Handout 11: Australia's System of Government

Australia has three spheres or types of government: Federal, State and Local. The Federal Government covers the whole of Australia. There are six state and two territory governments. Within each state and the Northern Territory hundreds of local Councils look after local areas.

Today each sphere of government has an elected body that makes key decisions. Each has been established to respond to the needs of the people for the area it covers and in specific areas in which it operates. Some service areas involve all three levels of governments. For example all three levels of government play a role in the provision of health care.

Your local council is established to support and represent the local community and to reflect the differences of your area. Councils plan for the future of communities, raise issues with other government and provide a range of services that may differ from area to area.

C Councils can make local laws but operate within a legal framework set up by State and Territory governments. They raise most of their funds from rates on land and buildings. The leader of the Council is usually known as the Mayor.

Services include: environmental protection, recycling and rubbish collection, libraries, development approvals, building roads and footpaths, parks and gardens, traffic and parking control, sports facilities, community centres and aged care.

State and Territory Government

State and Territory governments manage most of the laws affecting citizens and many public services.

State Governments can make laws in any area not given to the Federal Government by the Australian Constitution. They raise funds from a variety of business and transaction taxes such as payroll tax and stamp duty. The leader of a State is called the Premier. Responsibilities include: Police, court and prisons, building State highways, schools, public hospitals, and many utilities such as water and power supply.

Federal Government

The federal or national government is sometimes called the Commonwealth of Australia.

Federal Government laws overrule those of State and Territory Governments where there is a conflict. It raises most of its funds from income tax. The leader of the Federal Government is called the Prime Minister. The Federal Government meets in Canberra, the national capital.
The Federal Government's job is to decide on matters which affect the whole country, like: foreign affairs, defence, trade, telecommunications, postal services, social services, notes and coins, banking, immigration, national highways and unemployment benefits.

**Your Who's Who of the Federal Parliament**

- Local member - often your first point of call, depending on your politics. In theory, they should be sympathetic to your complaints and have some local knowledge.

- Government Ministers - a useful influence for your cause. A list of Government Ministers can be found in the Parliamentary Handbook or by phoning parliament.

- Cabinet - this is the inner circle of Ministers appointed by the Prime Minister. It is a very powerful group which gets to decide on policy making decisions both inside their portfolio and in other areas.

- Opposition M.P’s - can be useful to speed up your case. If a letter goes to the government from an Opposition MP, it will be dealt with faster than if it just came from a member of the public. However, be wary of your issue becoming a political slanging match.

- Democrats/Independents - since the 1993 election, these groups have held the balance of power in the Senate which gives them a much greater influence than they otherwise would have. Some unions actually use the Democrats to get their social justice policies up, rather than go through the ALP.

- Parliamentary Standing Committees - these are made up of groups of MPs from both sides of the house who recommend policy, hold inquiries and call for public submissions. These can be a very good vehicle for change - but be prepared to wait. Some of their hearings can go on for months or even years.

- Ministerial staff - every Minister appoints his/her own staff to handle the areas of media, policy, speechwriter, political adviser and appointments. The Minister depends on these staff and therefore they are good people to have onside as they can be very influential.

- Department heads - these are top level bureaucrats appointed by the government. Every government department has to submit an annual report to Parliament which has an organisational chart and other valuable information. You can also use the Commonwealth Directory for contacts. Departments prepare briefings for ministers on issues relevant to their portfolio.

- Senators - members of the Upper house should not be forgotten during your lobbying process.
• Parliamentary Secretaries - this group act as executive assistants for Ministers. They are often ear-marked for a spot in the ministry. They are a useful source of information as they have access to Cabinet papers.

Given the jurisdiction of government lobbying politicians and working with them to effect change is an important part of systems advocacy.