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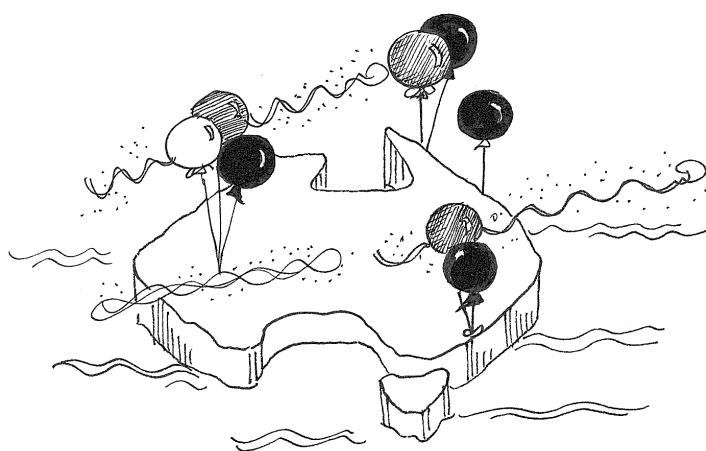
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## ● Preface

This learning circle has a principal aim: to explore Australia's federal system of government.

The decision of the people of the six Australian colonies, made by referenda in 1898 and 1899, to form a federation and create a new level of national government, was the product of decades of visions, deals, miracles and accidents. The pageantry of the public celebrations and ceremonies of the first Australia Day in 1901 promoted the message that a new nation—the Commonwealth of Australia—was being formed with a new constitution and institutions. This learning circle kit is designed to foster an interest in the achievement of Australian federation and to consider the outlook for our federal system.



The detailed arrangements of the Constitution to overcome the differences between the colonies, which became states from 1901, had been the most difficult sections of the Constitution to decide. The federal fathers knew that the annoying customs houses on the intercolonial borders, which delayed travellers and collected duties on goods passing between the colonies, had to be abolished if Australian commerce was to develop. They also knew that customs duties on goods imported from overseas had to be uniform throughout the colonies and that such duties should be collected

by a national customs service. Rivers flowed between colonies, defying the man-made borders, as did railways, and these features needed at the least co-ordination or even control by the new Commonwealth government.

This learning circle kit is designed to encourage its users to engage with the Australian Constitution on these federal issues. Many sections of the Constitution have been given their detail by legislation and some changed by referenda. This allows learning circles to look at how our Constitution has worked, and how its principles have held up in practice.

The kit also encourages learning circle participants to consider the current workings of our federal system. The first learning circle kit produced under the Discovering Democracy programme for the adult and community education sector—*The Governance of Australia*—had a detailed look at our national governance. This second kit provides an opportunity to learn about the other spheres of government in Australia—the State and Territories and local government. Participants are encouraged to use the discussion notes and resources of the kit, which are necessarily general, to come to grips with the governance of their own State/Territory and their local government area.

These are the areas—especially at the local level—where people have a more direct relationship with government. These are the spheres of government that provide, change or withdraw local services in waste collection, roads, schools, hospitals, sporting and recreation facilities. They control what can be done with one's house and land and neighbourhood areas. This is a rich lode for a learning circle. Mining it can lead to increased local awareness and even local action to support or oppose local developments. It is an area where

people are more likely to feel empowered to make a difference. Contributing to a debate about the use of public space in a suburb or country area can be more immediate than discussing Commonwealth taxation reform, even though it may be less important in the long run to the way we are governed and our quality of life.

The kit leads participants to study how the Australian federal system has developed since federation and how it is operating now. This is done in two sessions. Session four encourages participants to look at the elements of the federal system. Thus the Senate, High Court, Council of Australian Governments, Premiers Conferences, Ministerial Councils, the Commonwealth Grants Commission and other intergovernmental agencies get a mention. In session five a number of case studies are presented to show how this system works. These case studies are designed to encourage learning circles to look at how the three spheres of government affect their own local area as all localities have contemporary issues which can be explored from this perspective.

Finally, the kit encourages its users to consider the future of our federal system in Australia.

Is it working as well as possible? Are the personalities involved more important than the structures? Are there different attitudes which could make our federal system more productive for Australian citizens? Has the process of reform to avoid duplication and increase efficiency worked and will its extension achieve a better federal system? Are there better structures which produce less hostility between the Commonwealth, State/Territory and local government bodies involved? Will these produce less hostility to our federal institutions and politicians from individual voters? Are there other possibilities open to us? This last session encourages the learning circle towards some imaginative speculation.

After experiencing these aspects of the kit we hope that all participants will have enjoyed their journey though Australia's Constitution and federal system and will have developed their understanding of both. This learning can then be put to whatever use the group or its individual members decide. That could include continuing their learning circle activities as part of their lifelong learning.

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