

Three levels of government

Australia is a representative democracy where people eligible to vote elect representatives to speak and make decisions on their behalf.

Australian citizens vote to elect representatives to each of the three levels of government – Federal, State or Territory and Local.

Federal Government

The decision-making body of the Federal Government is Federal Parliament, which consists of two houses - the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Representatives elected to the House of Representatives are called Members of the House Representatives. There are 150 Members of the House of Representatives and each member represents a separate division or electorate.

The leader of the Federal Government is called the Prime Minister.

A federal election must be held every three years because Australia's constitution limits the term of office for Members of the House of Representatives.

Representatives elected to the Senate are called Senators. They represent a State or Territory. There are 12 Senators for each State and two Senators for each Territory. State Senators are elected for a term of six years, with Territory Senators elected for a term of three years.

Federal Government responsibilities include: foreign affairs, social security, industrial relations, trade, immigration, currency and defence.

State and Territory Government

The decision making body of State Government is the State Parliament which meets in the Parliament House of the particular State. Each State Parliament, except for the Queensland Parliament, is made up of two houses.

Representatives elected to State Parliaments are generally known as "members"- Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) or Members of the House of Assembly (MHA) or Members of the Legislative Council (MLC). The leader of a State Government is called the Premier.

The Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory have a different arrangement. Each Territory Parliament has one house called the Legislative Assembly. The leader of each Territory Government is called the Chief Minister.

State and Territory Government responsibilities include: justice, consumer affairs, health, education, forestry, public transport and main roads.

Local Government

The decision-making body of local government is usually called the city council or shire council. Councils are established by State Governments to look after the particular needs of a city or local community. The people's representatives who form the council are called aldermen or councilors. The head of the council is the mayor or shire president.

Local government responsibilities include: local road maintenance, garbage collection, building regulations and land subdivisions, and public health and recreation facilities such as swimming pools.

Further information about the electoral process, enrolment and voting is available at the AEC website www.aec.gov.au or by calling 13 23 26.