to the **Constitution** must be approved by the population through a referendum*
- *All adult Australian citizens can vote regardless of their race, religion, gender, or class. This is called universal adult suffrage*
- *The separation of powers – laws that can be tested through a court system, which is separate from the government and government departments. To employ citizens to be a part of the process of justice by enabling action in government laws.*

The strength of this system enables power to be spread across different groups in Australia's society, therefore preventing one person or group from dominating the nation. Democracy is about power being accessible to as many of the people as possible.

Australia has not always been a democratic society. The law has not always given all people the same rights and opportunities. Today, however, all people in Australia are protected by the Constitution, regardless of their gender, race or background.



European Settlement

Australia's system of government grew over time from single governors representing the British Parliament to the fully elected representative democracy that is in place today.

During the first few decades of European settlement in Australia, power lay in the hands of the governors who ruled on behalf of Britain. In the early 1920's a council was created which could advise the governor. Its members were appointed by the British Parliament, which had ultimate power over any decisions the council or governor made. A proper court system was also set up in New South Wales. Similar changes were made a couple of years later in Tasmania (which was called Van Diemen's Land at the time) and Western Australia. South Australia had a small government from the mid-1830s but its members were also chosen by the British Government. The governor could suggest laws for the colony, but again only after approval from Britain.

The Development of Representative Government

Around 1830, people in New South Wales began to push for a representative government, one with members who were elected to represent the people. Finally, in 1843 the people got their chance to vote, but only for some members of the new parliament. The other members were chosen by the British. The governor still had most of the power and the only people who could vote were wealthy landowners.

By the mid-1850s, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania had elected governments, but it was still only men who owned a lot of property that could vote. Poorer men felt it was unfair that they had no vote – therefore no say in government, but still had to pay taxes. This was one of the complaints that led to the Eureka Stockade in Victoria 1854, where miners rebelled against government authorities. The authorities responded harshly, but most people sympathised with the miners. Not long after this event, both Victoria and South Australia extended the vote to all men over 21 years of age, regardless of how much property they owned.

Victoria and South Australia introduced the secret ballot, where people placed their votes in an enclosed box so that no one else knew who they had voted for. This meant that people could not be bullied by others into voting for a particular person or group. Secret ballots, which were later called Australian ballots in the United States, are now considered to be one of the most important features of true democracy.

In the mid-1850s, South Australia also brought in the *one man, one vote* principle. This meant that men could only vote in the area in which they lived. Up until then, a man who owned a property in more than one place, could vote for local representatives in each of those places. Prior to this, wealthier people cast more votes than others, and therefore had more influence in the decision on who was elected to parliament. The *one man, one vote* principle meant that all voters had equal influence on election results.

By 1870, Victoria had introduced a system where payment was granted for members of parliament. This was because only rich men had the financial backing to stand for election before then. Unfortunately, being a member of parliament meant high demands on their time, and poor men could not afford to give up their jobs to become involved in government. Payment for members was an important initiative and enabled the poorer sections of the community to have a representative in parliament who understood their needs.

Federation 1901

When Federation took place on 1 January 1901, the young nation of Australia had a new constitution and a new federal government. These institutions had been created through discussions, conferences, conventions and referenda with the input and consent of people in all the Australian colonies.



National Museum of Australia

When drafting the Constitution, Australians used the United States Constitution as one of their models. Although unlike the United States version, Australians did not include a Bill of Rights which would have granted certain rights for Australians. The only right which is clearly stated in the Australian Constitution is freedom regarding religion. The Australian government is not allowed to force people to take up or abandon a religion. The democratic feature of the Constitution is that it cannot be changed unless Australian voters agree for the change in a referendum.