

Institutional reform stocktake

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About this report

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Overview

Australia has a 'pretty good democracy' by global standards. We have strong institutional foundations, including compulsory and preferential voting, a world-class electoral commission, and strong rule of law. These institutions have delivered 'pretty good government' over the long term.

However, Australia faces profound policy challenges, and trust in government has fallen. While better leadership and cultural change would help, leaders ultimately respond to institutional incentives. Changes to institutional rules can change those incentives. But Australia's institutions are heading in the wrong direction as power is concentrated in the executive, major parties become more professionalised and less connected to their community, and social capital weakens.

There is no magic bullet to transform our institutions. Many changes have been proposed. The vast majority of these would help, but given resistance to institutional reform, we need to focus. Policy makers have limited political capital and researchers have limited resources. And if there is a hung parliament or an expanded cross-bench, there are only so many items that independents can realistically demand if they are horse-trading over legislation or negotiating with a party that wants to form government.

So, as with any other aspect of public policy, reforms need to be prioritised. This report aims to help policy makers and researchers focus their efforts in investigating and promoting changes. It analyses which reforms would most improve governance so that government delivers more for Australians, and people are more likely to trust it in return.

We investigated 34 potential reforms to the Commonwealth Parliament and Executive. We identified the priority of reforms by looking at their impact, their feasibility, and the strength of their evidence base.

We identified seven high priority reforms with high impact that were reasonably feasible, and with a good evidence base. These reforms would get serious about capping political donations and campaign spending, and

tighten the processes for appointing and terminating the secretaries of government departments. They would implement fixed three-year terms, implement long-standing proposals to improve civics education in schools, and require more timely responses by government to parliamentary committees. The reality of rising voter support for independent MPs, and greater numbers in parliament, should be reflected in greater resources to support them, proportionate opportunities as chairs and members of committees, and more time to debate and vote on private members' bills.

We identified four reforms that are likely high impact, but which are less politically feasible, and need more research and advocacy over the longer term. These include more work on defining the role and increasing the accountability of Ministerial advisers, promoting four-year terms for the House of Representatives (which will require constitutional amendment), considering mechanisms for deliberative democracy processes, and developing thinking around expert advisory bodies.

We identified another 15 reforms that are worth pursuing in a second phase, once reforms in this first phase have largely been implemented. These would improve Australia's governance, although they are likely to make less difference than the first phase of reforms. We think that the remaining nine reforms are lower priority because they would have less impact and are less feasible.

Reasonable minds will differ on the prioritisation we have suggested. But we hope that this report is a starting point for continued discussion, and a useful summary of the available information about the potential impact of reforms and the issues that require further analysis.

Australia's good government is not just luck. Historically we have made good institutional choices, leading to good government, and delivering prosperity. But our world is changing, institutions are corroding, and authoritarianism is growing internationally. We need to make our own luck again by renewing Australia's institutions of government.

Recommended highest priority reforms

Political donations

- Reduce overall gift cap to \$150,000 within an election cycle and reduce cap on third party spending to \$2m.
- Reduce threshold for donation disclosure from \$5,000 to \$1,000.
- Create new standing expert commission on electoral matters, with initial brief to reconsider caps on campaign spending.

Departmental secretary appointment and termination

- Legislate to require appointment from shortlist assessed by Public Service Commissioner and Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- Legislate to require annual reporting on how often candidates were specifically shortlisted by the Prime Minister, and how often successful candidates had been assessed as 'not suitable'.
- Legislate to limit grounds for terminating a secretary's employment.

Fixed parliamentary terms

- Legislate to fix terms at three years unless government loses confidence or is unable to pass supply.

Civics education

- Specify minimum number of teaching hours for civics in years 9 and 10, and mandate civics course for years 11 and 12.
- Set up national research centre to promote effective civics education.

Private members bills

- Schedule parliamentary time for regular debate and votes on private members' bills.
- Prioritise voting on private member's bill when supported by substantial minority of the House of Representatives Selection Committee.

Parliamentary committees

- Allocate membership and chairs of joint and House of Representatives committees proportionate to membership of the Parliament and House.
- Require the responsible minister to table response within four months of publication of a parliamentary committee report, and require the responsible minister and departmental secretary to attend a committee hearing if no report is tabled, and once any response is tabled.
- Require a non-government chair for oversight committees such as Public Accounts and Audit Committee and the Joint Committee on the National Anti-Corruption Commission.
- Conduct comprehensive review of committee system.

MP resourcing and procedures for allocation

- Increase personal staffing levels for independent MPs, particularly if they hold the balance of power.
- Conduct and implement review to define criteria for appropriate staffing levels and to define independent process for allocating resources.

Longer term research and advocacy

- Conduct and implement comprehensive reviews of:
 - appointment, conduct, and accountability of **ministerial advisers**;
 - the use of **deliberative democracy** to progress politically intractable issues and institutional reforms; and
 - principles, subject areas, structure, and powers for potential new **independent expert advisory bodies**.
- Build the public case for **four-year terms**.
- Publish previously completed reports on public appointments process and MP resourcing.

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1. Purpose and approach

1.1 Purpose

This report ‘takes stock’ of institutional reform proposals in Australia. It aims to help people focus their efforts where they will make the most difference. It provides a systematic prioritisation of institutional reforms, drawing on the extensive work already completed about them.

The stocktake aims to support policy decision-makers – particularly parliamentarians interested in institutional reform – to focus their inevitably scarce political capital on the reforms that would make the most difference and have the best prospect of success. Without prioritisation there is a real danger that the agenda becomes clogged with reforms that might be in the right direction, but are unlikely to make much of a difference.¹

The report also aims to support those involved in policy research – funders, think tanks, and academics – to prioritise their scarce resources for research where they are most needed.

Prioritisation is fundamentally a matter of political choice.² Most policy questions involve value judgments, so a prioritisation report such as this one is only an aid to political decision-making. Nevertheless, prioritisation analysis is worthwhile. Disciplined analysis of the options is often valued by politicians who have to make those choices. Assembling the relevant evidence enables politicians to make better prioritisation choices. And evidence can test the validity of the assumptions that drive those choices.³

¹ Daley et al. (2020), p. 5.

² Daley et al. (2020), p. 3.

³ Daley et al. (2020), p. 25.

1.2 Prioritising institutional reform is important

1.2.1 Defining institutions

Rather than prioritising reforms to substantive policy areas such as health, education, or the economy,⁴ this report focuses on prioritising reforms to how government works, particularly the Commonwealth Parliament and Executive.

We take a broad approach to the institutions that might improve our governance. We define the institutions of government to include formal constitutional structures, and the institutions set up by statute and administrative arrangements, from the Reserve Bank to parliamentary committees.⁵ We include the rules governing these institutions, including electoral law, public sector staffing legislation, and subordinate rules. We also include the structures of the political parties that are crucial in practice, and the conventions that shape political behaviour even though they are not legally binding.

Our approach is to try to improve ‘responsible government’, not just maximise ‘democracy’ narrowly defined as reflecting the view of a majority of citizens at a point in time. We believe that government involving regular, meaningful elections is more likely to deliver good outcomes in the long run than an autocracy. But we also believe that embedding such a democracy in a broader system of rule of law, checks and balances, and relatively independent institutions will deliver even better outcomes in the long run.⁶

⁴ See, e.g., Wood et al. (2022d); Daley (2012).

⁵ As per Daley (2021), p. 6.

⁶ Jones (2020); Mounk (2018).

1.2.2 Why institutions matter

Prioritising institutional reform is particularly important. Institutions matter: by their nature, a single institution can affect many policy decisions, and profoundly change their outcome. As described in Chapter 2 in more detail, growing problems with government institutions in Australia (and in other countries) explain why substantive policy reform has slowed over the past few decades.⁷ These problems also contributed to falling trust in government over the long term, weakening government's ability to deliver.⁸

There is a tendency to respond by calling on parties and politicians to do better.⁹ But while leadership is important, powerful trends in our political system often promote short-term decision-making and decisions contrary to the long-term public interest.¹⁰ These trends include power centralising in the executive, professionalised politics, and soundbite media. These trends affect the incentives for political actors, increase the power of vested interests, and reduce appetite and capability to pursue long-term reform, partly explaining why reform has been 'gridlocked' for some time.¹¹ We say more about these problems in Chapter 2.

The rules of the game affect these trends and incentives, and therefore shape how many major policy decisions serve the public interest. Improving institutional rules can ultimately improve policy outcomes. There are also ethical arguments for decision-making through democratic processes that increase public participation.¹²

Institutional reform isn't everything. Australian institutions already have many things going for them. The Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Australia as the 11th strongest democracy in the world, rising 3 places in the rankings last year,¹³ which is consistent with a broad range of other

assessments.¹⁴ Commentators from other countries often wish that they could adopt Australia's systems of compulsory voting, a fiercely independent electoral commission that sets electoral boundaries, and a number of other independent institutions.¹⁵ These institutions have delivered 'pretty good government' over the long term. So reforming Australia's institutional rules is not a panacea.

But undeniably, Australian institutions could do better, and institutional reform is likely to promote better policy decisions that improve welfare in the long run.

1.3 Australia may have a rare opportunity for institutional reform

The need to prioritise institutional reform will always be with us. But opportunities for significant institutional reform are relatively rare. Consequently, it is particularly important to make the most of any window that does open by prioritising pushing through reforms that will make the most difference.

1.3.1 Many institutional reforms are strongly supported

Forces are aligning to improve the opportunities for institutional reform. Public concern with institutions is unusually high; a growing number of think tanks and researchers are producing evidence of the need and value for reform; and there is a significant possibility that no party will have a lower house majority in the next Federal Parliament, a situation which has led to institutional reform in the past.

⁷ Daley (2021), p. 3.

⁸ Cameron and McAllister (2022), p. 101. In 1969, 51% of Australians indicated that people in government can be trusted, compared to 30% in 2022. Per O'Donnell et al. (2024) at p. 72, trust in the Federal Government has declined since the COVID-19 pandemic, though remains marginally higher than levels recorded in the 2010s.

⁹ See, e.g., Walter (2022).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Daley (2023), p. 3.

¹¹ Daley (2023), p. 46.

¹² See, e.g., Parvin and Saunders (2018).

¹³ Economist Intelligence Unit (2025), p. 15.

¹⁴ Evans et al. (2024), pp. 577-582.

¹⁵ Evans et al. (2024), p. 35; and see Banks (2011), p. 1.

Institutional reform has plenty of strong popular support, both in general and for specific reforms. Nearly 30% of Australians viewed integrity issues as more important in the 2022 election than in previous elections,¹⁶ and a large majority of Australians believe it is worth trying to fix the problems democracy may have.¹⁷ Concern about open and honest government has decreased since the 2022 election,¹⁸ although it remains much higher than in the past.¹⁹ As this report documents, many specific institutional changes have strong popular support.²⁰

Around the world, academics are increasingly focused on the role of institutions. This year's Nobel Prize in Economics went to three economists whose work focused on how institutions affect outcomes.²¹ In recent years, a substantial body of work about how to improve Australia's institutions has been produced by civil society leaders and think tanks, including the Centre for Public Integrity, the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, Grattan Institute and the Susan McKinnon Foundation. Advocates from civil society across the political spectrum, including research institutions and academia, think tanks, and business groups, have been advocating institutional reforms for decades, often with much consensus between advocates and over time.²²

This public and expert support for institutional reform is reflected by Australia's political institutions themselves, although it has not yet led to much effective change.

1.3.2 Recent institutional reform has been limited

Despite broad support, there have been limited institutional reforms over the past few years. The Commonwealth Government launched a survey of

Trust and Satisfaction with Australian Democracy in June 2023,²³ and recently initiated a Strengthening Democracy Taskforce, aiming to strengthen support for Australia's democratic institutions.²⁴ The current Parliament passed legislation to set up the National Anti-Corruption Commission. The Commonwealth Grant Rules and Principles 2024 create a more disciplined system to set criteria for, evaluate, and report on ministerial intervention for grant programs, although the regime is not entrenched in legislation.

The current Parliament did pass 247 pages of amendments to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act*, primarily about political donations and campaign finance. The amendments dealt with some of the widely identified problems such as the lack of real time disclosure, and the non-disclosure of many contributions,²⁵ as discussed below at section 4.1. However, many have expressed concerns that the amendments will not do much to limit the ability of wealthy donors to buy access and influence, were apparently designed to benefit incumbent major parties over independents and new entrants, and may be unconstitutional.²⁶

Bills on a range of other institutional reforms were introduced to the 2022-25 Federal Parliament, led by the crossbench.²⁷ But these and many other suggested reforms had little chance of passage.

Overall, in recent years there has been little concrete change relative to the large slate of proposed reforms documented in the remainder of this report.

¹⁶ The Australia Institute (2022b).

¹⁷ Australian Public Service Reform (2023).

¹⁸ Botha and Payne (2024).

¹⁹ See *The Perfect Candidate* (2018).

²⁰ See, e.g., literature review on lobbying, political donations, campaign finance, truth in political advertising, FOI, and whistleblower protection.

²¹ The Nobel Prize (2024).

²² See, e.g., Accountability Round Table (2021); Reece et al. (2019).

²³ Australian Public Service Commission (2023b).

²⁴ Department of Home Affairs (2024).

²⁵ Wood and Griffiths (2022).

²⁶ Crowley (2024); Koutsoukis (2024); Twomey (2024).

²⁷ Haines (2024).

The window for institutional reform is often small. Institutional reform shifts power. People with power are usually reluctant to give it up, and precisely because they have power, they are often in a position to block change.²⁸

Institutional reforms have often not progressed in Australia because they would not serve the interests of incumbent parties. Many of the suggested changes would leave members of the government more exposed to questioning, challenge or censure, reduce the advantages of established political parties relative to new entrants, reduce the power of party officials relative to rank-and-file members, or reduce employment opportunities after a political career.

1.3.3 A hung parliament may widen the window for reform

Because the forces opposing institutional reform are powerful, significant institutional reforms in modern Australia have typically been more frequent in the wake of scandal, or when independents held the balance of parliamentary power, particularly in the lower house.²⁹ The significant possibility of a hung parliament after the next federal election may widen an important window for institutional reform.

Crossbenchers usually have strong electoral incentives to prosecute institutional reforms, because they are usually both popular and not supported by incumbent parties. Institutional reform has typically been a central pillar of the policy platforms of independents and Greens candidates.³⁰

Historically, hung parliaments have tended to promote institutional reform.³¹ During the hung Gillard Parliament, the cross-bench successfully sought a series of institutional reforms, including the establishment of the Parliamentary Budget Office, reconfiguration of the parliamentary

committee system, a stricter approach to relevance during Question Time,³² the conferral of greater power on the Auditor-General to review people working for government, and greater protection for confidentiality of journalists' sources.³³

There is a significant possibility that the crossbench will hold the balance of power and may be larger after the upcoming federal election. At the time of writing, commentators are predicting a slim Labor majority or a hung parliament: Labor leads the Coalition on a two-party-preferred vote of 52-48, voters increasingly expect a hung parliament, and there is significant support for Greens, other minor parties and independents.³⁴ Over the longer term, the major party vote has fallen significantly.³⁵

This window of opportunity may narrow again. The power of independents to push for institutional change is greatest during negotiations immediately following an election. It usually only persists while the parliament is hung. Hung parliaments are relatively unusual in Australia: over the past 20 years the Commonwealth Government has had a majority in the House of Representatives for 16 years; and only the South Australian, Western Australian, Australian Capital Territory, and Northern Territory governments have had five years or more of minority government.³⁶

1.4 Making the most of this chance requires preparation

While a lot of work has already proposed and examined the merits of particular institutional reforms in the Australian context, an overall agenda has not been articulated. No published source provides a summary of the universe of potential institutional reforms, let alone a comparison of their

²⁸ See, e.g., Boix (1999).

²⁹ Daley (2021), pp. 59-61.

³⁰ Daley (2021), p. 61.

³¹ Daley (2021), p. 61.

³² Parliament Library (2013).

³³ Grattan (2013).

³⁴ See, e.g., Benson (2025).

³⁵ Browne and Le (2024).

³⁶ Browne and Denniss (2024), pp. 25-26.

potential value and political feasibility, which is necessary for disciplined prioritisation and sequencing.³⁷

The preparation for individual institutional reforms is also piecemeal. The proposals for many institutional reforms lack some of the key steps of a disciplined policy process likely to lead to better quality policy and greater public acceptance of the outcome.³⁸ Consequently, some reforms may not be adequately prepared to capitalise on the window of opportunity.

This report aims to plug the gap by providing a stocktake of existing work on institutional reform. It aims to prioritise the proposals that should be pursued immediately if an opportunity for reform arises; and prioritise further research that will make it easier to pursue reform in future.

1.5 Remainder of the report

Chapter 2 summarises the problems that institutional reforms aim to solve, and identifies the key institutional trends behind these problems.

Chapter 3 outlines our methodology for prioritising reforms, and identifies the relative priority of the reforms we have investigated based on their impact, evidence base, and political feasibility.

Chapter 4 provides more detail on the priorities for immediate reform. For each reform, the chapter shows how the reform will contribute to resolving the problems identified in Chapter 2, and outlines the key features of the reform.

Chapter 5 explains the key features of the priority reforms for immediate research and advocacy, why they would substantially improve Australia's governance, and the further research that is required before they can be implemented.

Appendix 1 provides more detail on our prioritisation methodology.

Appendix 2 provides the key reasons for our prioritisation of each potential reform.

Appendix 3 provides a list of additional reforms raised in the course of interview.

Appendix 4 lists the interviewees who contributed to forming our views in this report.

This report is supported by a set of **Background Materials** that provides a more detailed assessment of each significant institutional reform against our prioritisation criteria.

³⁷ Daley (2020).

³⁸ Howard (2012).

2. The problems that institutional reforms are aiming to solve

2.1 What institutions should deliver

Government should deliver good substantive outcomes to people, engender trust, provide opportunities for citizens to have agency as part of their governance, and promote liberal and rational values.

2.1.1 Good policy outcomes

One ultimate rationale for institutional reform is that it helps government to deliver social, economic, and environmental outcomes in the public interest. However, Australian governments are getting worse at delivering policy changes that make a big difference to long-term problems.³⁹

Australia needs plenty of substantive long-term policy reforms. Three widely recognised major challenges⁴⁰ are declining intergenerational equity, particularly housing affordability,⁴¹ slowing (now declining) productivity growth,⁴² and little progress in reducing emissions from any sector other than electricity production.⁴³ All reflect decades of reluctance to make tough and lasting policy choices. Progress on these and other policy issues is slow.⁴⁴ More than 80% of Australians agree that policy decisions are generally too focused on the short-term.⁴⁵

³⁹ Daley (2021).

⁴⁰ Daley and Coates (2018), p. 3; Robson (2023); Spender (2024), pp. 8-18.

⁴¹ 30 years ago, the average older household had 2.5 times as much wealth as the average younger household; today it has almost 4 times as much wealth: (Wood and Griffiths (2019), p. 6); home ownership for low-income households under 35 has declined from 45% to 25% between 1981 and 2021 (Spender (2024), p. 10; and see Wood (2024)); and only 8% believe that the standard of living will be better for the next generation of Australians (Accent Research and RedBridge Group (2024)).

⁴² Foster (2024), and apart from a brief recovery post-pandemic, Australian productivity growth is falling behind other developed economies.

⁴³ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (2024); Quiggin (2023).

⁴⁴ Vand der Meer (2017), p. 587.

⁴⁵ EveryGen (2024).

⁴⁶ Leigh and Terrell (2020). See below 2.2.3, “Weakening social capital”.

Another challenge less recognised by headlines, but acutely felt, is declining social connection⁴⁶ and increasing isolation.⁴⁷ Social connection is one of the two main drivers of overall life satisfaction,⁴⁸ and is closely correlated with other aspects of well-being such as health.⁴⁹

2.1.2 Trust in government

Another ultimate rationale for institutional reform is to maintain trust in government. Trust is partly a means to better long-term policy. If trust is lower, then people are less likely to follow leaders that try to reassure them a policy is in fact in the long-term public interest even though its immediate impacts appear bad.⁵⁰ Trust also enables more efficient and effective government: if trust is higher, people are more likely to comply voluntarily with government directives (including adherence to challenging reforms and programs with better outcomes), reducing the costs of enforcement, and increasing the benefits of government coordination.⁵¹ Trust can help legitimise and protect democratic institutions and norms.⁵²

Trust in government in Australia has fallen over the long term,⁵³ and there is growing dissatisfaction with key institutions, particularly political parties, politicians, and business.⁵⁴ Trust in the Federal Government has declined

⁴⁷ The proportion of the population experiencing “social isolation” increased from 11% in 2012 to 15% in 2021: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024).

⁴⁸ Schumaker et al. (1993), p. 69.

⁴⁹ Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015), p. 228; Wilkins et al. (2022), p. 135.

⁵⁰ Daley (2021), p. 40.

⁵¹ OECD (2024b), p. 15.

⁵² OECD (2024b), p. 15.

⁵³ The proportion of Australians who thought that people in government can be trusted declined from 51% to 30% between 1969 and 2022: Cameron and McAllister (2022), p. 101. Per O'Donnell et al. (2024) at p. 72, trust in the Federal Government has declined since the COVID-19 pandemic, though remains marginally higher than levels recorded in the 2010s.

⁵⁴ The proportion of Australians that believe that “parties care what people think” declined from 30% to 21% between 2007 and 2022. The proportion of Australians that believe that “big business has too much power” increased from 60% to 74% between 1967 and 2022: Cameron and McAllister (2022), p. 101.

since the COVID-19 pandemic, though it remains marginally higher than in the 2010s.⁵⁵

Lack of progress on key policy problems is itself one reason for falling trust in government. Falling trust is also correlated with increasing inequality.⁵⁶ Falling trust in government may also partly be a consequence of perceptions that:⁵⁷

- governments overpromise but underdeliver;
- major political parties do not represent the view of the general population;
- vested interests have outsized influence; and
- individual politicians are governing in their own interest rather than the public interest.

The perception that politicians are governing in their own personal interests at the expense of the public interest is fuelled by stories of abuse of parliamentary entitlements, a revolving door of appointments to lobbying and public roles, and lack of accountability.⁵⁸

2.1.3 An opportunity to participate in government

Many argue that there is also an inherent value to citizens participating in their own government.⁵⁹ Considering common problems together, and forging solutions, promotes both community and individual agency.

However, around half of Australians feel that people like them have very little or no ability to have a say in what government does, and more than half do not feel confident about their ability to participate in politics.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ O'Donnell et al. (2024) at p. 72.

⁵⁶ Bienstman (2023).

⁵⁷ See Wood and Daley (2018), pp. 76-80.

⁵⁸ Wood and Daley (2018), pp. 80-81.

2.1.4 Inter-relationships between features of good governance

The failures of governments to deliver are interrelated. As noted above, when government delivers good substantive outcomes, trust in government tends to rise. When trust in government rises, it is easier for governments to promote reforms that electorates instinctively distrust, but which would be good in the long term. When governments fail to deliver good policy outcomes, and trust in government falls, authoritarian movements often flourish. Authoritarianism sometimes makes the trains run on time, but over the long term it often leads to terrible outcomes for people, because the regime is driven by a desire to retain power no matter the cost to the public interest. Conversely, genuine public participation in government tends to lead to better outcomes in the public interest because it usually penalises self-interested rulers, and ensures that decisions take the street-level view into account.

2.1.5 Global outcomes

Australian trends mirror global trends, even if Australia is doing better than most overall. Many countries face policy gridlock (and stalled productivity growth), falling trust in government, political parties more disconnected from the general population,⁶¹ and over-powerful corporate interests.⁶² Australia can only avoid these global patterns through local choices that counter the global trends.

2.2 Institutional trends and the outcomes of government

Institutional design can make a big difference to the outcomes of government discussed in the previous sub-section. Good institutions promote better long-term policy outcomes, higher trust in government, and

⁵⁹ See Anderson (2009), p. 213. Claims that democratic participation has intrinsic value date back to Aristotle: Mulgan (1990).

⁶⁰ Biddle and Gray (2024), p. 19.

⁶¹ Van Haute et al. (2017).

⁶² Economist Intelligence Unit (2025), p. 13; OECD (2024); Edelman Trust Institute (2025).

more opportunity for citizens to participate in government, and discourage authoritarian movements that undermine liberal and rational values.

However, many institutional trends in Australia are heading in the wrong direction. These trends largely explain why government is delivering less, as documented in the previous section. Similar institutional trends and outcomes can be observed in many other developed countries. These trends include:

- concentration of government power;
- professionalised political parties less connected to their communities; and
- weakening social capital.

Institutional reforms that counter these trends are likely to be the most effective ways to improve long-term government outcomes.

2.2.1 Concentration of government power

Government power has become more concentrated in Australia as power has shifted from parliament to the executive, from public service to Ministers, and from Ministers to the Prime Minister.

While the constraining influence of parliamentary power should not be overstated,⁶³ power has shifted from the parliament to the executive. Norms of ministerial responsibility to parliament have weakened.⁶⁴ Parliamentary committees can promote more evidence-based, consensus-driven deliberation and scrutiny, but Australia's parliamentary committee system 'is much weaker than that in several other contemporary

Westminster parliaments (Britain, New Zealand, and Scotland).'⁶⁵ Parliamentary scrutiny of delegated legislation has weakened.⁶⁶ Question Time, the most visible aspect of parliamentary proceedings, has become 'more a shield for executive government rather than a scrutiny.'⁶⁷

Government power has shifted from the public service to executive government. It is broadly recognised that over time the public service has become more politicised and responsive to the demands of the government of the day.⁶⁸ Enlarged ministerial staffs, with greater effective authority, have further increased executive resourcing and power.⁶⁹

The growth in the size and responsibility of the Prime Minister's personal office and the dual capacity of Prime Minister and Cabinet as both a coordinator across government and a source of 'rival' departmental advice to the Prime Minister has strengthened prime ministerial power within the executive.⁷⁰

Concentration of government power reduces accountability.⁷¹ Combined with the fact that, 'outside elections, accountability to the party room may be more potent than accountability to the parliament,'⁷² it opens the path for decision-making that favours vested interests and the loudest voices. It can also limit deliberative, evidence-based decision-making.

2.2.2 Professionalised political parties

Parties play crucial roles in democratic systems. Parties help form a set of coherent governing principles and policies that can be taken to elections, based on democratic deliberation⁷³ and aggregation of citizen demands, providing alternative policy choices for voters.⁷⁴ Parties have a vital role to play in driving the process of democratic reform and innovation.⁷⁵

⁶³ Bäck et al. (2021).

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Carne (2024).

⁶⁵ Marsh and Halpin (2015), p. 137.

⁶⁶ Appleby and Howe (2015).

⁶⁷ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure (2021), p. 21.

⁶⁸ Prasser (2012), p. 49; Halligan (2020); Podger and Halligan (2023).

⁶⁹ Prasser (2012), p. 49.

⁷⁰ Prasser (2012), p. 49; Taflaga (2021), p. 65.

⁷¹ Taflaga (2021), pp. 66-67.

⁷² Taflaga (2021), p. 67.

⁷³ Gauja (2015), p. 203.

⁷⁴ Ghazarian (2021), p. 106.

⁷⁵ Farrell (2020), p. 4.

However, political parties in Australia don't always operate this way. While in theory political parties are part of policy development, in practice they are often more focused on operating an electoral machine and providing a career pathway.⁷⁶

Party membership no longer provides a reliable connection to the community to discuss policy concerns. Party membership is a tiny fraction of the community, and falling.⁷⁷ The four largest parties (ALP, Liberals, Nationals and Greens) *collectively* have about 130,000 members: less than 1 Australian in 250.⁷⁸

Instead major political parties around the world have increasingly become 'cartel parties' in which members promise each other the benefits of government patronage, part of the machinery of government operated by a professional political class.⁷⁹ The opportunities and incentives for patronage have grown as the links have become tighter between decision makers, political party machines, ministerial advisers and vested interests.⁸⁰ Former Prime Minister John Howard has repeatedly complained that factions have become 'preferment cooperatives'.⁸¹ When almost all major party MPs belong to a faction then inevitably the party itself is to some extent a preferment cooperative.

⁷⁶ Gauja (2015), p. 202.

⁷⁷ Humphrys et al. (2020).

⁷⁸ The only reliable data on party membership is available from disclosures in NSW where about 30,000 people are members of the four largest political parties: NSW Electoral Commission (2025). In 2023-24 the ALP had about 11,000 members, the Liberal Party about 10,000 members, the National party less than 3,000 members, and the Greens less than 4,000 members, although these calculations do not account for "family" memberships where a single membership fee pays for two individual memberships. These numbers have declined a little since 2019-20. See also Davies (2020), reporting that in 2020 the ALP claimed 60,000 members, and the Liberal Party between 50,000 to 60,000 members.

⁷⁹ Daley (2021) p. 46; Katz and Mair (1995); Evans et al. (2024), p. 138.

⁸⁰ Daley (2021) p. 56.

⁸¹ Davies (2018); Haig (2024); Benson (2024).

⁸² Fawcett and Corbett (2018).

⁸³ Daley (2021) pp. 45-49, 53-57.

⁸⁴ The Liberal Party review of the 2022 campaign noted 'the rise in large-scale local volunteer campaigns organised by activist groups opposed to the Coalition' and that 'the decline in the

As parties have increasingly provided mutual patronage, politics has professionalised. Politicians enter politics younger, and are drawn from a narrower range of backgrounds.⁸² The number of ministerial advisers has grown, and this is increasingly the path to election as an MP.⁸³

The rise of community independents can be seen as a reaction to these trends. Most elected independents appear to have active local volunteer bases that are larger than those of most MPs from major political parties,⁸⁴ and most have entered politics in middle age with little or no prior experience of politics.⁸⁵

The cartelisation of political parties and the professionalisation of political careers are major drivers of the failure to pursue important policy reforms.⁸⁶ Many argue that they have also driven broader populations to disengage from politics, with falling trust in politicians.⁸⁷

2.2.3 Weakening social capital

Membership of groups including trade unions,⁸⁸ political parties,⁸⁹ and other social groups⁹⁰ has been declining for the past 20 years, and most Australians think that people have become less connected to others and their community.⁹¹

[Liberal] Party's volunteer base, in particular, is a major concern.' Loughnane and Hume (2022), p. 23.

⁸⁵ 22 self-described community independent candidates stood in the 2022 federal election. All but two were highly educated, professional women aged between 40 and 65 years old, stemming from diverse professional backgrounds. None were 'rogue former party MPs or former advisors or technocrats from the political establishment' (although two had familial links with previous generations of Liberal MPs and ministers). All were local members of their communities: Hendriks and Reid (2023), p. 1617.

⁸⁶ Daley (2021), pp. 47-48.

⁸⁷ Fawcett and Corbett (2018).

⁸⁸ Since 1992, the proportion of employees who were trade union members has fallen from 40% to 13.1%: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024).

⁸⁹ See, e.g., Humphrys et al. (2020); see also above section 2.2.2

⁹⁰ This has declined from 62.7% to 50% over 2006 to 2019 (the latest General Social Survey results after 2020, when results were likely skewed by the pandemic): Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019).

⁹¹ Huntley (2024), p. 40.

Social groups are a means to input community views to government and to parties, and to promote focus on the public interest.⁹² With declining membership of social groups, this mechanism has become weaker.

Social groups are also a means for government to communicate back to the community and win supporters for difficult policies.⁹³ With falling membership of social groups, this mechanism has also become weaker.

Membership of social groups itself creates trust in community by reinforcing beliefs that people are supported by, and engaged in, broader systems.⁹⁴ It is plausible that this trust in community has a positive effect on trust in government.⁹⁵ With higher trust in government, it is easier for governments to persuade people to support – or at least not oppose – policies that appear difficult at first sight.⁹⁶ See also section 2.1.2

2.2.4 Media polarisation

Many claim that media polarisation is increasing, and that Australians absorb news from partisan sources that narrowcast to ‘believers’ rather than the entire population. Such polarisation might well lead to falling trust in government and increasing authoritarianism. However, media polarisation appears to be more a United States trend than an Australian reality.⁹⁷ Australian news media trends are much more muted than in the United States, and hyper-partisan media in Australia remains relatively small.⁹⁸

⁹² Putnam (1994), p. 17, who argues that ‘if we are to make our political system more responsive, especially to those who lack connections at the top, we must nourish grassroots organizations’.

⁹³ See, e.g., Szreter and Woolcock (2004), writing on public health policies.

⁹⁴ See, e.g., Putnam (1994), p. 9, arguing that ‘networks of civic engagement also facilitate coordination and communication and amplify information about the trustworthiness of other individuals’. Huntley (2024), p. 42.

⁹⁵ Levi and Stoker (2004), p. 493.

⁹⁶ Levi and Stoker (2004), p. 492; OECD (2024), p. 15.

⁹⁷ Similarly, US trends for media polarisation are *not* mirrored across Europe: Fletcher (2022).

⁹⁸ Daley (2021) p. 44

⁹⁹ Australian Communications and Media Authority (2025), Indicator 5, ‘Main platform’; Susan McKinnon Foundation (2024a), p. 97.

Social media is now the main source of news for about 20% of the Australian population,⁹⁹ and commands a similar share of news attention.¹⁰⁰ Many people *think* that social media increases polarisation.¹⁰¹ But social media only creates an echo chamber for a very small proportion of the population.¹⁰²

Mainstream news outlets continue to be the main source of news for 67% of the population,¹⁰³ and ABC and the Nine Network command about 35% of news attention (compared to 9% for NewsCorp).¹⁰⁴ While some mainstream outlets take obviously partisan lines,¹⁰⁵ experts do not argue that they have changed much from 2016.¹⁰⁶

Trust in news media is only about 40% and has not changed materially over the past decade, but the proportion who *distrust* new media has increased materially from 25% to 33%.¹⁰⁷

Australian media ownership has always been concentrated relative to other countries, and has become even more concentrated.¹⁰⁸ However, the changes in control are not so obviously large that they can be blamed for the declines in robust policy-making and falling trust in government.

2.2.5 International trends

Similar trends in concentration of executive power have been observed in other Western democracies, including the UK (which has seen

¹⁰⁰ Australian Communications and Media Authority (2025), Indicator 6, ‘Share of attention’.

¹⁰¹ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2024a), p. 72.

¹⁰² Arguedas (2022).

¹⁰³ Australian Communications and Media Authority (2025), Indicator 5, ‘Main platform’; Susan McKinnon Foundation (2024a), p. 97.

¹⁰⁴ Australian Communications and Media Authority (2025), Indicator 6, ‘Share of attention’.

¹⁰⁵ Daley (2021) pp. 28, 43.

¹⁰⁶ Muller (2025).

¹⁰⁷ Australian Communications and Media Authority (2025), Indicator 6, ‘Australians’ trust in news’.

¹⁰⁸ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (2019), p. 290.

disempowerment of the legislature, courts, and independent regulators, and breakdown in norms and conventions),¹⁰⁹ Central and Eastern European countries,¹¹⁰ and the US. In many countries, there are growing concerns that these trends are leading to authoritarian governments prepared to do whatever it takes to preserve their power.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Russell et al. (2022).

¹¹⁰ Blackington et al. (2024), p. 1219.

¹¹¹ Repucci and Slipowitz (2022); Carothers and Press (2022); Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019); Dresden et al. (2022) p. 8.

3. Prioritisation outcomes

3.1 Prioritisation methodology

Our prioritisation methodology is detailed in Appendix 1.

In short, we identified 34 institutional reforms, focusing on potential changes to the Commonwealth Parliament and Executive. We defined the key features of each reform by looking for a version of the reform that was on the public record, broadly supported by reform advocates, and that (within these constraints) in our view would most improve policy outcomes with the greatest chance of successful implementation.

We defined the priority of reforms by looking at their impact, their feasibility, and the strength of their evidence base.

In assessing impact, we looked at how the reform might improve the key problems identified in Chapter 2 – that is, how each institutional reform might improve substantive outcomes, and how it might improve trust in government. We did not rely on popular views of impact because public polling about how citizens perceive the relative importance of institutional reforms is not available (in contrast to regular polling about which issues voters consider most important in an election).

In assessing feasibility, we looked at how much political capital is needed to make each reform happen. This is a function of the political environment and implementation costs. The political environment includes current public opinion, the position of major parties, and the existence of champions; implementation costs include the legal complexity (particularly constitutional requirements), administrative complexity, and budgetary costs.

The evidence base matters because it can convince decision makers to act, shift public opinion, shift the balance of power between interest

groups, and increase the probability of successful implementation. While better evidence is neither necessary nor sufficient for worthwhile reform, it both improves the chances that changes will serve the public interest, and makes adoption more politically feasible. Ideally there is good evidence for all the elements of good policy making, from identifying the problem to comparing alternative mechanisms, understanding comparative experience, and working through the detailed components of design.

3.2 Expert views

Our ranking of the impact of reforms is broadly consistent with the assessment of 28 experts and nine current Members of the Commonwealth Parliament with whom we consulted in preparing this report.¹¹² They were not representative (and in particular independent MPs were more available to meet than members of the two major parties). However, given the calibre of experts consulted, it is likely that their views are indicative of a broader sample.

Our interviewees ranked our list of reforms (informed by short description of each reform summarised in Figure 3). They identified their ‘top five’ and ‘bottom five’ reforms (not in order). Their responses are summarised in Figure 1.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the views of experts and MPs were broadly similar, although MPs were more concerned about National Anti-Corruption Commission reform, and less concerned about secretary appointments and ministerial advisers.

Their opinions were diverse: the most popular two responses were highly ranked by just over half of our respondents. The diversity of opinion reflects that there are no silver bullets for institutional reform in Australia and that many worthwhile reforms are incremental. The diversity also

¹¹² While this group is not representative, it included many of Australia's experts on institutional reform, and their views are at least indicative.

reflects how much institutional reforms depend on normative judgments (see also section 2.1.3).

Despite the diversity of opinion, there is substantial correlation between expert judgements and our assessment of impact. Of the nine reforms that we ranked highest impact, six were in the nine reforms most often selected by experts. The major outliers may be explained by recent developments and research. Many experts and MPs were unaware of recent guidelines that substantially tighten discretionary grantmaking.¹¹³ And recent research on truth in political advertising suggests that reforms likely to survive constitutional challenge are unlikely to make much difference.¹¹⁴

Conversely, we identified fixed three-year parliamentary terms, MP resourcing, and private members' bills as important although interviewees did not rank them highly. As discussed further below (section 4.3), fixed three-year terms could be a useful 'second-best' to four-year terms, which require a politically uncertain referendum. MP resourcing is emerging as an important issue where independent MPs hold the balance of power. Interviewees were not asked to consider the impact of reforms to procedures for private members' bills, which only emerged as an important issue towards the end of our project.

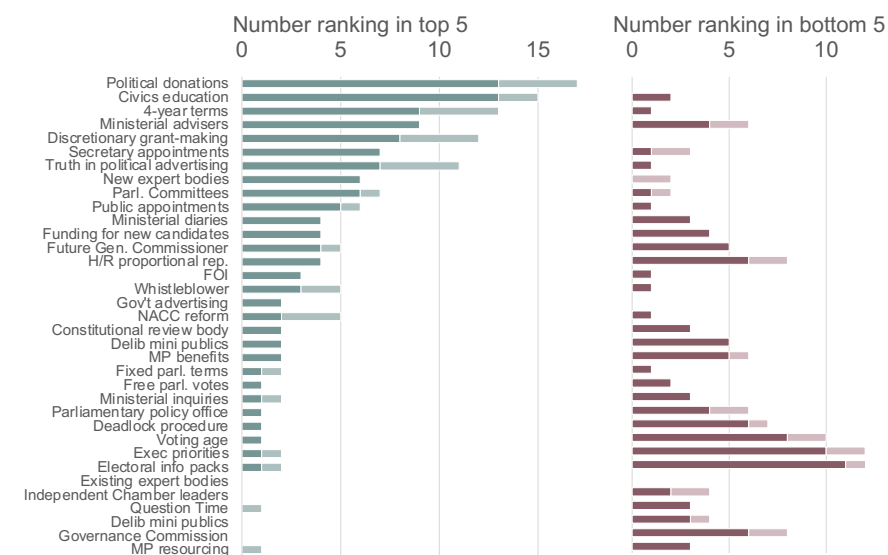
Our interviews with experts and MPs have also informed this report. Their views were provided confidentially, and the authors remain responsible for all contents of this report where not expressly attributed.

3.3 Prioritisation outcomes

Our overall prioritisation of institutional reforms based on this methodology is shown in Figure 2. Appendix 2 on page 72 summarises the key features of each reform and the reasons we have assigned its priority. Further detail for the priority of each institutional reform, including key references, is provided in the Background Materials.

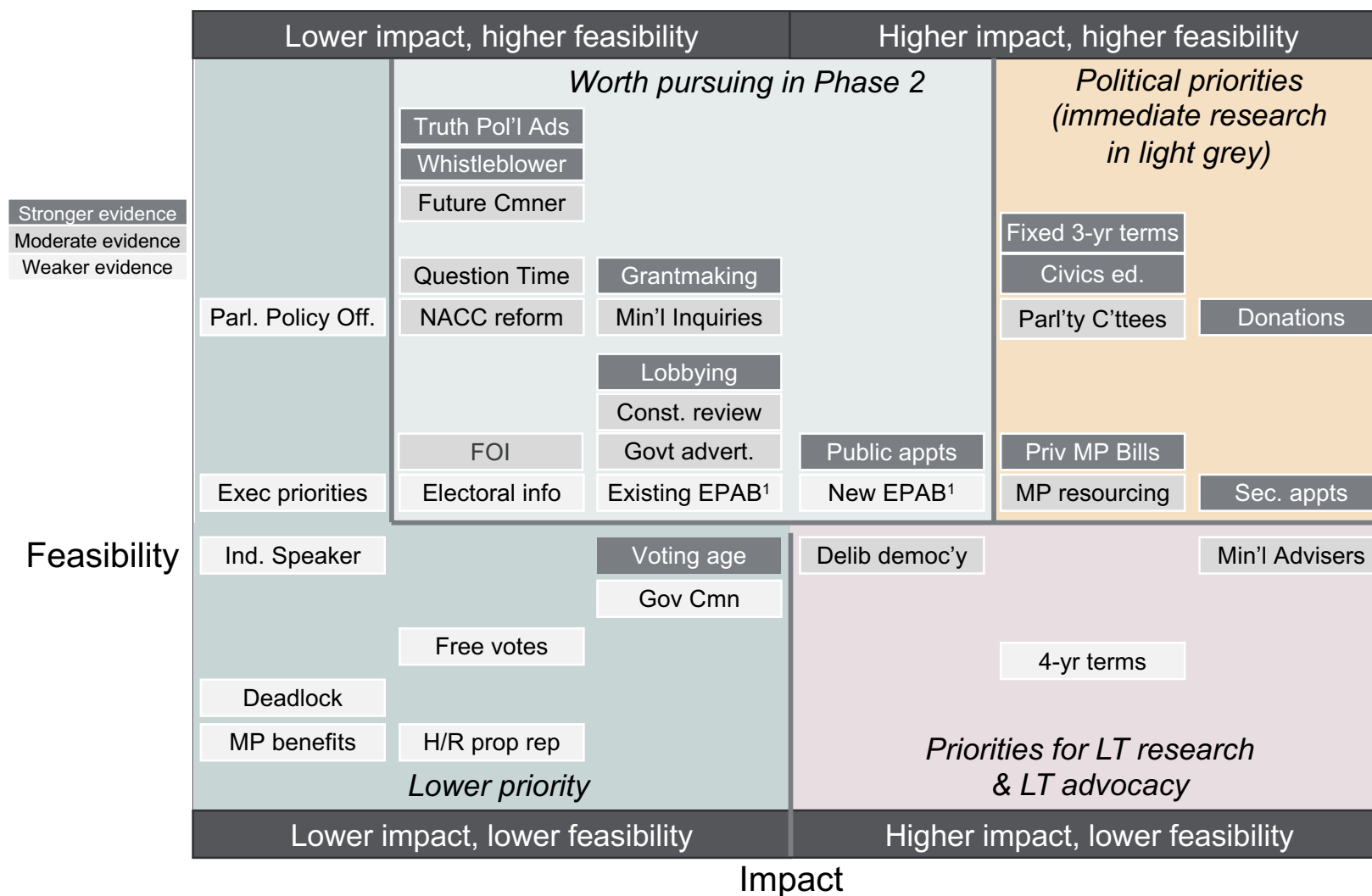
¹¹³ *Commonwealth Grants Rules and Principles 2024*; see also notes on discretionary grantmaking in Background Materials.

Figure 1: Expert ranking of high and low impact reforms
Rankings of 38 experts and MPs; MP responses are shaded lighter



Note: Does not include two reforms ('Ministerial standards' and 'Parliamentary standards') that were only identified as important by a single participant, and which our work indicated were not likely to have material impact. The private members' bill reform was added to our list for evaluation only after most interviews had been conducted.

Figure 2: Institutional reform priorities – overall assessment; reform descriptions in table below (ordered alphabetically)



Abbreviations: EPAB (Expert Policy Advisory Bodies); NACC (National Anti-Corruption Commission).

Figure 3: Institutional reform summary descriptions (ordered alphabetically)

Reform	Summary description
Civics education	Require min number of teaching hours for civics in years 9 and 10; mandate civics course for years 11 and 12; develop and disseminate teacher professional development resources; set up national research centre to promote effective civics education
Constitutional review body	Create a standing expert Constitutional Commission to develop proposals for referenda on constitutional changes; hold periodic Constitutional Conventions every ~10 years, involving citizens and experts, to consider proposals for referenda on constitutional changes
Deadlock procedure	Allow the government to identify measures blocked by the Senate before an election, which it can put to a joint sitting of Parliament for passage if it wins the election
Deliberative democracy	Run deliberative democracy process on well-defined specific issues that are politically intractable; consider other deliberative processes (e.g., smaller-scale electorate-level processes) to build trust
Discretionary grantmaking	Legislate requirements for publication of criteria, advice from officials assessing applications relative to guidelines, and reporting of exceptions to parliament; shorten timeframes for reporting on exceptions to parliament; establish a parliamentary oversight committee
Electoral information packs	Introduce Australian Electoral Commission-issued candidate information packs for elections; include a formal policy manifesto document from each party/candidate, a candidate statement, the candidate's business interests and affiliations, and total amount and source of donations received by each candidate; disseminate packs online, mail to homes and make available at the ballot box on voting day
Executive priorities and commitments	Require governments to table a statement of legislative intent at the start of a parliamentary term/calendar year, setting out the government's priorities
Existing expert bodies	For existing independent expert advisory bodies including the Productivity Commission, Australian Law Reform Commission, Australian Human Rights Commission: increase resourcing for public consultation and communication, especially for 'hard-to-sell' reforms; allow additional self-initiated inquiries; provide for single annual appropriation
Fixed three-year terms	Legislate to fix Commonwealth Parliament terms at three years unless government loses confidence or is unable to pass supply.

Reform	Summary description
FOI	Increase funding to FOI teams and FOI commission to clear backlog and reduce response times; set up independent external review of the functionality of the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner; develop proactive information release policies tailored to individual government agencies; improve electronic records management in government agencies
Four-year terms	Increase House of Representatives terms to four years (which would also be fixed); align to Senate terms of eight years
Free votes	Introduce a parliamentary convention that joint committees can nominate issues to be put to a free vote
Future Generations Commissioner	Appoint a Future Generations Commissioner; create legislative obligation for public bodies to consider the interests of future generations in their decision-making
Governance Commission	Establish an independent expert commission to make advisory public reports on non-constitutional institutional reforms; require the Commission to investigate some (but not all) of the proposals submitted to it by parties and candidates
Government advertising	Permit government advertising campaigns only where they are necessary to encourage specific actions or drive behaviour change; establish an independent panel to assess government advertising campaigns before they are launched; make governing parties liable to repay the cost of a campaign launched without certification from the independent panel (as determined by the Auditor-General)
House of Representatives Proportionate representation	Introduce mixed-member proportional representation for elections to the House of Representatives with multi-member divisions and representation in proportion to the support of parties in each division
Independent Chamber leaders	Make the offices of Speaker and President quasi-judicial; appoint officers for set terms of service; select officers based on expertise and understanding of parliamentary practice via a bipartisan parliamentary committee
Lobbying	Publish Ministerial diaries; include in-house lobbyists on the federal lobbying register; ban former Ministers and their senior staff from becoming lobbyists for three years after leaving Parliament; introduce enforcement mechanisms and penalties via the National Anti-Corruption Commission

Reform	Summary description
Ministerial advisers	Require at least half of ministerial advisers to be drawn from the public service; legislate code of conduct; apply accountability mechanisms including publishing names and roles of senior staff, and explicitly subject to accountability mechanisms such as the Ombudsman and Auditor-General; mandate training
Ministerial Inquiries	Create a new form of official inquiry with powers to require production of documents or appearance but short of full Royal Commission powers; produce guidelines on what forms of inquiry (e.g., single expert, expert panel, official inquiry, Royal Commission) are appropriate in what circumstances
MP benefits	Reintroduce the defined parliamentary superannuation scheme
MP resourcing	Increase personal staffing levels for independent MPs, particularly if they hold the balance of power; conduct and implement review to define criteria for appropriate staffing levels and to define independent process for allocating resources
National Anti-Corruption Commission reform	Allow the NACC to hold public hearings whenever it believes it would be in the public interest (not just in 'exceptional circumstances'); bring forward statutory review of the NACC; expand the Inspector's powers to review more of the NACC's operations; ensure no party has a majority vote on the NACC's parliamentary committee
New independent expert bodies	Establish additional expert advisory bodies that are separate from government departments, and are not directly controlled by a Minister, in challenging policy areas that require a long-term perspective (e.g., tax, migration, climate)
Parliamentary committees	Allocate membership and chairs of House of Representatives committees proportionate to membership of the House; require responsible minister to table response within 4 months of publication of a parliamentary committee report, and require the responsible minister and departmental secretary to attend a committee hearing if no report is tabled; and once the response is tabled; require a non-government chair for oversight committees such as Public Accounts and Audit Committee; conduct comprehensive review of committee system
Parliamentary Policy Office	Establish a Parliamentary Policy Office that on request provides confidential advice to MPs (which they may choose to publish) on proposed policy initiatives
Political donations and campaign finance	Reduce overall gift cap to \$150,000 within an election cycle and reduce cap on third party spending to \$2m; reduce threshold for donation disclosure from \$5k to \$1k; create new standing expert commission on electoral matters, with initial brief to reconsider caps on campaign spending

Reform	Summary description
Private members' bills	Schedule parliamentary time for regular debate and votes on private members' bills; prioritise vote on private member's bill when supported by substantial minority of the House of Representatives Selection Committee
Public appointments	Legislate a transparent, merit-based process for all statutory body appointments; advertise all statutory appointments, along with selection criteria for each position; appoint an independent panel, including the relevant departmental secretary and a new Public Appointments Commissioner, to assess applications against the selection criteria and provide a shortlist of suitable candidates to the Minister; require the Minister to select from the recommended shortlist; establish a Public Appointments Commissioner and joint cross-party parliamentary committee
Secretary appointment and termination	Legislate to require appointment from shortlist selected and assessed by Public Service Commissioner and Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet (with Prime Minister able to add to shortlist); legislate to require annual reporting on how often candidates were specifically shortlisted by the Prime Minister, and how often successful candidates had been assessed as 'not suitable'; legislate to limit grounds on which Secretary can be terminated
Question Time	Disallow questions about alternative approaches; allow one immediate supplementary question for each primary question; ensure minimum number of constituency, opposition and non-aligned questions
Truth in political advertising	Legislate to prohibit misleading statements of fact in political advertising, applying broadly to all forms of political advertising including social media, applying at all times not just to election campaign period, applying to anyone seeking to affect the outcome of an election including third party campaigners
Voting age	Lower the voting age to 16; make enrolment and voting for the new age bracket compulsory
Whistleblowers	Establish a Whistleblower Protection Authority; clarify immunities from prosecution, including for preparatory acts

3.4 Implications for decisionmakers, researchers and advocates

We identified seven ‘**political priorities**’ for implementation in the short term. These would reform:

- political donations and campaign finance;
- departmental secretary appointment and termination procedures;
- fixed three-year parliamentary terms;
- civics education;
- parliamentary committees (particularly composition and chairs of House of Representatives committees, and requirements for timely response by government);
- MP resourcing levels and procedures for allocation; and
- private members’ bill procedures (particularly ensuring that there is time set aside to debate and vote upon them).

These reforms are ‘ready to go’ – with high impact, high feasibility and a strong evidence base. Scarce political capital is best spent on these reforms with relatively high impact and good prospects of successful implementation. Some researchers may also prioritise fleshing out the final detail of these reforms precisely because they are closer to implementation.

We also identified four ‘**priorities for long-term research**’ – that would have high impact, but first require more research and advocacy over the longer term. These include:

- ministerial advisers (particularly improving accountability, and requiring a greater proportion to be drawn from the public service);

- four-year terms (particularly building the public case);
- new expert policy advisory bodies (particularly considering what substantive policy areas they would have the most impact in and considering their structure, governance and consultation mechanisms); and
- deliberative democracy processes (particularly identifying appropriate issues and appropriate procedures).

By making the case, reform advocates can potentially change the political dynamics, increasing the feasibility of reform.¹¹⁵ To some extent, people’s political beliefs are shaped by the views of political leaders,¹¹⁶ and when researchers gather evidence and engage in public debate.¹¹⁷ And by working on the reforms likely to have highest impact, researchers can maximise the value of inevitably limited resources.

More detail on these political priorities and priorities for long-term research is provided in Chapters 4 and 5.

We have identified a number of other reforms that should be pursued in ‘**Phase 2**’. We believe that these reforms are worthwhile, but would have lower impact than those we have identified as higher priority. Consequently, they should be pursued once higher priority reforms have largely been implemented.

We have identified other reforms as ‘**lower priority**’ because they would have relatively lower impact, or are less feasible. It is possible that more detailed research, or evolution of our systems of government, might change this prioritisation in the future. For proponents of individual reforms, it is often difficult to concede that their project is a lower priority.

¹¹⁵ See Daley (2020), p. 30.

¹¹⁶ See, e.g., Barber and Pope (2018), p. 53; Bullock (2011), pp. 496-515; Daley (2020), pp. 6-7.

¹¹⁷ Daley (2021), pp. 27-30.

When time and energy have been sunk into a project it is understandably difficult to let the project go. It is always tempting to keep lower priorities on the agenda and avoid disappointing someone. But the focus and drive that are the rewards of disciplined prioritisation (see above Figure 2) depend on having the discipline to end or defer activity on lower priorities.

3.5 Additional materials on institutional reform

Our review of the evidence currently available for a number of institutional reforms identified several reports that have been completed but not released, and a number of reports to which government response is well overdue. Publishing these reports and responses would substantially aid consideration of these reforms and promote transparency.

Significant unpublished government reports include reviews of:

- **Public appointments process** review by Lynelle Briggs AO, which was provided to government in August 2023,¹¹⁸ but in August 2024 the government refused to indicate when it would be released publicly.¹¹⁹
- **Secretary appointment and termination process** policy, which was recommended in the Thodey Review,¹²⁰ was reported as ‘underway’ in November 2023,¹²¹ and appears to be in operation, but has not been published – which also means that any alterations or deviations from the policy are not transparent.
- **MP resourcing** review, conducted by the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service, due to be provided to the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service CEO in October 2024,¹²² but has not been published.

¹¹⁸ Australian Public Service Commission (2024b).

¹¹⁹ Parliament of Australia (2024d).

¹²⁰ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 294.

¹²¹ Australian Public Service Reform (2023b), recommendations 39a, 39c.

¹²² Parliamentary Workplace Support Service (2023b).

¹²³ Attorney-General’s Department (2024b).

- **Whistleblower protection** consultation process, conducted by the Attorney-General’s Department, with public submissions closed in December 2023,¹²³ and government indicating in April 2024 that they would be considered,¹²⁴ but nothing has been published on the promised second stage of public sector whistleblowing reforms.

There is no obvious justification for these reports to remain unpublished: releasing them should be a priority.

Significant parliamentary committee work on institutional reforms, to which government responses are overdue, include reports into:

- **Lobbying**, particularly access to parliament house by lobbyists, conducted by the Senate Standing Committees on Finance and Public Administration, with a report issued in May 2024,¹²⁵ implying a response should have been tabled by August 2024.¹²⁶
- **FOI**, conducted by the Senate Standing Committees on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, with a report issued in December 2023,¹²⁷ implying a response should have been tabled by March 2024.¹²⁸

Given that these are important institutional design issues, there is no obvious legitimate reason for executive government to fail to respond as required to substantial parliamentary reports.

3.6 Additional reforms raised in the course of expert interview

Several other reforms that have not been central to institutional reform discussions over the past decade were raised by one or two experts in the

¹²⁴ Attorney-General’s Department (2024b).

¹²⁵ Senate Standing Committees on Finance and Public Administration (2024), *Access to Australian Parliament House by Lobbyists*.

¹²⁶ Parliament of Australia (n.d.), “President’s report to the Senate”; Australian Senate (1973).

¹²⁷ Senate Standing Committees on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (2023): *The operation of Commonwealth Freedom of Information (FOI) laws*.

¹²⁸ Parliament of Australia (n.d.), “President’s report to the Senate”; Australian Senate (1973).

course of our interviews, as outlined in Appendix 3. We did not consider these in detail because our initial assessment is that they are either outside our scope, or would have less impact, or are less feasible, than the reforms we have considered in more detail. Nevertheless, many would benefit from additional consideration and/or advocacy, particularly from civil society.

4. Priorities for immediate action

Chapter 3 identified seven reforms as high priorities for near-term advocacy and implementation on the basis that they are high impact, supported by good evidence, and are more feasible. This chapter provides more detail on these reforms, particularly how the reform would address key institutional problems, its potential impacts, and more detailed design choices and rationale.

4.1 Political donations and campaign finance

4.1.1 Problem and relationship to key institutional trends

Political donations and campaign finance are ‘an essential component of a modern democracy’, as Associate Professor Yee-Fui Ng observed.¹²⁹ Candidates for office need money to communicate to voters why they might best represent them. Elected MPs need money and resources for ongoing communication with their electorate and to help them understand the issues they face.

But if money for those activities is provided by others, there are inevitable concerns about the price.¹³⁰ Inherently, political donations can unduly influence, or even corrupt, political representatives. There are also concerns if rules for campaign finance – from private or public sources – unfairly advantage incumbents or particular groups.

A well-functioning political finance system needs to ensure that there are enough resources for would-be and elected candidates to communicate with their electorate, while minimising the risk of undue influence, unfair advantages for incumbents, or disproportionate opportunities for the wealthy. It also needs to respect the freedom to participate in our political

system.¹³¹ To some extent these principles are embodied in the right to freedom of political communication which the High Court has found is implied by the Commonwealth Constitution, although the extent of this protection has not been fully tested.¹³²

Inadequate controls over political donations and campaign finance can lead to poor policy outcomes if special interests use donations to influence outcomes in their favour. Highly regulated industries (with more to win or lose from government decisions) disproportionately make political donations. Gambling is a particular outlier, contributing 10% of donations by industry, even though it is much less than 1% of the economy.¹³³

Usually the link is well short of corruption: rather, money talks ‘softly and subtly’ as donors have disproportionate access to make their case to those they have supported.¹³⁴

Inadequate controls over political donations and campaign finance can also reduce trust in government. There is a perception that donors effectively buy greater access, and then disproportionately influence decisions in their favour. This perception inevitably contributes to the view held by a majority of Australians that government is ‘run for a few big interests’.¹³⁵ This view correlates strongly with low trust in government.¹³⁶

Public money to fund campaigns can reduce the influence of private political donations – but only if it substitutes for private money rather than simply adding to it. And schemes for public finance need to be designed carefully so that they don’t reinforce the advantages of incumbency.

Many States and Territories have substantially tightened political donations and campaign finance laws over the past decade, requiring real time disclosure, limiting who can donate, limiting how much can be donated, and capping total expenditure.¹³⁷ The Commonwealth Parliament

¹²⁹ Ng (2022).

¹³⁰ Ng (2021), p. 5.

¹³¹ See Ng (2021), p. 7; Tham (2021), p. 20.

¹³² Twomey (2024).

¹³³ Wood and Griffiths (2018), pp. 19, 37-38.

¹³⁴ Wood and Griffiths (2018), pp. 34, 39-43.

¹³⁵ Cameron and McAllister (2022), p. 102.

¹³⁶ Wood and Daley (2018), p. 69.

¹³⁷ Daley et al. (2019), p. 149.

passed electoral reform legislation in early 2025 which requires earlier disclosure of donations, captures more of the money flowing to candidates, adds some limits to donations and campaign spending, and increases public funding particularly for incumbents.¹³⁸

4.1.2 Current arrangements

Under the new Commonwealth arrangements (which will apply from 1 July 2026¹³⁹):

- donations to a candidate are capped at \$50,000 per year per person;¹⁴⁰
- donations to a political party are capped at \$50,000 per year per State per person or corporate, and at \$200,000 per year from an industry body, with an overall gift cap (for any kind of donor) of \$1.6m;¹⁴¹
- donations are defined broadly to include any money or property gifted for no or inadequate consideration in return, but not subscriptions, affiliation fees, or annual levies paid to candidates or political parties;¹⁴²
- donations over \$5,000 must be declared within 21 days during non-election periods, seven days during an election period, and within 24 hours in the week before and after an election;¹⁴³
- campaign expenditure is capped at \$800,000 per campaign per candidate, and overall expenditure by political parties (including for specific candidates) is capped at \$90m per campaign;¹⁴⁴

- electoral expenditure by organisations and individuals that are not political parties, such as trade unions and business groups, is capped at \$11.25m per campaign;¹⁴⁵ and
- Members of the House of Representatives receive \$90,000 per election cycle, and Senators receive \$45,000 in ‘administrative assistance funding’ to be used for administrative expenditure,¹⁴⁶ such as paying staff wages or renting office space.¹⁴⁷

4.1.3 Specific problems with current arrangements

Many problems have been identified with the Commonwealth arrangements.

The donation caps are effectively too high. The purpose of a donation cap is to keep the donation from any particular source so small – both in absolute terms, and as a share of the total – that it is unlikely to buy access or influence behaviour. However:

- the effective cap on donations in an election year is \$800,000 for individuals and \$1.6m for industry bodies because they can donate \$50,000 (\$200,000 for industry organisations) in each State and

¹³⁸ See, especially, *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* schs 2-4.

¹³⁹ *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* s 2(1).

¹⁴⁰ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ss 302B, 302BA, 302CB, 302CD, as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 3 items 1 and 5.

¹⁴¹ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ss 292FAE(2), 302B, 302CB, 302CD, and 302CI, as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 3 items 1 and 5, and sch 6 item 4.

¹⁴² *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ss 287AAB(1) and (3), as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 1 item 18.

¹⁴³ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* s 287(1), as amended by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 1 item 10. *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* s

303A(2), as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 2 item 4.

¹⁴⁴ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ss 302ALA, 302AMA, and 302AMB, as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 4 item 2.

¹⁴⁵ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ss 302ALA and 302APA, as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 4 item 2.

¹⁴⁶ Administrative assistance funding is paid out on a quarterly basis. These amounts assume a three-year election cycle.

¹⁴⁷ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ss 287AA, 302AB, 302AG, as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 6A item 3 and sch 7 item 2.

Territory,¹⁴⁸ and donate twice because the cap is reset when an election is held;¹⁴⁹ and

- a single person or organisation can effectively donate up to \$1.6m to a coalition of two parties (for example to the Liberal Party and the National Party) because the donation limit applies per party.¹⁵⁰

A donation of \$800,000 is likely to be more than enough to provide continuing high-level access to a political party, that may allow a person to influence policy outcomes.

Campaign spending caps for third parties are effectively too high.

The purpose of a third-party campaign spending cap is to restrict parties from circumventing campaign spending caps through the support of third parties, and to prevent interest groups unduly influencing a campaign. However:

- the \$11.25m cap on third-party spending is too high: when major parties are limited to spending \$90m, a vested interest could materially influence the electorate with an \$11.25m spend;¹⁵¹ and while there is an implied freedom of political communication, a well-resourced special interest group should not be able to amplify its voice to such a degree relative to other interests.¹⁵²

Incumbent parties have unfair advantages relative to independent candidates and new parties:

- A candidate backed by a party can effectively outspend an independent candidate if the party concentrates its advertising (that does not name the particular candidate) in the electorate.¹⁵³
- The nominated entity arrangements unfairly advantage existing parties because they can use the existing resources of these entities, and use them as conduits for new funding, while non-incumbents are limited to new donations, which are now more restricted.
- The ‘administrative funding’ for sitting members is unfair relative to new candidates,¹⁵⁴ considering that it is more than 10% of the amount that a new candidate is allowed to spend on their campaign.¹⁵⁵

The threshold for declarable donations is too high. The purpose of the declaration regime is to ensure transparency between donations to an MP and that MP’s actions. The \$5,000 threshold is too high: \$5,000 is enough to buy a seat at a fund-raising dinner that enables access to an MP or Minister. This is precisely the kind of access that should be made transparent.¹⁵⁶

The donation definitions are too loose. The purpose of the donations definition is to ensure that all material donations are transparent. However:

- some funding is not included at all: funds are not a ‘donation’ if they are paid as a membership or affiliation fee to a political party.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁸ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ss 292FAE(2), 302B, 302CB, 302CD, and 302CI, as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 3 items 1 and 5, and sch 6 item 4. See also The Centre for Public Integrity, The Australia Institute, Transparency International Australia and Australian Democracy Network (2025), who note aggregation of donations to different party branches for the purposes of the gift cap and disclosure, means that wealthy interests will be able to continue accessing the political process in a way the average Australian cannot.

¹⁴⁹ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* s 302CK, as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 3 item 5.

¹⁵⁰ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* s 302CB(1), as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 3 item 5.; Twomey (2024).

¹⁵¹ Note that spending by the nominated entity of a registered political party is counted within the expenditure of that political party: *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* s 302ALF.

¹⁵² *Unions NSW v NSW* (2023) 277 CLR 627.

¹⁵³ The Centre for Public Integrity et al. (2025), p. 1., noting that the national cap of \$90 million will be able to be used by parties to flood key races and will do nothing to alleviate the arms race for funding.

¹⁵⁴ Twomey (2024).

¹⁵⁵ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ss 287AA, 302AB, 302AG, as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 6A item 3 and sch 7 item 2.

¹⁵⁶ See also The Centre for Public Integrity et al. (2025), p. 1., noting that the disclosure cap is too high to capture most cash-for-access payments.

¹⁵⁷ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ss 287AAB (3), as inserted by *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025* sch 1 item 18.

Other problems weaken the regime:

- Public funding based on votes in previous election has increased on the basis that it would substitute for reduced private funding, but donation caps are so loose that there may be little actual reduction in private funding.¹⁵⁸
- Charitable organisations may be caught in unintended ways by the legislation, for example preventing charities from pursuing electoral advocacy in line with their charitable purpose.¹⁵⁹

4.1.4 Recommended changes

There are some obvious changes that would more closely align the regime with the objectives of freedom of political communication, communicating with the electorate, limiting the advantage and influence of well-resourced special interests, limiting artificial advantages for incumbent parties and candidates, and increasing public confidence in the integrity of the system. The changes include:

- applying the same limits to union affiliation fees and party membership fees as apply to donations (unions should still be able to encourage their members to donate individually, but this would be a matter of individual choice);
- reducing the ‘overall gift cap’ for all donors (including industry associations) to *all* political entities to \$150,000 (thereby significantly reducing the influence of any one donor) within an election cycle (i.e.

the cap would be aggregated across the three years of a typical parliament);

- reducing the cap on third-party campaign spending to \$2m (thereby significantly reducing the ability of an entity that is not a political party to sway an election);
- reducing the limit for declarable donations to \$1,000 (thereby limiting the impact of undeclared donations, particularly where a person makes multiple donations to different entities);
- applying the same donation and third-party campaign spending limits to nominated entities as apply to other organisations; nominated entities would otherwise be confined to funding party administration and policy work;¹⁶⁰ and
- limiting the definition of electoral expenditure to material that has the dominant purpose of influencing how people vote, to avoid capturing non-electoral advocacy (by charities, in particular).¹⁶¹

Other changes require more detailed consideration, and should be the subject of a thorough public review conducted immediately by an expert commission with genuine independence from any political party,¹⁶² including:

- designing a system that limits the ability of a political party to target a particular marginal electorate with general party spending significantly greater than the \$800,000 limit that applies to named candidates;¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ Whealey (2024).

¹⁵⁹ Australian Democracy Network (2025); see *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Act 2025*, s 292FA(4).

¹⁶⁰ See The Centre for Public Integrity et al. (2025), p. 1., suggesting that ‘nominated entities should be able to spend and donate just like any other associated entity, but they should not be exempt from any of the limitations applying to those entities.’ It is relevant that the original source of funds for nominated entities such as the Cormack Foundation and Labor Holdings was the sale of radio stations 3XY and 4KQ that were based on licences gifted by government to each of the precursors of the Liberal Party and the ALP: the history is detailed in *Alston v Cormack Foundation* [2018] FCA 895; Ludlow (2005).

¹⁶¹ The Centre for Public Integrity et al. (2025), p. 1.

¹⁶² The Centre for Public Integrity et al. (2025) recommends that the Commission noted below would report pre-implementation on the setting of relevant caps and public funding arrangements.

¹⁶³ See The Centre for Public Integrity, The Australia Institute, Transparency International Australia and Australian Democracy Network (2025), p. 1, who suggest an “anti-piling in” provision to require all electoral expenditure to count against seat caps, according to how that spending is distributed.

- reviewing the amount of administrative spending and purposes for which it can be spent by MPs; and
- considering mechanisms such as matched funding¹⁶⁴ to allow support for new parties and candidates that do not benefit from government funding from previous campaigns.

This expert commission should become a standing expert commission on electoral matters.¹⁶⁵ This would operate in parallel with the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters,¹⁶⁶ and provide a view independent of the views of elected parliamentarians that are inevitably influenced by their self-interest in the existing system. To maximise its capability and credibility, an independent process should drive appointments to the commission. The expert commission should have the power to initiate its own enquiries. It would have parallels with the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission that was set up in Queensland in the wake of the Fitzgerald Commission of Enquiry. This proved highly effective: its 23 reports published over four years were considered and reported on by a parallel parliamentary committee, and its recommendations were largely implemented, transforming electoral systems, administrative review, FOI, and public administration.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Parties and candidates must raise a certain amount of private funding to access a matching public contribution: see, e.g., Bonotti and Nwokora (2024), p. 703.

¹⁶⁵ See The Centre for Public Integrity, The Australia Institute, Transparency International Australia and Australian Democracy Network (2025), pp. 1, 3.

¹⁶⁶ The Centre for Public Integrity, The Australia Institute, Transparency International Australia and Australian Democracy Network (2025), p. 1, note that the Commission would conduct statutory reviews in line with the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters review process the Act establishes and 'own-motion' investigations as required.

¹⁶⁷ Prasser (1996).

4.2 Secretary appointment and termination

4.2.1 Problem and relationship to key institutional trends

Departmental secretaries are responsible for providing policy advice to their Minister, managing their department's activities, and providing stewardship within the department.¹⁶⁸ As with all public servants, they are required to achieve the best results both for the government and for the Australian community.¹⁶⁹ These responsibilities include assisting their Minister to provide factual information to parliament.¹⁷⁰

Their advice, management and stewardship should be based on the available evidence, and consider the long-term public interest, often summarised in the aspiration of 'frank and fearless' advice.¹⁷¹ However, as several Australian Public Service Commissioners have noted, 'there has always been a challenge in getting the balance right between responsiveness to the elected government and the obligations of impartiality, commitment to service and the public interest and professionalism.'¹⁷²

There are concerns that the balance has shifted too far towards responsiveness. Experts have indicated that 'there are concerns regarding Ministers' drive to assert political control over policy'¹⁷³ and 'there would certainly appear to be evidence of ministerial departments...focusing more on the immediate demands of ministers and their advisers than on longer-term issues.'¹⁷⁴ Experts have suggested that senior public servants sometimes conduct politically sensitive reviews so as to minimise political embarrassment.¹⁷⁵ It is hard to read some Senate Estimates Committee

Hansard without suspecting that some of the responses are motivated by pressure to frame responses in a way that causes the least possible embarrassment to the responsible Minister rather than providing the factual information requested by Parliament.¹⁷⁶ The Robodebt Royal Commission found that the continuation of the Robodebt scheme 'was enabled and facilitated by employees who disregarded the considered views of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, deceived the Commonwealth Ombudsman and failed to give frank and fearless advice to the executive' and that there was a 'failure of members of the APS to live up to the values and standards of conduct expected of them by the Australian community.'¹⁷⁷

A material cause of the shift towards responsiveness at the expense of impartiality appears to be the processes for appointing and terminating the employment of our most senior public servants. The OECD,¹⁷⁸ the Thodey Review,¹⁷⁹ and a large academic literature have all recognised the influence of appointment and termination processes on independence.¹⁸⁰ The processes for appointment and termination of departmental secretaries are particularly important because their behaviour inevitably influences the behaviour of more junior public servants, causing them to temper their advice,¹⁸¹ even if the junior public servants are appointed and their employment terminated under a more rigorous regime.

Without sufficient checks on appointment, politicians may weigh ideology more heavily than merit in appointments,¹⁸² affecting the quality of advice received. But as a former secretary told the Thodey Review, 'Governments have shifted from wanting advisers to wanting fellow travellers, and tend to look more for those with similar views.' This makes it much more difficult

¹⁶⁸ *Public Service Act 1999* s 57.

¹⁶⁹ *Public Service Act 1999* s 10(1).

¹⁷⁰ *Public Service Act 1999* s 57(2)(i).

¹⁷¹ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 22.

¹⁷² Podger (2018), p. 7; MacDonald (2023).

¹⁷³ Tiernan et al. (2019), p. 18.

¹⁷⁴ Podger (2018), p. 7.

¹⁷⁵ Waterford (2021); Twomey (2021), pp. 335–338.

¹⁷⁶ Daley (2021), p. 51.

¹⁷⁷ Holmes (2023), p. 641.

¹⁷⁸ Gerson (2022) 40–41.

¹⁷⁹ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 287.

¹⁸⁰ See, e.g., Lopes and Viera (2023), p. 153.

¹⁸¹ Podger (2024a), p. 7.

¹⁸² Lopes and Viera (2023), p. 159.

for the Australian Public Service to operate according to the traditional model (such as being apolitical).¹⁸³ Similarly, the Victorian Ombudsman found ‘creeping politicisation’ in the Victorian public service.¹⁸⁴

If the process to terminate the employment of senior public servants is insufficiently rigorous, then the threat – or reality – of termination may lead to advice that is too responsive and not sufficiently impartial. The Thodey Review notes that arbitrary terminations ‘could mean Australian Public Service leadership favours being ‘agreeable’ rather than engaging in debate and challenge, and so compromise the provision of frank and fearless advice.’¹⁸⁵ At least one senior Minister believed that terminating a senior public servant would lead to more compliant advice from others.¹⁸⁶

Through the 1980s and 1990s it became much easier in practice to terminate the employment of senior Commonwealth public servants. The power to do so shifted from the Public Service Commission to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet through amendments to the *Public Service Act* in 1986. The Federal Court ruled that a secretary’s employment could be terminated for any reason, even if it had nothing to do with performance.¹⁸⁷ It is now broadly assumed that the Prime Minister will exercise their power to remove a secretary if the relevant Minister says that their relationship with the secretary is ‘not working’.

The power to terminate the employment of senior Commonwealth public servants has been used frequently in recent years. Between 1996 and 2019, around 22% of Commonwealth secretaries were sacked.¹⁸⁸ Some claim that some of these appointments and terminations have been political.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸³ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 133.

¹⁸⁴ Victorian Ombudsman (2023).

¹⁸⁵ Thodey et al. (2019), pp. 292-293, 250.

¹⁸⁶ Barnaby Joyce reflected that: “One of the only ways I could deal with [the bureaucrats] when I was the [Agriculture Minister] was [that] I invited the head of the department up, brought him into my office and sacked him – just to remind him where the authority starts from. And then I got a lot more sense out of the rest of them; they were great”: Easton (2019).

¹⁸⁷ Pullin and Haidar (2004).

More rigorous processes for the appointment and termination of departmental secretaries that effectively buttress their independence and reduce the influence of political considerations would counter some of the unhelpful institutional trends identified in Chapter 2. It would reverse the increasing centralisation of power with Ministers and executive government. It would symbolise a shift in balance towards achieving the best result for the Australian community; even if this is not the best result for the government of the day. This might well encourage secretaries to exercise functions more independently of their Minister, such as making submissions to Parliamentary inquiries.¹⁹⁰

Obviously, frank and fearless advice is also a function of character.¹⁹¹ Better processes for appointment and termination do not guarantee good character; but they increase the chance that people with good character will be appointed, and will then act in a way that puts greater weight on their obligations to the public interest.

4.2.2 Current arrangements

The current arrangements for appointment and termination of secretaries were put in place following a review of Australian Government Administration in 2010.¹⁹² Secretaries are appointed by the Governor-General, on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, for up to five years. The Prime Minister does so having received a report about the appointment from the Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Department, prepared after consultation with the Public Service Commissioner and the relevant minister.¹⁹³ The Prime Minister may appoint any person, whether or not they are recommended in the report from the secretary of the Prime

¹⁸⁸ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 291.

¹⁸⁹ Podger (2024c).

¹⁹⁰ See Daley (2021), p. 30.

¹⁹¹ Podger (2024c).

¹⁹² Advisory Group on reform of Australian Government administration (2010), p. 48

¹⁹³ *Public Service Act 1999* s 58.

Minister's Department. While the Albanese Government may have further formalised the process, thereby limiting the Prime Minister's discretion, there is no formal basis for this process. It has not been published, and it could be changed at any time.¹⁹⁴ There is also no requirement to advertise the vacancy or solicit applications.¹⁹⁵

Secretaries' appointments may be terminated by the Governor-General on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister does so after receiving a report about the termination from the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, prepared after consultation with the Public Service Commission.¹⁹⁶ Podger suggests that Prime Ministers do not provide much (if any) consideration to these reports on terminations.¹⁹⁷ While the Prime Minister is legally obliged to provide a reason for the termination, the grounds for termination are unlimited,¹⁹⁸ and include, for example, that the minister no longer wants to work with the secretary.

4.2.3 Recommended changes

Relevant considerations

Changes to processes for appointing and terminating employment of secretaries of departments need to maintain an appropriate balance between independence and responsiveness to the ministers of the day,¹⁹⁹ and appropriately value a close and trusted relationship between secretary and minister.²⁰⁰

On the other hand, these considerations should not overwhelm the value of processes that promote an independent public service equipped and motivated to serve the public interest. Many argue that the events of

Robodebt demonstrate that the pendulum has swung too far in promoting responsiveness at the expense of encouraging impartiality, and commitment to the public interest.²⁰¹ Changes in appointment and termination processes that reduce the likelihood of consequences such as those exposed by Robodebt may outweigh a marginal reduction in responsiveness.

Changes also need to acknowledge the problems created if previous appointments have been politicised, and constraints on termination then entrench this situation.

Appointment

To balance these considerations, this reform would introduce legislation to require a person can *only* be appointed as a departmental secretary if included on a shortlist of at least three candidates considered by the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Public Service Commissioner.²⁰² They would include on their shortlist any person whose inclusion was specifically requested by the Prime Minister. They would rate all shortlisted candidates (including anyone nominated by the Prime Minister) against their view of the key criteria for the position, including criteria that respond to the current context, and indicate whether each candidate was 'suitable' overall. If the Prime Minister did not wish to appoint any of the shortlisted candidates, the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Public Service Commissioner would be obliged to provide alternative lists until an appointment is made. Annual reporting would indicate how often the Prime Minister specifically requested that a person be included on a shortlist, how often they requested a further slate

¹⁹⁴ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 340 recommended that the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Public Service Commissioner should "agree and publish a policy on processes to support advice to the Prime Minister on appointments of secretaries and the APS Commissioner", and Australian Public Service Reform (2023b), pp. 29-30 reported that this recommendation is currently "underway", but no process has been published.

¹⁹⁵ Podger (2024a), p. 8.

¹⁹⁶ *Public Service Act 1999* s 59.

¹⁹⁷ Podger (2024c).

¹⁹⁸ *Barratt v Howard* [1999] FCA 1132.

¹⁹⁹ Podger (2025).

²⁰⁰ Podger (2024b), p. 6.

²⁰¹ Podger and Kettl (2024), pp. 169-170;

²⁰² In the case of the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet, this could include candidates considered by the Public Service Commissioner in consultation with one or two other independent advisors: see Podger (2024a), recommendation 4. The likelihood of this reform being implemented is low.

of candidates, and how often they appointed a person not rated as 'suitable'. Such a procedure would preserve the Prime Minister's responsibility for appointing departmental secretaries, but create substantially greater pressure to appoint merit-based candidates.

These appointment processes might be consistent with those currently in use. The Thodey Review recommended a shift to a process designed by the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Public Service Commissioner,²⁰³ a recommendation endorsed by the Robodebt Royal Commission.²⁰⁴ This recommendation was reported as 'underway' in 2023,²⁰⁵ although at least one component of the recommendation – to *publish* the new process – has not occurred.

Given the crucial role of the Public Service Commissioner in this process, it might be appropriate – although it would not be essential – to give legislative force to the current convention where the Prime Minister consults with the Leader of the Opposition on appointment of the Public Service Commissioner.²⁰⁶

The proposal above differs from the Thodey Review's recommendation at least on the basis that it would be legislated, rather than a practice adopted by the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Public Service Commissioner, which could be varied at will. Without a legislative basis there is a real danger that the process will not be followed on a controversial appointment – precisely when it might well be needed most. The importance of a legislative basis is illustrated by the process already specified in guidelines for the appointment of heads of statutory and executive agencies which the Thodey Review found was 'often circumvented'.²⁰⁷ The proposal would also require regular reporting about how often exceptions to the process occur.

²⁰³ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 339.

²⁰⁴ Holmes (2023), p. 643.

²⁰⁵ Australian Public Service Reform (2023b), pp. 28-29.

²⁰⁶ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 340.

²⁰⁷ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 289.

The changes discussed above are similar to proposals made by Podger. He would expand the recommending panel to include another independent person (such as a retired secretary), to mirror the processes used for many other public appointments.²⁰⁸ Although this could complicate the selection process, it might well have value, although it is not the core of the proposed reform.

Other alternatives include requiring reporting to Parliament each time the Prime Minister departs from the recommendation of the Public Service Commission and the secretary. However, there are obvious personal sensitivities in discussing specific candidates for a specific role, and the robustness of the process may be sufficiently buttressed by the alternative reporting regime outlined above.

Parliamentary confirmation of appointments is likely to have less net impact than the reform outlined above. There are real dangers that parliamentary approval creates incentives for an Opposition to politicise appointments,²⁰⁹ which might well deter outstanding candidates from applying, reduce the authority of secretaries once appointed, and damage perceptions of an apolitical public service.

Termination

To balance responsiveness and public interest, the reform would also introduce requirements that a secretary can only be terminated on the grounds that apply to other public servants²¹⁰ (most relevantly a breach of the Australian Public Service Code of Conduct such as failing to comply with applicable laws, breaching confidentiality, or using authority improperly).²¹¹ It may be appropriate to have broader grounds for terminating a secretary's appointment, but if so, as recommended by the Thodey Commission and endorsed by the Robodebt Royal Commission,

²⁰⁸ Podger (2024a), p. 9.

²⁰⁹ Lopes and Viera (2023), p. 160.

²¹⁰ Thodey et al. (2019), p. 342; Podger (2024a), p. 8.

²¹¹ *Public Service Act 1999* ss 13, 15, 29.

these grounds would be legislated, and would be less broad than the practice that has evolved of allowing termination effectively whenever it is desired by the relevant minister.²¹² More robust processes are also required. For example, consistently with practice in New Zealand,²¹³ termination might only be permitted if the Public Service Commissioner (rather than the Prime Minister) believes that the behaviour of the secretary prevents the secretary or the minister from fulfilling their role effectively. At a minimum, the Prime Minister should be required to attempt to identify an alternative appointment, at a similar (i.e. SES 3) level before termination for reasons other than misconduct.²¹⁴ This obligation should also apply if a secretary's role becomes redundant due to government reorganisation. The Prime Minister is likely to look more carefully for alternative appointments if the secretary cannot be terminated simply because the minister asserts that the relationship has broken down.

Reappointment and permanent appointment

Secretaries are currently employed under fixed renewable contracts, usually for five years. The decision to not re-appoint a secretary is not limited by any process. There are concerns that maximising the prospects of re-employment may motivate secretary behaviour – potentially even more than the threat of termination. The strongest protection would be a return to permanent secretaries.

However, such stringent employment protection might swing the pendulum too far from responsiveness to independence. It was not recommended by the Thodey Review, and is not a feature of current New Zealand arrangements. An incremental approach would be to implement the reforms we have recommended, observe their impact, and then consider whether a shift to permanent contracts is needed.

²¹² Thodey et al. (2019), p. 296; Holmes (2023) p. 643.

²¹³ *Public Sector Act 2020* (NZ) Sched 7, s. 8.

²¹⁴ There are similar proposals in Advisory Group on reform of Australian Government administration (2010), p. 48 and Podger (2024a), p. 8.

Promoting independent contributions

Changes to appointment and termination procedures would themselves symbolise the importance of adjusting the balance between responsiveness and long-term stewardship, and might encourage shifts in behaviour, such as a greater willingness to make submissions to Parliamentary inquiries independent of ministerial oversight. It might be appropriate to consider amending current parliamentary guidelines that 'submissions should be cleared to appropriate levels within the department or agency, and normally with the minister, in accordance with arrangements approved by the minister concerned' to make more explicit the grounds on which submissions may be ministerially reviewed and cleared.²¹⁵ This change would require more detailed analysis, which is beyond the scope of this report.

Public service contributions might also be influenced through an explicit public statement of expectations that outlines circumstances in which contributing to public understanding of policy issues is encouraged.

Alternative reforms

Other measures have been proposed to improve secretary appointments and independence. However, in our assessment, they would have less impact than the changes outlined above, or there are valid concerns about whether they are worth pursuing given potential unintended consequences.

For example, in parallel with processes that operate in New Zealand, the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Public Service Commissioner might recommend a single person as secretary, with the Prime Minister effectively having the power to make a substitute appointment provided that this was publicly reported.²¹⁶ Also mirroring

²¹⁵ Parliament of Australia (2015), cl 2.4, p. 5.

²¹⁶ *Public Sector Act 2020* (NZ) Sched 7, s. 3; the predecessor legislation in similar terms was discussed in Thodey et al. (2019), p. 288.

New Zealand processes, the power to terminate a secretary might require a *joint* recommendation by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Public Service Commissioner.²¹⁷ These processes would substantially increase the independence of secretaries, although they effectively require that a Prime Minister reveal at the time whenever a person is appointed as secretary contrary to the recommendation of the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Public Service Commissioner.

Secretaries could be empowered to ask for a ministerial 'direction' where they feel that a minister's policy decision did not have a sufficiently robust basis to justify the expenditure of public or private resources.²¹⁸ This direction would be reported to Parliament and would increase the pressure on the minister to justify their choices. However, precisely because such a manoeuvre would increase pressure on the minister, its impact will be limited if a secretary is highly motivated to avoid political embarrassment for their minister. Consequently, the proposals above to strengthen secretarial independence through more robust appointment and termination processes are at the very least a pre-requisite.

²¹⁷ *Public Sector Act 2020* (NZ) Sched 7, s. 8.

²¹⁸ *Public Service Act 1999* s 15; Rutter (2022), p. 19.

4.3 Fixed three-year parliamentary terms

4.3.1 Problem and relationship to key institutional trends

There are proposals to fix the term of the Commonwealth Parliament so that in the ordinary course they occur around a fixed date every three years. Proposals for four-year terms (which would require constitutional amendment, and raise difficult questions about Senate terms) are not part of this proposal and are considered below at section 5.2).

The Prime Minister has the power to call an election whenever it is convenient. This has resulted in average terms of two years and eight months,²¹⁹ rather than the three years permitted by the *Commonwealth Constitution*.²²⁰

Even though fixed terms have been implemented successfully in all other states except Tasmania,²²¹ they have not been implemented for the Commonwealth Parliament.

The Prime Minister's power to call an early election impairs public policy outcomes in many ways including:²²²

- less effective cycles of policy planning in the public sector;
- less certainty for investment planning for the private and public sectors;
- lack of certainty for parliamentary committee inquiries and processes;
- less effective planning of the parliamentary timetable and use of parliamentary time; and
- less effective planning for policy implementation, which may be interrupted by the election process.

²¹⁹ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025a), p. 8.

²²⁰ Bennett (2003), p. 9.

²²¹ Fellows (2010).

²²² The Australian Collaboration (2013), p. 1.

²²³ Tingle (2024).

The power to call an early election also provides some unfair advantages to the incumbent government, including:

- the unilateral ability to choose the election date whenever the government perceives it will be most advantageous;²²³ and
- the ability of the government to plan around an early election date when opponents lack this knowledge.

Unpredictable elections also reduce the ability of the Australian Electoral Commission and other actors to encourage electoral enrolment ahead of a known deadline.²²⁴

There are concerns that fixed terms limit the ability of an early election to solve a political crisis if a government loses its majority in the Lower House.²²⁵ However, there are good arguments that in this situation others should have the opportunity to form a government before an election is called. And legislation for fixed terms in States and Territories has included exceptions that in practice seem to have navigated this problem effectively, while maintaining fixed terms in the ordinary course.

4.3.2 Recommended changes

Fixed terms might be implemented through amendments to the Commonwealth Constitution. This raises all of the general concerns about the lack of success of referendum proposals. However, its prospects of success would be relatively high: a proposal for fixed terms would be popular;²²⁶ and scare campaigns would probably have limited traction given the success of similar reforms in the States and Territories. If passed, it would be the first referendum to succeed since 1977. That might reinvigorate consideration of other constitutional changes.

²²⁴ Once writs are issued for an election, unenrolled citizens have 7 days to enrol: *Commonwealth Electoral Act*, s.155.

²²⁵ The Australian Collaboration (2013), p. 1.

²²⁶ ReachTEL (2016).

Alternatively, fixed terms could be implemented through legislation. There are real concerns about whether such legislation would be constitutional.²²⁷ Sections 5 and 28 of the *Commonwealth Constitution* give the Governor-General power to dissolve the House of Representatives. Unlike many other constitutional sections, these provisions do not apply ‘until the Parliament otherwise provides’. This may imply that the Parliament has no power to constrain the Governor-General’s ability to dissolve the House of Representatives under ss.5 and 28. It is arguable that Parliament could pass legislation that would be constitutional that confines the Prime Minister’s ability to advise the Governor-General to exercise their power under ss.5 and 28, but this is legally untested.

While there may be doubts that legislation to fix Commonwealth parliamentary terms would be constitutional, the legislation would probably be effective in fixing terms as a matter of practice. It is likely that any Governor-General advised to call an early election contrary to the legislation would ask for high-quality legal advice that to do so was within their power. The situation might well precipitate a constitutional crisis that nullifies any advantage that the government gains from an early election. It is unlikely that a government would mount a constitutional challenge to the legislation well ahead of calling an early election because such a challenge might well be seen as undermining arrangements that have strong popular support.

Legislating three year fixed terms would depend on legal views about its constitutionality, and government appetite to accept any uncertainty. There are obvious rule of law concerns if governments legislate despite constitutional doubts about validity – although the Commonwealth Parliament and Government have continued to spend money in ways that may not be constitutionally permitted despite forceful High Court precedents.²²⁸

²²⁷ Grattan (2016a).

²²⁸ Twomey (2021)

²²⁹ *Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011* (UK).

While legislation for fixed terms in the United Kingdom²²⁹ was not effective in practice and was repealed,²³⁰ Australia may have more success. In the UK, a super-majority was required for an early election,²³¹ whereas legislation in the States and Territories allows an early election if a simple majority of the House of Representatives passes a motion of no confidence. And relative to the UK, the Australian upper house has more legitimacy, is usually not controlled by the government, and is likely to block legislation repealing previous legislation for fixed terms.

There may be concerns that implementing fixed three-year terms would reduce the impetus for four-year terms. This consideration is speculative – it is hard to know either way. It may be that people are satisfied by fixed three-year terms and lose interest in four-year terms. It is equally possible that successful legislative or constitutional implementation of fixed three-year terms increases confidence in reform and the impetus to increase fixed terms from three years to four years. Either way, there is real merit in the argument that the perfect should not be the enemy of the good: a desirable change that is achievable in the near term should not be delayed simply because there might be an even better change that is further off and has uncertain prospects.

4.3.3 Further research needed

Further work is required to document the constitutional issues described above, which have not been studied in the literature.

Further work is also required to agree the details that have been identified when considering similar State legislation:

- How should the election date be defined in the ordinary course?²³²

²³⁰ See *Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022* (UK); Strong (2022).

²³¹ Russell and Hazell (2024).

²³² Queensland Finance and Administration Committee (2015), p. 39.

- How should the legislated election date be altered given the timing of State and Territory elections?²³³
- What exceptional circumstances (e.g., no-confidence motion) and what mechanisms should allow an early election?²³⁴
- How should Senate elections be aligned (particularly if there is an early election)?
- When should the new arrangements begin to apply?²³⁵

These questions would require by legal and constitutional analysis, and consultation with MPs and the public service to understand the implications of specific proposals for election timing. They would benefit from comparisons to existing state legislation for fixed terms.

²³³ Queensland Finance and Administration Committee (2015), p. 45.

²³⁴ Queensland Finance and Administration Committee (2015), p. 31.

²³⁵ Queensland Finance and Administration Committee (2015), p. 59.

4.4 Civics education

4.4.1 Problem and relationship to key institutional trends

Civics education, like the other reforms in this report, would not be a silver bullet. But it would help.²³⁶

Civics education outcomes in 2024 for school students were significantly lower than at any time since national testing began in 2004, with only 28% of year 10 students attaining the proficient standard.²³⁷ Adult self-reported understanding of democracy is, at best, mixed; 27% of Australians report that they understand nothing or understand democracy ‘slightly’, 31% report ‘moderate understanding’, and 39% understanding it very well or completely (noting the limitations of self-reporting).²³⁸ Less than half the electorate correctly answer true/false to statements about the basis for Senate elections, the length of Parliamentary terms, and the number of House of Representative MPs.²³⁹

Better civics education might counter a number of trends including:

- significant support for authoritarian forms of government amongst many age groups;²⁴⁰

- modest decreases in support for democracy amongst younger Australians (against the backdrop of more profound increases in anti-democratic sentiment globally);²⁴¹
- decreases in traditional forms of political participation,²⁴² with fewer than 100,000 people holding memberships in either major party;²⁴³
- modest levels of voter understanding of government and information about current political issues (against a backdrop of ‘soundbite culture’);²⁴⁴ and
- a rise in misinformation, with more than a quarter of Australians using social media, which contains large volumes of fake news,²⁴⁵ as their main source of news.²⁴⁶

Essentially all of these undesirable trends could be countered by better civics education.

A recent systematic literature review concluded that ‘there is ample evidence that citizenship education can secure significant improvements in knowledge, attitudes, intention to participate and actual levels of participation.’²⁴⁷ While correlation is not causation, 53% of participants with civics education reported a robust understanding of democracy versus 35% without, and 72% of those educated about civics were satisfied with democracy in Australia, versus 52% without.²⁴⁸

²³⁶ See, e.g., Campbell (2021), p. 1.

²³⁷ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2025), p. 19.

²³⁸ Australian Public Service Commission (2023), p. 23.

²³⁹ Based on questions in the Australian Election Study since 2001 reported in McAllister (2019), p. 205.

²⁴⁰ The proportion of Australians who say it would be ‘fairly good’ or ‘very good’ to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is 31% for 18-24 year-olds, 51% for 30-34 year-olds but only 19% for 65-69 year-olds: Sheppard (2018), p. 6.

²⁴¹ Wike and Fetterolf (2021). Younger Australians aged 18-44 (65%) are less likely than older Australians aged over 45 (79%) to say that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government, and this gap that has widened by five percentage points since 2022: Lowy Institute (2024).

²⁴² Fu et al. (2021), p. 12.

²⁴³ Daley (2021), p. 21, fn. 207.

²⁴⁴ Smith et al. (2015). The conclusion of the authors is relatively tentative across several questions about degree of information. On the narrow question of formal voting, the authors note that ‘the [study participants] tried to fill in their ballots in a way that would support the candidates or parties they preferred. They were confident that they had succeeded.’ On political knowledge, they write that ‘the focus group discussions revealed that these voters often get details about political institutions and processes confused or incorrect’ (p. 68). On more substantive levels of information, they write that ‘these voters have various ways of acquiring enough information to believe that they have made reasonably informed choices about how they should vote’ (p. 68).

²⁴⁵ Aimeur et al. (2023).

²⁴⁶ University of Canberra (2024).

²⁴⁷ Jerome et al. (2024), p. 5.

²⁴⁸ Australian Public Service Commission (2023a), p. 2.

Civics education can also increase the political knowledge, interest, and participation of students from lower socioeconomic and diverse backgrounds, which is typically lower than for higher socioeconomic students (labelled the ‘civic gap’).²⁴⁹

However, not all civics education is effective: success depends on high-quality education. For example, studies show that an ‘open classroom climate’, in which teachers welcome a variety of opinions and students feel able to express and explore them,²⁵⁰ tends to produce better outcomes for engagement.²⁵¹ The question of what kinds of interventions are most effective remains understudied²⁵² and there is scope to continue to explore new approaches with rigorous evaluation.²⁵³

Civics education needs to be combined with ‘supply-side’ initiatives that give young people actual opportunities to participate, feel heard, and interact with leaders and institutions.²⁵⁴ Without actual participation and engagement, there is a real danger that civics education will be less effective.

The most significant obstacle is that the school curriculum is already crowded, and implementing changes across thousands of schools is difficult. However, education that equips citizens to participate in government in a meaningful way is a fundamental component of a functioning democratic system; as John Dewey wrote, ‘democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.’²⁵⁵

4.4.2 Current arrangements

While civics education is an established part of the Australian Curriculum, it does not occupy much space in students’ timetables. Each state and territory, and individual schools, can adopt their own specific approach to teaching the Australian Curriculum for years 3 to 10 to meet the needs of their local contexts and students.²⁵⁶ It is typically embedded in other subjects in a crowded curriculum.²⁵⁷ The national average for years 7 and 8 is 32 minutes per week.²⁵⁸ As Year 11 and 12 students approach voting age, they typically receive no civics education (as it is not one of the agreed Australian Curriculum Senior Secondary subjects).²⁵⁹ There are very limited opportunities for professional learning specifically focused on civics education.²⁶⁰

Although multiple federal inquiries have addressed civics education, there has been limited action at the federal level (for example, the Government responded in May 2024 to the 2021 Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs²⁶¹ noting its recommendations²⁶² but providing no substantive response on the basis that so long had passed since the report was tabled).²⁶³

South Australia recently announced a set of reforms at the state level, including that all years 7 and 8 public school students would study civics and citizenship education for an hour per week, every subject in years 9 and 10 will have civics and citizenship incorporated into it as part of the introduction of a Cross-Curriculum Priority, and all public school students

²⁴⁹ Jerome et al. (2024).

²⁵⁰ Jerome et al. (2024), p. 3.

²⁵¹ Campbell (2019), p. 37.

²⁵² Campbell (2019).

²⁵³ Campbell (2019), pp. 32, 44.

²⁵⁴ Chowdhury (2021).

²⁵⁵ See, e.g., Halverson et al. (2024), p. 1.

²⁵⁶ Department of Education (2024a), p. 3.

²⁵⁷ Australian Professional Teachers Association (2024), p. 8.

²⁵⁸ South Australian Government (2024), p. 3.

²⁵⁹ Department of Education (2024a), p. 7.

²⁶⁰ Social and Citizenship Education Association of Australia (2024), p. 3; Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (2025), p. 25.

²⁶¹ Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (2021).

²⁶² Recommendations included increasing the time dedicated to civics and citizenship education to at least 30 hours per year, and reviewing the civics and citizenship module of the Australian National Curriculum with a view to redesigning it to make it more engaging for students: Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (2021), p. ix.

²⁶³ Government of Australia (2024).

will be able to participate in an annual Active Citizenship Convention.²⁶⁴ However, it remains an outlier.

4.4.3 Recommended changes

Civics education would be improved by adopting a number of recommendations in the recent Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia, with terms of reference focused on formalised civics education in schools and other institutions, and mechanisms for promoting informed voting.²⁶⁵ These include that the government:

- specify a minimum number of teaching hours to support the delivery of the Australian Curriculum in years 9 and 10;²⁶⁶
- design and implement a mandatory civics and citizenship course for year 11 and 12 students with a minimum number of hours;²⁶⁷ and
- work with state and territory governments and teacher associations to develop and disseminate teacher professional development resources to promote high quality teaching of civics and citizenship.²⁶⁸

As a foundation for this work, JSCEM also recommended that the Department of Education work with Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority to fully implement and nationally align the civics and citizenship curriculum across Australia.²⁶⁹

Drawing on other submissions to the JSCEM inquiry²⁷⁰ although not ultimately recommended by the Committee majority, the Commonwealth should set up a national research centre to promote effective civics education. The centre should be established at a leading Australian university to develop best practice interventions, including active and

experiential learning. It should rigorously measure the impact of interventions on intention to participate and voting on an informed basis, ideally using randomised controlled trials²⁷¹ that generate good causal evidence. The centre is important to create pressure to implement *effectively*.²⁷² As noted above, the mode of delivery (particularly using active, participatory approaches) is crucial to effective civics education. Australia has decades of stagnant literacy and numeracy scores in international testing, which demonstrate that changes to education do not always result in better outcomes.

Further work is required to identify interventions that might increase the civics knowledge of the substantial majority of the population that has already finished school. Our discussions with a range of stakeholders universally acknowledged this as an issue,²⁷³ but failed to identify particular initiatives in Australia or elsewhere that appeared to be making a difference.

²⁶⁴ South Australian Government (2022).

²⁶⁵ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (2025), p. xi.

²⁶⁶ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (2025), p. xii, Recommendation 3.

²⁶⁷ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (2025), p. xii, Recommendation 4.

²⁶⁸ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (2025), p. xii, Recommendation 5.

²⁶⁹ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (2025), p. xiii, Recommendation 1.

²⁷⁰ See Print (2024), Heggart (2024),

²⁷¹ As supported by Print (2024), p. 5; Heggart (2024); p. 2; Dr Neoh (SCEAA), *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 16 October 2024, p. 13.

²⁷² See above, section 4.4.1.

²⁷³ See also JSCEM (2025), p. 47.

4.5 Parliamentary committees

4.5.1 Problem and relationship to key institutional trends

The value of parliamentary committees is widely acknowledged.²⁷⁴ They are a vital forum to consider important policy issues. They also have a deliberative function, as they are composed of elected MPs, openly invite submissions, and hold public hearings. These processes, along with parliamentary resources, encourage an evidence-informed approach.

Key concerns with parliamentary committees include:

- Committees are more partisan, so less effort is committed to devising a consensus position,²⁷⁵ and less effective guardians of independent institutions.
- While there is a practice of generally allocating committee membership in proportion to government and non-government House membership,²⁷⁶ membership arrangements have failed to adapt to the rising number of independent and Green MPs. For example, all eleven members of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Security and Intelligence in the last Parliament were ALP and Coalition MPs even though 2 in 11 MPs are independents or belong to other parties.²⁷⁷
- Chairs and deputy chairs of committees are also increasingly disproportionate to the membership of Parliament: they are exclusively government and opposition MPs and fail to recognise the proportion of the MPs from neither major party.
- Committees often fail to influence the policy agenda because a government simply ignores their recommendations.²⁷⁸ To cite one

²⁷⁴ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure (2010), p. viii; Marsh and Halpin (2015), p. 138.

²⁷⁵ Reflected by a growing number of dissenting reports: Halligan and Reid (2015), p. 231.

²⁷⁶ Parliament of Australia (n.d.). "Infosheet 4 – Committees".

²⁷⁷ Prime Minister of Australia (2022).

²⁷⁸ Moulds (2024a), p. 238.

recent example, the government never responded to the unanimous report on online gambling tabled in June 2023.²⁷⁹

In other Westminster jurisdictions, parliamentary committees are more independent of the executive, and have greater impact.²⁸⁰

Weaker parliamentary committees reflect the concentration of government power in the executive. Increasing partisanship also reflects the professionalisation of major political parties which reduces the motivation for working constructively with opponents towards public interest outcomes.

4.5.2 Recommended reforms

Key reforms that are consistent with principle, would address the key concerns above, and would plausibly make a substantial difference, include:

- allocating membership and chairpersonship of joint and House of Representative committees proportionate to membership of the Parliament and House²⁸¹ (consistent with arrangements that already apply to Senate committee membership but not Senate committee chairs);
- requiring the responsible minister to table a response to each committee report within four months, and requiring the responsible Minister (or their representative in the House) and the departmental secretary to attend a committee hearing if no report is tabled, and after the response is tabled;²⁸²
- requiring a non-government MP as chair, and a majority of non-government MP members for committees that oversee key

²⁷⁹ Parliament of Australia (n.d.), "Government Response" (to the Inquiry into Online Gambling and Its Impacts on Those Experiencing Gambling Harm'.

²⁸⁰ Marsh and Halpin (2015), p. 137.

²⁸¹ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 21.

²⁸² Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 17.

independent institutions such as the Australian National Audit Office and the National Anti-Corruption Commission.²⁸³

While an exception to the general principle of proportionate membership, non-government chairs for key oversight committees are more likely to hold executive government to account, which is the primary purpose of such committees.²⁸⁴ Such arrangements worked successfully in Victoria with the Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee, and legislation now requires a non-government MP as the chair of the Integrity and Oversight Committee and the Parliamentary Ethics Committee.²⁸⁵

4.5.3 Further research needed

The value of a comprehensive review

Parliamentary committees are understudied, and the committee system has not been reviewed comprehensively since 2007,²⁸⁶ although the 2010 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure Report²⁸⁷ made a number of specific recommendations that were adopted. Two forthcoming expert reports also propose some specific, well-researched reforms.²⁸⁸ However, a review, itself conducted by a parliamentary committee, could provide a valuable overview including:

- thinking through how potential reforms to the committee system would interact;
- identifying the highest priority reforms; and
- identifying alternative high-priority reforms that are more feasible.

Key potential reforms for investigation

Key potential reforms to the Committee system that are worth investigating include:

- Overarching structure and powers:
 - Reconsider number of committees, and joint committees.²⁸⁹
 - Establish oversight committees with express powers to appoint, fund, and monitor the performance of independent officers (Auditor-General, Ombudsman, and Anti-corruption Commissioner).²⁹⁰
 - Consider developing overarching legislation governing committee powers, reporting obligations, responses as legislated in Victoria, Queensland, and South Australia.²⁹¹
- Composition:
 - Allocate committee membership proportionate to the composition of each House.²⁹²
 - Alternatively, for general purpose (inquiry) committees, specific purpose committees and oversight committees, prohibit a majority of Members from being Members of the party(s) in government; and prescribe committee Membership to be an odd number and chairs of committees should have a deliberative vote only.²⁹³
 - Prohibit Ministerial Membership of oversight committees, general purpose committees, and special purpose committees.²⁹⁴

²⁸³ The Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 46.

²⁸⁴ By contrast, most parliamentary committees are focused on policy, which should at least proportionately reflect the view of the party of government.

²⁸⁵ *Parliamentary Committees Act 2003* (Vic), s.22(1A)

²⁸⁶ Marsh and Halpin (2015), p. 137.

²⁸⁷ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure (2010).

²⁸⁸ The Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b).

²⁸⁹ See, e.g., House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure (2010), p. 89.

²⁹⁰ Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 47.

²⁹¹ *Parliamentary Committees Act 2003* (Vic); *Parliamentary Committees Act 1995* (Qld); *Parliamentary Committees Act 1991* (SA).

²⁹² Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 21.

²⁹³ Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 46.

²⁹⁴ Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 46.

- Consider mixed committees with both MPs and community members to encourage citizen engagement (as operates in Belgium).²⁹⁵
- Chairpersonship:
 - Require that Chairs and Deputy Chairs of committees are elected by the committees themselves rather than being appointed by the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition.²⁹⁶
 - Alternatively, allocate Chairs and Deputy Chairs of committees so that overall they are representative of the membership of the House.
 - Alternatively, elect chairs of select committees via secret ballot of all MPs (as in the UK).²⁹⁷
 - For specific purpose and oversight committees, prohibit the chair of the committee from being a member of the party(s) in government.²⁹⁸
 - Set expectations that committee chairs act impartially – which may at least influence behaviour.²⁹⁹
- Referrals:
 - Allow referrals only via own motion of the committee, a resolution of the House, or a standing referral, for example, an oversight committee being required to examine the annual report of the agency(s) it oversights.³⁰⁰

- Consider whether there should be any limit on the power of the government to unilaterally refer matters to a committee.³⁰¹
- Legislative inquiry and scrutiny:
 - Refer all bills for legislative inquiry.³⁰²
 - Require legislative inquiries to consider amendments.³⁰³
 - Require legislative inquiries to report within six weeks.³⁰⁴
- Scrutiny at different stages of the legislative process:
 - Increase references to committees on post-legislation issues.³⁰⁵
 - Increase scrutiny of policy prior to the introduction of legislation, such as through inquiries into white papers or green papers.³⁰⁶
- Resourcing:
 - Conduct an external review of staffing levels within the Department of the House of Representatives Committee Office to ensure that every committee has an adequately staffed secretariat.³⁰⁷
 - In general, confer power on the committee and the House to determine ongoing adequacy of resources, not the government.³⁰⁸
 - Establish parliamentary resources on specific topics (e.g., the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology) able to provide expert briefings and peer-reviewed evidence summaries to committees.

²⁹⁵ Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (2019).

²⁹⁶ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 16.

²⁹⁷ UK Parliament (2024). It is unclear how well this would work in the Commonwealth Parliament which has far fewer members than the UK Parliament.

²⁹⁸ Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 46.

²⁹⁹ See Appleby (2024)

³⁰⁰ Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 47.

³⁰¹ Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 47.

³⁰² Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 14.

³⁰³ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 14.

³⁰⁴ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 14.

³⁰⁵ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure (2010), pp. xx-xxi.

³⁰⁶ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure (2010), pp. 119-20.

³⁰⁷ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure (2010), p. xv.

³⁰⁸ Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 47.

- Establish a pool of experts from outside parliament that can be seconded to staff committee inquiries where expertise would be particularly valuable.
- Voting and decision-making approaches:
 - Explore alternative methodologies for the development of recommendations (e.g., consensus decision-making, used more frequently in Norway).³⁰⁹
- Reporting and responses
 - Require non-legislative inquiries to report within 16 weeks unless the relevant house of Parliament agrees to a different reporting period.³¹⁰
 - Require governments to respond to committee reports within 16 weeks, with committees given the power to call the relevant minister to a committee if the government fails to respond in time.³¹¹
 - Require parliamentary staff to prepare aggregate reporting on the extent to which government adopts committee recommendations and provides meaningful reasons for failing to do so.

³⁰⁹ The Storting (n.d.).

³¹⁰ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 16.

³¹¹ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 16.

4.6 Private members' bills

4.6.1 Problem and relationship to key institutional trends

Parliamentarians should be able to represent the concerns of their constituents on an equal and proportionate footing. Putting issues on the agenda, particularly the legislative agenda, is arguably a fundamental feature of representation.³¹² Private members' bills (including those sponsored by the opposition) are the means for parliamentarians who are not members of the government to add to the legislative agenda.

Private members' bills can push important issues onto the agenda that have been blocked because they counter the trends described in section 2.2, such as the concentration of power, and advancement through political parties. By raising issues that may initially seem unpopular, they may promote public discussion that opens the Overton window for future reform.

However, the representative value of private members' bills must be balanced against the need to focus scarce parliamentary time and drafting resources efficiently on measures that have real prospects of success. Private members' bills can require more time from parliamentary counsel than government bills because the drafting instructions for private members' bills are supported by a small number of advisers and civil society organisations, such as think tanks, whereas drafting instructions for government bills are supported by the public service. Nevertheless, fundamental principles of representation require that at least some parliamentary time and drafting resources be devoted to private members bills.³¹³

³¹² See, e.g., Dixon (2004), p. 89.

³¹³ Consequently, some have suggested additional drafting resources for the crossbench (e.g., through secondment of drafters from the Office of Parliamentary Counsel to the Department of the House of Representatives): The Australia Institute (2025).

³¹⁴ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 21.

There are also concerns that private members' bills may disrupt the government's legislative agenda. However, if it has a majority, the government always retains the power to vote down bills once debated.

In practice, the government almost invariably prevents private members' bills from being put to a vote.³¹⁴ In the 46th Parliament, for example, nearly 90 private members' bills were introduced across a wide range of salient policy issues but none were voted on.³¹⁵ Between the 39th Parliament (1998) and 46th Parliament (2022), there have been just 14 successful private members' bills.³¹⁶

As a result, if a private member's bill proposes a popular initiative that runs contrary to the government's interests, the government can stonewall the initiative rather than publicly indicating its opposition by voting against the bill.

The effective inability to bring private members' bills to a vote further concentrates executive power, and attenuates parliamentary power.³¹⁷ It also further concentrates power within parties, limiting the potential influence and profile of MPs who are not members of a major party. Putting private members' bills to a vote might well increase trust in government. Such legislation is likely to respond to voter concerns,³¹⁸ and active debate on these issues would demonstrate that systems of government were responding to them.

Examples of private members' bills introduced in recent years on reforms with strong public support which nonetheless were not put to a vote during the term of their introduction (although some were eventually incorporated

³¹⁵ Parliament of Australia (2022), pp. 31-36.

³¹⁶ Australian Law Reform Commission (2022).

³¹⁷ Dixon (2004), p. 91.

³¹⁸ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 21.

in a subsequent government's agenda) include an integrity body bill;³¹⁹ various electoral reform bills;³²⁰ gambling reform bills;³²¹ and proposed truth in political advertising laws.³²² Historically, important legislation has been introduced and passed as private members' bills, including Australia's world-leading compulsory voting legislation,³²³ which is arguably one of Australia's most successful institutional designs for promoting good governance in the long run.³²⁴

A higher profile for private members' bills could be particularly important for promoting institutional reform. Many of the private members' bills introduced in the 46th Parliament concerned the kind of institutional reforms discussed in this report. Institutional reforms are often popular with the electorate but politically inconvenient. Forcing the issues to a vote may put meaningful pressure on a government to pursue institutional reform.

4.6.2 Current arrangements

At present the government effectively controls whether or not a private member's bill is debated and voted on through the operation of parliamentary standing orders.³²⁵ Procedures which apply to the processing of private members' bills are substantially the same as for government bills, with debate on second reading adjourned to a future sitting.³²⁶ According to standing order 42, if any item of private member's business has not been called on or interrupted under standing order 41 and not re-accorded priority by the Selection Committee (on which government typically has a majority³²⁷) for a certain time period, it is

removed from the Notice Paper.³²⁸ Members cannot force a vote except through suspension of standing orders, which requires an absolute majority of the House.³²⁹

4.6.3 Recommended reforms

Private members' bills would have more prospects of a vote if standing orders were amended consistently with recommendations in the Susan McKinnon Foundation's 2025 report on parliamentary reform and The Australia Institute's 2025 *Blueprint*. Under their proposals, standing orders would be amended to require that:

- the House of Representatives Selection Committee should mirror the composition of the House;³³⁰
- a substantial minority of the House of Representatives Selection Committee should have power to schedule items of private members' business to be voted on;³³¹
- all private members' bills introduced into the House of Representatives, following the second reading being moved in the House of Representatives, should be referred to the relevant House general purpose standing committee for 12-weeks for inquiry and report;³³²
- the House of Representatives Selection Committee should have power to schedule votes on private members' bills within 15 sitting days, for passage through all stages, 12-weeks after the second reading of the bill is moved in the House of Representatives;³³³ and

³¹⁹ Helen Haines MP's *Australian Federal Integrity Commission Bill 2021*, with 75% public support: The Australia Institute (2022d).

³²⁰ E.g. Rebecca Sharkie MP's *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering the Donation Disclosure Threshold) Bill 2019*, with 78% public support for immediate, real-time disclosure of donations in 2023: Susan McKinnon Foundation (2023).

³²¹ E.g. Andrew Wilkie MP's *Gambling Harm Reduction (Protecting Problem Gamblers and Other Measures) Bill 2016* with 70% public support for precommitment technology in 2011: ANU (2011).

³²² Zali Steggall MP's *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Stop the Lies) Bill 2024*, with 90% public support: The Australia Institute (2020).

³²³ Australian Electoral Commission (2023c).

³²⁴ Brett (2019), pp. 181-183.

³²⁵ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 21.

³²⁶ Parliament of Australia (n.d.), "Infosheet 6 – Opportunities for private members".

³²⁷ Parliament of Australia (n.d.), "Committee membership".

³²⁸ Elder and Fowler (2018), p. 578.

³²⁹ The Australia Institute (2025), pp. 7-8, Elder and Fowler (2018), pp. 264–265.

³³⁰ The Australia Institute (2025), p. 8.

³³¹ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 22.

³³² Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 22.

³³³ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 22.

- votes on private members' and senators' business items should be scheduled for Thursday mornings.³³⁴

³³⁴ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025b), p. 22.

4.7 MP resourcing

4.7.1 Problem and relationship to key institutional trends

Historically MPs had resources to develop policy, and to analyse legislation before the Parliament, that were provided by parties and funded significantly by donations.³³⁵ However, this mechanism has largely been replaced by publicly funded resources.

The bulk of MPs' policy research on a day-to-day basis is now undertaken by a combination of parliamentary researchers, electorate officers, personal employees, and ministerial advisers.³³⁶ All MPs are allocated between five and seven electorate officers on a consistent basis to undertake constituency and policy research work.³³⁷ The tasks of electorate officers and personal employees are somewhat fungible, but the system for allocating 'personal employees' and ministerial advisers is much more fluid, and consequently, this section focuses on them.

The primary mechanism to allocate ministerial advisers and personal employees is that they are allocated to party leaders who then allocate them to individual MPs.³³⁸ As of February 2025, there were 496 governmental personal staff (largely ministerial staffers), and 104 opposition personal staff (largely staffers for shadow Ministers).³³⁹ In the current parliament, this is equivalent to 1.2 staff per MP. Opposition personal staff are currently 21% of the number of Ministerial staff, and this proportion has been consistent since 1983,³⁴⁰ apparently pursuant to an

ongoing agreement between the major political parties which does not appear to have been documented publicly.

However, this system for personal employees is working less well because more and more MPs are not members of a major party.³⁴¹

Like all MPs, independent MPs play an important role in developing and advocating for policy ideas. Independent MPs have made substantial policy contributions over the past three years, particularly to initiatives for institutional reform. They have secured legislative or regulatory amendments on several substantive issues, including climate³⁴² and health;³⁴³ championed reform on issues that have arguably taken a backseat amongst parties due to their political difficulty, such as major taxation reform;³⁴⁴ and proposed new legislation on a range of institutional reform topics, including an integrity commission,³⁴⁵ truth in political advertising,³⁴⁶ lobbying,³⁴⁷ and public appointments.³⁴⁸

With increasing numbers of independent Members of the House of Representatives,³⁴⁹ it is also increasingly likely that they will hold the balance of power at some point in the future, if not after the next election. . When they do, their attitude towards legislation is often crucial to the parliamentary outcome.

To fulfil the responsibilities of proposing new policy, and exercising the balance of power, independent MPs need sufficient resources to enable them to analyse and understand the issues. These resources include the

³³⁵ Gauja (2015), p. 202.

³³⁶ Gauja (2015), p. 212.

³³⁷ Department of Finance (2025b); note that higher numbers are allocated only to MPs who have second and third electorate offices at Commonwealth expense, which depends in turn on electorate size.

³³⁸ Gauja (2015), p. 212.

³³⁹ Madden (2022); Department of Finance (2025a), pp. 3-4.

³⁴⁰ Australian National Audit Office (2004), p. 30; Henderson (2009), p. 26; Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), p. 46.

³⁴¹ See Riboldi et al. (2024), p. 23, who track changes in numbers of independent and minor party MPs at the federal level, from 2 in 1970-1995, 11 in 1996-2010, to 15 in 2011-2023 at

the federal level. There were 15 Greens and 25 independent and minor party MPs when Parliament was prorogued in 2025.

³⁴² Evans (2022)

³⁴³ Wisbey (2023)

³⁴⁴ Spender (2024); Wood (2023).

³⁴⁵ *National Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2022*.

³⁴⁶ *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Stop the Lies) Bill 2022*.

³⁴⁷ *Lobbying (Improving Government Honesty and Trust) Bill 2023*.

³⁴⁸ *Transparent and Quality Public Appointments (Ending Jobs for Mates) Bill 2023*.

³⁴⁹ See Riboldi et al. (2024), p. 23; there were 4 Greens and 15 independent and minor party members of the House of Representatives when Parliament was prorogued in 2025.

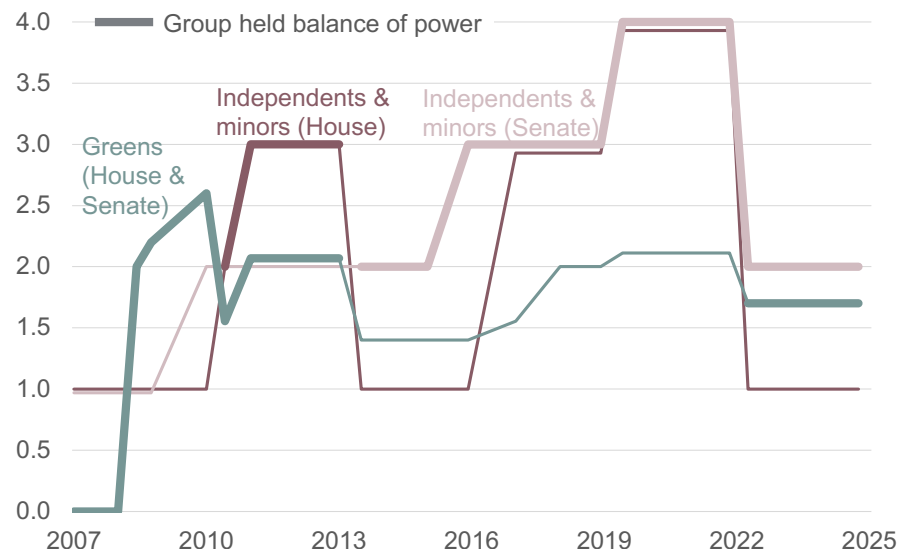
Parliamentary Library and the Parliamentary Budget Office, although neither of these institutions provide tailored interactive policy advice in the manner of a personal employee.

Independents can lack efficiencies of scale in the use of personal employees. Staff work completed for the opposition shadow minister is effectively available for the entire party, and will largely determine its position on a piece of legislation. By contrast, staff work completed for an independent MP is not necessarily available to others, and independent MPs often disagree on the appropriate response to proposed legislation.

Consequently, over the longer term the number of ‘personal employees’ (as distinct from electoral staff) of independent MPs has increased, and tends to be higher when independents hold the balance of power. However, independent members of the House of Representatives were only allocated one personal employee each in 2022 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: MP personal staff numbers

Personal employees per MP of minor parties and independents



Source: Madden (2022) for data up to 2022; Department of Finance (2023), Department of Finance (2024b), Department of Finance (2025); Correa Consulting analysis.

Notes: ‘Independents and minors’ exclude Greens. In some years, 1-2 senators received an additional adviser, which is not reflected in this graph. Greens advisers are calculated as an average for all Green MPs in both Senate and House of Representatives. After 2022, independent numbers reflect a rounded average.

With such limited resources but significant responsibilities, personal staffers to independent MPs may face unreasonable workloads and have an unsafe workplace.³⁵⁰ A report by the Parliamentary Workplace Support Services considering personal staffing levels was completed in 2024, but has not been released yet.³⁵¹

³⁵⁰ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), pp. 48-52.

³⁵¹ Parliamentary Workplace Support Service (2023a).

The Prime Minister has unfettered discretion to set the number of policy support staff for each independent MP.³⁵² At as 2025, two MPs and two Senators, all of whom had left parties to become independents, had been allocated zero personal staff.³⁵³ The executive's limitation of the resources available to independent MPs is another example of the concentration of government power, and another example of major political parties using institutional rules to preference their interests relative to other MPs. (see section 2.2.2).

4.7.2 Recommended changes and further research

Current staffing levels for independent MPs, and the process for allocating them, are inadequate, but further work is required to define an alternative long-term system.

Resourcing levels

Because independent MPs lack the economies of scale of a party, and given the volume of contemporary legislation, they clearly need more policy support, particularly when they hold the balance of power.

In the longer term, further work is required to define the appropriate levels of personal staff given the changing make-up of Parliament. Unlike the current system, criteria need to be articulated for appropriate staffing levels. For example, staffing levels might take into account who holds the balance of power, and vote share in the most recent election. They might also be set to encourage independent MPs to share the fruits of staff advice by allocating additional staff to them if they agree to share those resources on a basis to be agreed between them.

Further work is also required to consider other resources for independent MPs. For example, Commonwealth funding is provided to think tanks

aligned with major political parties.³⁵⁴ More broadly, a number of right-leaning and left-leaning think tanks (including four 'large' institutes on the right and six 'large' institute on the left,³⁵⁵ have close connections to parties (including through a 'revolving door').³⁵⁶ These are able to provide confidential advice to their aligned party on policy ideas, while providing 'plausible deniability' for the outcomes. Some of them also provide limited research, advice, and drafting resources to minor parties and independents, as do more centrist think tanks.

Process for allocating resources

The power of the Prime Minister to unilaterally determine staffing for individual MPs is anomalous compared to some State and Territory parliaments. In NSW and Queensland, independent MP staffing resources are set by the Independent Remuneration Tribunal, and by a legislated formula in Victoria (for non-government MPs) and the ACT.³⁵⁷ Other countries with Westminster systems also delegate the power to an independent entity.³⁵⁸

Research is needed to define the optimal long-term process for allocating staffers, which might draw on experience in other jurisdictions. A revised process might involve an independent entity such as the Remuneration Tribunal or the Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission.³⁵⁹

Research methodology

Approaches to answering the questions outlined above could include:

- benchmarking staffing levels and procedures in other jurisdictions;
- consulting with leaders from the public service and parliamentary services to understand the resources that are already available to MPs

³⁵² Maley and Sawyer (2022). *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*, ss. 4, 7, 11-13.

³⁵³ Based on omissions of Russell Broadbent MP, Ian Goodenough MP, Senator Gerard Rennick, and Senator Fatima Payman from disclosures in Department of Finance (2025).

³⁵⁴ For example, Menzies Research Centre and Chifley Research Centre each received approximately \$590k from March 2023 to June 2024 according to Grant Connect.

³⁵⁵ Hagland (2021), p. 72.

³⁵⁶ Hagland (2021), p. 128.

³⁵⁷ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), pp. 54, 56-57.

³⁵⁸ Maley and Sawyer (2022); Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), p. 57.

³⁵⁹ As suggested by Senator Pocock: Grattan (2024).

for policy work, such as the Parliamentary Budget Office, Parliamentary Library, and Chamber Office, to understand the minimum personal staffing functions required to 'translate' this work; and

- consulting with crossbenchers from 2010 to understand how their workload changed while they held the balance of power.

5. Priorities for longer-term research and advocacy on institutional reform

Section 3.3 identified three reforms as high priority for future research and advocacy because they may well be high impact, and would probably be feasible, but important parts of the evidence base or advocacy base are missing.

This chapter provides more detail on these reforms. It sets out for each research priority:

- the problem and potential impact of the reform; and
- key questions to be further analysed.

5.1 Ministerial advisers

5.1.1 Current situation

Ministerial advisers (including policy advisers, media staff, and departmental liaison officers) serve important functions in our democratic system. They support ministers with their considerable workload, contest ideas, and steer interactions between their minister and the public service³⁶⁰ and stakeholders³⁶¹ towards policy outcomes. They help to communicate policy to citizens via the media.³⁶² Somewhat insulated from the public service, they provide advice on policy more focused on its political implications, particularly how it will be perceived by the electorate, a core consideration in a democracy.³⁶³

Ministerial advisers have grown significantly in number and influence over past decades. The number of ministerial staffers grew from 210 in 1983 to 339 in 1996 to a temporary high of 437 at the end of the Howard

Government in 2007. The number of advisers fell back when the Rudd Government was elected, but rose again to 449 in 2019, and increased to 471 in 2023.³⁶⁴

The proportion of Commonwealth ministerial advisers who are public servants on leave is lower than under the Hawke-Keating Governments. It was consistently around 28% between 2010 and 2018,³⁶⁵ but anecdotally has fallen materially in the past few years.

5.1.2 Problems with ministerial advisers

A number of issues with ministerial advisers have been raised.

Ministerial advisers can **increase the focus on short-term political considerations**, and reduce the weight of longer-term policy outcomes:

- Advice from ministerial advisers tends to be focused on short-term political considerations, shaping ministerial responses to maximise short-term media outcomes,³⁶⁶ and immediate media management.³⁶⁷
- With the advantages of physical proximity, more regular contact, and personal trust,³⁶⁸ ministerial advisers ‘crowd out’ policy advice from the public service.³⁶⁹
- By controlling interactions, ministerial advisers can effectively throttle the flow of policy work and information from the department.

These concerns are exacerbated because ministerial advisers **do not always observe the theoretical limits to their power**. In theory:

³⁶⁰ Connaughton (2015), p. 2.

³⁶¹ Australian Public Service Commissioner (2022).

³⁶² Ng (2018), p. 41.

³⁶³ Connaughton (2018), p. 2.

³⁶⁴ Daley (2021), p. 47; Department of Finance (2023).

³⁶⁵ Maley (2024).

³⁶⁶ As suggested by former Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Martin Parkinson: quoted in Tingle (2015), p. 24.

³⁶⁷ Ng (2018), p. 55, 176.

³⁶⁸ Ng (2018), p. 176.

³⁶⁹ Shaw and Eichbaum (2020).

- ministerial advisers can only issue instructions to the public service and request information at the express behest of their minister;³⁷⁰ and
- ministerial advisers must act consistently with their code of conduct which is generally consistent with obligations applying to public servants, such as not mis-using information to gain advantage for themselves.³⁷¹

In practice, however, these limits to the power are not always observed and there is a general perception that the level of professionalism is substantially lower than in the broader workforce.³⁷²

Furthermore, political advisers may intervene to **extract partisan advantage from public service processes** that should be conducted for the public interest, such as intervening in FOI requests to block or delay requests for information, or to expedite the release of information to favoured channels that will embarrass the Opposition.³⁷³

As a relatively new component of government, existing institutions have not adapted, leaving a **'black hole of accountability'** for ministerial advisers.³⁷⁴

- The names of even senior ministerial advisers are not public (in contrast all Senior Executive Service roles in the public service – about 3,400 people³⁷⁵ – are published in the Australian Government Directory).
- From a legal perspective, their conduct is governed merely by contractual terms rather than a legislated code.³⁷⁶

- Despite their significant role in government by convention they are generally not called before parliamentary committees.³⁷⁷
- There is no internal government body responsible for overseeing the behaviour of ministerial advisers.³⁷⁸

While ministerial advisers can now be called by the National Anti-Corruption Commission (they fall within the relevant Act's definition of 'public official'),³⁷⁹ this is a relatively blunt tool for holding ministerial advisers to account.

Finally, the growing number and power of ministerial advisers is **changing other parts of our system of government**. Experience as a ministerial adviser has become the most common route to preselection and election as an MP.³⁸⁰ This effectively narrows the pool of people likely to be elected to Parliament. This career path may also contribute to promoting shibboleths rather than rational judgment about policy outcomes.³⁸¹

The extent of these problems depends in part on the approach of each particular minister. For example, our anecdotal observation is that the most experienced and competent ministers are those most likely to have a significant proportion of staffers drawn from the public service. However, good institutional practice designs in good outcomes rather than relying on the competence and values of participants.

Reforms to the system of ministerial advisers divide experts more than any other reform we examined. Of the people that we consulted in preparing this report, those with a background in the public service perceive the case for reform is strong; those with a background in politics do not. Reform to ministerial advisers was the *only* reform examined where a substantial

³⁷⁰ Thodey (2019), p. 135.

³⁷¹ See, e.g., *Public Service Act 1999* s 13(10), *Ministerial Staff Code of Conduct* (2022) [19].

³⁷² Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), p. 97.

³⁷³ Ng (2018), p. 177.

³⁷⁴ Moran (2013), p. 5; Tiernan et al. (2019), p. 26; Ng (2018); but cf Shergold (2015, p. 33).

³⁷⁵ Australian Public Service Commissioner (2024), p. 299.

³⁷⁶ Ng (2018), p. 139.

³⁷⁷ Ng (2018), pp. 118, 178.

³⁷⁸ Ng (2018), pp. 179-180.

³⁷⁹ National Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2022 s 10.

³⁸⁰ Daley (2021), p. 47.

³⁸¹ Daley (2021), pp. 20-24.

number thought reform was a high priority *and* a substantial number thought reform was a very low priority (see section 3.2).

5.1.3 Relationship to key institutional trends

Current arrangements for ministerial advisers are contributing to many of the institutional trends that are leading to poor policy outcomes and declining trust in government (see section 5.1).

Government power is concentrated in the minister and their office, through a growing cadre of partisan ministerial advisers, correspondingly reducing the influence of the public service. The lack of accountability mechanisms for ministerial advisers, also weakens the power of Parliament to hold executive government to account.

The widening career path from ministerial advisor to preselection and Parliament, may increase partisanship and promote the professionalisation and cartelisation of political parties.

Ministerial advisers tend to focus on the immediate political implications of decisions, reducing the influence of ‘thinking slow’ institutions. There is a danger that the focus of ministerial advisers may lead to short term outcomes and partisan considerations eclipsing the longer-term public interest in the development and implementation of policy reform.

5.1.4 Potential reforms

Detailed government reviews and academics have proposed reforms to address the issues described above,³⁸² including:

- limiting the number of ministerial advisers;³⁸³
- requiring a proportion of ministerial advisers (the Thodey Review recommended 50%) to be drawn from the public service;³⁸⁴
- creating a new ministerial adviser role staffed by the department that has a similar reporting structure to the Departmental Liaison Officer position but is more focused on providing policy advice;³⁸⁵
- publishing the names of all senior ministerial advisers;³⁸⁶
- training political advisors on codes of conduct, relevant legislation, and norms of government applicable to their role;³⁸⁷
- further defining the limits to the authority of ministerial advisers, particularly formalising the understanding that they cannot give instructions to public servants unless expressly instructed by their minister;³⁸⁸
- legislating the code of conduct governing the behaviour of ministerial advisers;³⁸⁹
- explicitly subjecting ministerial advisers to official accountability mechanisms such as the Ombudsman, Auditor-General, Information Commissioner;³⁹⁰
- explicitly defining when it is appropriate for parliamentary committees to require a ministerial adviser to appear, and also defining the limits to the type of questions that a ministerial adviser is obliged to answer;³⁹¹ and

³⁸² Including Ng (2018), Maley (2019), Tiernan et al. (2019), Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), and Centre for Public Integrity (2025).

³⁸³ Ng (2018), pp. 145, 180, also noting UK and Canada experience.

³⁸⁴ Thodey et al. (2019), pp. 134-136, 312; Tiernan et al. (2019), p. 25; see also Meert et al. (2023), p. 243, indicating that Greece and the European Commission have mandatory minimum percentages of civil servants (respectively 55 and 50 percent).

³⁸⁵ Maley (2019), p. 2.

³⁸⁶ Maley (2019), p. 3.

³⁸⁷ Ng (2018), p. 181; Thodey et al. (2019), p. 137.

³⁸⁸ Ng (2018), p. 180; Thodey et al. (2019), p. 137; Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), p. 102; Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 54.

³⁸⁹ Ng (2018), p. 180; Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), p. 96; Thodey et al. (2019), p. 137.

³⁹⁰ Ng (2018), p. 180; Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 54.

³⁹¹ Ng (2018), p. 180; Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], p. 54; Tiernan et al. (2019), p. 26; Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), p. 101; Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee (2003), p. 40.

- regularly conducting joint forums for ministerial advisers and Australian Public Service senior executives.³⁹²

Governments in power typically contest all these ideas:

- Limiting the number of ministerial advisers could be described as an inappropriate constraint on ministerial power. Oppositions have incentives not to highlight increases in the number of advisers because of the convention that they are linked to increases in opposition staffing.
- Requiring a proportion of ministerial advisers to be drawn from the public service was described in the Government's response to the Thodey Review as 'not necessary',³⁹³ and some would claim that it would inappropriately constrain ministers in selecting staff who will work with them very closely to advance a political agenda.³⁹⁴ It would also reduce the number of personnel likely to support the minister's political ambitions. Our interviews suggested that the most competent ministers are those most likely to have a significant proportion of advisers drawn from the public service. This suggests that any constraint is unlikely to reduce the quality of policy making.
- A departmental employee providing policy advice may be seen as insufficiently focused on the minister's needs.³⁹⁵
- Publishing ministerial adviser names may be seen as inappropriate as they do not in theory have decision-making power.³⁹⁶ On the other hand, they wield substantial official power in practice, and it is not obvious why their privacy should be protected more than a much larger number of public servants whose names and positions are published.

³⁹² Shergold (2015), p. 5.

³⁹³ Australian Public Service Reform (2023).

³⁹⁴ Maley (2024), p. 19.

³⁹⁵ Maley (2024), p. 15.

³⁹⁶ Maley (2020) notes that until 2001, the names of ministerial staff were published in the Commonwealth Government Directory, alongside the names of senior public servants and that 'we don't know why they were removed in 2002, and at what level the decision was made'. The rationale that governments might offer reflects the 'McMullan principle', similarly

- Training may be difficult to schedule, because ministerial advisers are almost always under extreme time pressure,³⁹⁷ not least at the beginning of a government's term when there tends to be a significant influx of new advisers.
- Tightening the limits on the authority of ministerial advisers may be seen as inappropriate because the formal limits are already significant – and the real problem may be more that they are not always observed in practice.
- Legislating codes of conduct, making ministerial advisers subject to official accountability mechanisms, and requiring them to appear before parliamentary committees may all be seen as exposing ministerial advisers to legal liability that is inappropriate if they are following ministerial direction. It may also weaken their personal responsibility to the minister because they would become more accountable to other authorities.

Many of the objections are expressed privately, but do not appear in official documentation where many proposals have been effectively blocked through stonewalling rather than outright rejection.³⁹⁸

5.1.5 Further research needed

The literature on ministerial advisers, both in Australia and internationally is growing.³⁹⁹ This literature, and further research can help with two overarching issues.

First is the philosophical question of whether ministerial responsibility should remain the guiding principle for system design even though

based on strict adherence to the notion that an advisor acts only at the direction of and knowledge of the minister, who is ultimately accountable: Centre for Public Integrity (2025) [forthcoming], pp. 52-53.

³⁹⁷ Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022), p. 8.

³⁹⁸ The official response over three years later is that many of the Thodey recommendations are 'under consideration' or 'underway': Australian Public Service Commissioner (2023b), pp. 28-31.

³⁹⁹ See for example, Ng (2018); Maley (2024); Shaw (2023).

ministerial resignations for breach have become extremely uncommon, and the role of ministerial advisers has changed in practice.

Second, there are always concerns that structural changes, such as an effective change to the status of ministerial advisers, may have unintended consequences. Experience in comparable jurisdictions can indicate whether these concerns are well-founded.

Other issues have not been thought through in the detail required. In particular:

- What activities of ministerial advisers would be subject to which accountability mechanisms?
- How should the limits be defined as to the questions that a ministerial adviser should and should not answer before a parliamentary committee?
- How should any further limits to ministerial adviser participation in party political advocacy and participation be defined?
- Exactly what might be the level of any cap on adviser numbers, how might it be set in a principled way, and would it be set in terms of number or budget?

5.2 Four-year terms

5.2.1 Current situation

The Australian House of Representatives currently has three-year, non-fixed terms.⁴⁰⁰ All Australian State and Territories except Tasmania have fixed terms, and all states and territories have four-year terms.⁴⁰¹ Many international jurisdictions are similar. Many experts and other stakeholders believe non-fixed three-year terms are a barrier to good governance.

Reform to move to four-year terms has been raised multiple times over the past 40 years.⁴⁰² Multiple research and discussion papers have been prepared, including a recent comprehensive paper published by Susan McKinnon Foundation.⁴⁰³

However, four-year terms have struggled to gain political and public traction. A referendum to move to four-year terms (amongst other proposals) failed in 1988, securing only 33% of the national vote and failing to secure a majority in any state.⁴⁰⁴ Leaders have from time to time expressed support and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Opposition Leader Peter Dutton tentatively expressed support in 2024.⁴⁰⁵ As at April 2024, only 51% of the public supported a move to four-year terms.⁴⁰⁶

More generally, referenda are hard to pass, with only 8 in 45 succeeding in Australia's history.⁴⁰⁷ Experts tend to emphasize bipartisan support as a key success factor (although some have also cautioned against over-emphasizing its significance, pointing to examples where proposals without bipartisan support have succeeded⁴⁰⁸). They are also politically

costly; many would argue that the Voice Referendum of 2023 at least cost the Government significant time and resources that they might have deployed to other work and advocacy and political capital that they might have spent on other issues, and the polls showed a modest decline in support from the Government following the referendum.⁴⁰⁹ Referenda raise something of a chicken-and-egg problem; we know the public are informed by the signals of leaders,⁴¹⁰ but leaders don't have strong incentives to support the reform without public support.

5.2.2 Problem and relationship to key institutional trends

Three-year terms entail more frequent elections and campaigning, diverting from governance.⁴¹¹ This in itself is a challenge for governments trying to implement their agenda. It could also be argued that more campaigning increases the focus on short-term electoral promises, and reduces government appetite for reforms that lack immediate electoral appeal and only pay off in the longer term.⁴¹²

However, it's important not to overstate the value four-year terms. There is limited empirical analysis of whether moving to four-year term State elections has led to better policy outcomes, or more reforms that pay off longer term.

The question of whether to move to four-year terms is also not just a technical one that can be answered with reference to qualitative and quantitative data. They also raise a normative question about how often the public might want the chance to vote out incumbents.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁰ Australian Constitution, section 28.

⁴⁰¹ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025a), p. 14.

⁴⁰² Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025a), pp. 11-14.

⁴⁰³ Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025a).

⁴⁰⁴ Australian Electoral Commission (2023a).

⁴⁰⁵ Coorey (2024).

⁴⁰⁶ Benson (2024b).

⁴⁰⁷ Australian Electoral Commission (2023a).

⁴⁰⁸ Goot (2024).

⁴⁰⁹ Roy Morgan (2023).

⁴¹⁰ McAllister and Biddle (2024).

⁴¹¹ See Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025a), p. 17.

⁴¹² See Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025a), p. 17.

⁴¹³ See Susan McKinnon Foundation (2025a), pp. 19-20.

5.2.3 Further work

Significant work has been done to lay out the potential benefits of moving to four-year terms. It would be helpful to analyse how moving from three-year to four-year terms in States and Territories changed policy making trends and facilitated more continuous and effective governance. This work would also be useful in advocacy. Some kind of deliberative process involving the public, rather than just quick polling, might also be helpful in revealing the underlying public attitudes to the reform.

However, the major barrier to reform is not insufficient research, but insufficient public support. There has not been a sustained advocacy campaign for four-year terms. The nature of any such advocacy campaign is also very important, given that the electorate was not particularly responsive to mass information or advertising in the Voice Referendum.⁴¹⁴ Grassroots campaigning might be much more effective. Because the signals of party leaders matter, the campaign would also need to work with players across the political spectrum.⁴¹⁵

Effective advocacy takes time, and an advocacy campaign in relation to four-year terms would likely be a long-term project.

⁴¹⁴ McAllister and Biddle (2024).

⁴¹⁵ McAllister and Biddle (2024).

5.3 Deliberative democracy processes

5.3.1 Current situation

Deliberative democracy processes typically involve citizens selected through a form of lottery, who meet together to discuss at some length and converge on solutions to political and policy issues. Two of their most common formats are ‘citizens’ juries’ and ‘citizens’ assemblies’.

Prominent Australian examples of such participatory processes include a series of citizen juries in South Australia to investigate issues including city nightlife, landholder contributions to a drainage network, cycling safety, and storage of nuclear waste from other countries,⁴¹⁶ and the City of Melbourne’s Citizen Jury to develop a ten-year financial plan.⁴¹⁷ All of them were ultimately advisory: the commissioning government was not bound to act in accordance with their advice (and often did not). Organisations such as Amplify have experimented with creating deliberative forums outside of government,⁴¹⁸ although by definition these have no direct connection to government – governments often do not agree even to consider their recommendations, let alone to implement them.

There are many international examples, including in Ireland on a variety of constitutional changes including abortion reform,⁴¹⁹ in the UK and France on climate change,⁴²⁰ in Chile on health care,⁴²¹ in Germany on misinformation,⁴²² and in Belgium on political party funding.⁴²³

⁴¹⁶ Ryan, M.D. (2023), pp. 674-679.

⁴¹⁷ See Young (2016).

⁴¹⁸ Amplify (2025).

⁴¹⁹ See, e.g., McKay (2019).

⁴²⁰ UK Parliament (n.d.) and Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (n.d.).

⁴²¹ Fishkin et al. (n.d.).

5.3.2 Relationship to key institutional trends

Deliberative democracy processes are promoted as a tool to help with many of the governance issues described in section 2.1.⁴²⁴ In theory they can deliver good policy outcomes, particularly by persuading participants and others that initially unpopular solutions are nevertheless in the public interest. By involving ‘ordinary’ citizens they can also increase trust in government.

Deliberative democracy is also promoted as countering many of the undesirable trends described in section 2.2. By creating independent institutions, the processes counter the concentration of executive power. Because participants are selected from the general community they undercut the professionalisation and cartelisation of political parties. They build bonds between individual participants, increasing social capital. And with deliberative processes to work through issues, they are designed to ‘think slow’.

5.3.3 Rationale for further work

We have included deliberative democracy processes as a priority for further work, even though evidence of their actual impact on policy outcomes is mixed.

More than 45 assemblies have been run by national governments in other countries in recent years,⁴²⁵ and governments typically adopt some but not all recommendations.⁴²⁶ For example, of the many proposals put forward

⁴²² Burgerrat (2024).

⁴²³ Burgerrat (2023). For a complete list of international examples see Burgerrat (n.d.), “Citizens’ assemblies worldwide”.

⁴²⁴ Belgiomo-Nettis (2015).

⁴²⁵ Burgerrat (n.d.), “Citizens’ assemblies worldwide”.

⁴²⁶ Burgerrat (2020).

in the 2021 French Citizens' Assembly on Climate, 30 were fully implemented and 75 partially implemented or implemented through an alternative measure. Results from a systematic review of local assemblies indicated that just over a third of proposals were fully implemented, and just under a third were partially implemented/modified or rejected,⁴²⁷ with strong evidence of governmental cherry-picking.⁴²⁸ There is a risk that assemblies are used as vehicles to legitimate government authority.⁴²⁹

In Australia, participatory processes such as those noted above have had a limited impact on government decisions. They have also tended to rely on a particular style of more interactive political leadership and have not survived changes in government.⁴³⁰

Despite this mixed record, deliberative democracy processes remain a priority for further research because:

- of all the reforms we have investigated, participatory processes are potentially amongst the most disruptive, in a system that is heavily biased to the status quo,⁴³¹ and downsides appear limited;
- participatory processes may have more impact once they become established so as to increase their profile, public trust, and effective communication of their outcomes: in jurisdictions such as Ireland where participatory processes have become more common, they have gained strong public trust, and are better communicated, increasing their potential influence on policy outcomes; and

⁴²⁷ Font et al. (2017), p. 13.

⁴²⁸ Font et al. (2017), p. 17. Note that there doesn't appear to be systematic analysis of the same kind at the national level.

⁴²⁹ Smith and Setälä (2018), p. 308.

⁴³⁰ Ryan (2023), pp. 684-685.

⁴³¹ E.g., incrementalism, path dependency and the tendency of incumbents to preserve status quo political structures that benefit them.

⁴³² See, e.g., Johnson et al. (2024).

- they may be able to improve long-term outcomes by widening the Overton window⁴³² because they alter public perceptions of what people 'like me' think.⁴³³

5.3.4 Further work

Research and pilots of deliberative democracy processes can build on the substantial volume of research already undertaken, including that by newDemocracy Foundation and the Center for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance.

Useful directions for research and pilots include:

- defining specific issues for investigation through deliberative processes that are either politically intractable or involve institutional reforms where incumbent governments have a conflict of interest;
- exploring the optimal form and piloting of smaller-scale deliberative processes at the electorate level (such as town halls), which may be able to build citizen trust;⁴³⁴
- exploring how to communicate what assemblies are and their findings so as to maximise their impact on the views of the general public;
- developing models for deliberative democracy processes that themselves set the agenda for more focused further deliberative democracy assemblies⁴³⁵ to minimise the risk of assemblies being used disingenuously to legitimate predetermined outcomes; and
- exploring how to encourage interactive political leadership that promotes the continuing use of deliberative democracy processes.⁴³⁶

⁴³³ Pow et al. (2020).

⁴³⁴ See Alnemr et al. (2024).

⁴³⁵ See, e.g., Gruen (2023).

⁴³⁶ See, e.g., Ryan M.D. (2023). See also Mansbridge (2017), p. 6, explaining a model of 'recursive representation' and Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability (2022) outlining the 'deliberative town hall' model.

5.4 Independent expert advisory bodies

5.4.1 Current situation

Features and advantages of independent expert advisory bodies

Expert independent advisory bodies that are separate from government departments, and are not directly controlled by a Minister can have significant advantages. They can be valuable if:

- decisions require expertise;⁴³⁷
- decisions require a long-term view;⁴³⁸
- they contribute to the publicly available evidence base,⁴³⁹ which can weaken the influence of special interest groups contrary to the public interest,⁴⁴⁰
- they can engage with and ultimately change contrary public opinion when politicians cannot afford to advocate for unpopular causes; and
- they increase public confidence in decisions (it is notable that some of the most trusted parts of Australian government such as the Australian Electoral Commission and Reserve Bank of Australia are independent bodies).⁴⁴¹

Expert bodies may be better able than government departments to deliver these outcomes when they have longer-term leadership, longer-term staff, and insulation from lobbying by special interests.

Independent advisory bodies are not always appropriate. By definition they adopt approaches less influenced by the priorities of the popularly elected government. They may also adopt a perspective that is too narrow or technocratic.⁴⁴²

Current independent expert advisory bodies

Current examples in Australia of purely advisory bodies include the Productivity Commission, the Australian Law Reform Commission, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, the Climate Change Authority, and Infrastructure Australia. Other independent bodies that combine advisory and executive roles include the Reserve Bank of Australia, Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, the Bureau of Meteorology, the Australian Human Rights Commission, and Creative Australia. There are many examples internationally such as the UK Climate Change Committee,⁴⁴³ the UK National Institute for Health Care Excellence,⁴⁴⁴ and the Netherlands Advisory Council on Migration.⁴⁴⁵

In 2019 there were 1,277 government bodies (not all of them advisory). 118 new bodies had been created in the previous three years.⁴⁴⁶ The Australian Government Organisations Register reported 1,322 bodies as of December 2024.⁴⁴⁷

⁴³⁷ Davis (2017), pp. 69-20; Dennett (2016); Thodey et al. (2019), p.245; Department of Finance (2021); Stewart and Prasser (2015), pp. 152-153.

⁴³⁸ Davis (2017), pp. 69-20; Dennett (2016); Thodey et al. (2019), p.245; Department of Finance (2021); Stewart and Prasser (2015), pp. 152-153.

⁴³⁹ Stewart and Prasser (2015), p. 162.

⁴⁴⁰ Daley (2021), p. 52.

⁴⁴¹ Australian Public Service Reform (2024), p. 20.

⁴⁴² Stewart and Prasser (2015), p. 162.

⁴⁴³ Climate Change Committee (n.d.).

⁴⁴⁴ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (n.d.).

⁴⁴⁵ Advisory Council on Migration (2024).

⁴⁴⁶ Thodey et al. (2019), p.244.

⁴⁴⁷ Australian Government Directory (2024).

5.4.2 Problem and relationship to key institutional trends

Lack of rationale for independent expert bodies

There are no official criteria for when an independent expert body would be appropriate.⁴⁴⁸ The templates under the Commonwealth Governance Structures Policy note that independence affects the appropriate structure for a government body, but do not lay out the factors that make independence appropriate. Other literature is thin,⁴⁴⁹ although the Institute for Government in the UK has produced a useful body of work.⁴⁵⁰

Key opportunities for independent expert bodies

It is not easy to identify a new independent government expert body that has had a material impact on public policy since the creation of the Parliamentary Budget Office in 2012.

Key areas where new independent bodies have been suggested but not implemented include higher education, migration, and tax policy.

In 2024, the Australian Universities Accord, a review of higher education, recommended a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission to advise on higher education policy.⁴⁵¹ It was slightly ‘back to the future’ – it would have many similarities to the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission whose functions were largely cut back when it was subsumed into the new Higher Education Council of the National Board of Employment Education and Training in 1988,⁴⁵² and this body was abolished altogether in 2000.⁴⁵³ The Department of Education issued a consultation paper on the creation of Australian Tertiary Education Commission, and the Minister recently appointed ‘interim commissioners’ but legislation has not yet proceeded.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁴⁸ Department of Finance (2020).

⁴⁴⁹ Stewart and Prasser (2015), p. 156.

⁴⁵⁰ See Gill and Dalton (2023)

⁴⁵¹ Department of Education (2024b).

⁴⁵² *Employment, Education and Training Amendment Act 1988*, s 25.

⁴⁵³ *Employment, Education and Training Amendment Act 2000*.

The Commonwealth had an advisory body on migration policy, originally named the Bureau of Immigration Research from 1989 until 1996.⁴⁵⁵ It is arguable that a similar body today would be very useful in providing statistics and analysis on migration policy.

Tax policy is inevitably fraught. The last major tax policy reform in Australia was in 1999.⁴⁵⁶ Experts and politicians have called for a new independent Tax Reform Commission to promote better informed and more ambitious tax policy.⁴⁵⁷

Expert advisory bodies for other areas of policy might well be identified if more consistent principles were articulated and existing arrangements rationalised.

Relationship to key institutional trends

The failure to create new expert advisory bodies is consistent with the centralisation of power. Inherently expert advisory bodies may have views that differ from the minister of the day.

5.4.3 Further research needed

Research is needed to define:

- the principles of when independent expert bodies should be created;
- in which areas additional independent expert bodies would be justified;
- the optimal structure for independent expert advisory bodies that balances the need to be relevant and useful, but not so close to the executive that they cease to be or appear to be independent;⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁴ Australian Tertiary Education Commission (2024); Clare (2025).

⁴⁵⁵ Joint Standing Committee on Migration (2013), p. 125

⁴⁵⁶ Tilley (2024).

⁴⁵⁷ The Tax Institute (2021), p.256; Spender (2024), pp. 45-46.

⁴⁵⁸ Stewart and Prasser (2015), p. 153.

- how to engage citizens appropriately in the development of expert advisory body work to avoid an overly technocratic approach;
- how to maximise the impact of expert advisory bodies' findings on public discussion; and
- the mandate and powers of expert advisory bodies and the circumstances in which it is appropriate for them to have executive functions in addition to advisory functions.

This research could learn from the experience of current and former expert advisory bodies. Analysis of topics that dominate public agendas would be helpful in identifying the areas where there is the greatest need for independent expert, long-term advice.

Appendix 1: Prioritisation methodology

A1.1 Scope and identification of potential reforms

Our project identified a long list of reforms that might address the institutional challenges identified in section 2.2.

To identify candidate institutional reforms we reviewed the existing literature of official, academic, and think tank sources, although we did not attempt to create a reproducible meta-analysis. We also consulted with academic and policy experts, and with participants in the political process. As this report is a stock take, we did not attempt to devise substantial new proposals, or new analysis of reforms previously identified.

We adopted a broad definition of ‘political institution’ as including constitutional structures such as the parliament, institutions set up by statute and administrative arrangements, such as the Productivity Commission and parliamentary committees, the rules governing these institutions, the structures of political parties, and the conventions that are often not determined by law, but which consistently shape political behaviour.⁴⁵⁹

For the reasons set out below and overall for the pragmatic reason that we needed to find ways to limit scope:

- The **judiciary is considered out-of-scope** for this review not because it is considered less important, but because in the Australian context, the apolitical nature of the judiciary is extremely well-established; for this reason, the range of proposals that have been put forward to reform the judiciary is limited and at the same time, any questions that do arise are typically particularly technical.
- While not in the list above, we note that the media are sometimes treated as political actors;⁴⁶⁰ **we consider the media out-of-scope for**

this review because the scope of reforms that have been put forward is vast and particularly politically contested.

- We considered **reforms to Australia’s federal system to be out-of-scope** given the complex interactions that this raises.

We also excluded from scope institutional reform proposals that on initial investigation either have minimal impact, or no realistic prospect of success, as summarised in Figure 5.

A1.2 Characterising reforms

Almost every institutional reform comes with a broad variety of options and alternatives. For example, in reforming processes for senior public service appointments:

- Who should be involved in appointment and termination processes?
- What criteria should apply?
- Should these processes be entrenched in legislation?
- What exceptions should there be to the standard process, who should be empowered to authorise these exceptions, and how should exceptions be reported?

Some of these design choices would have a profound impact on both impact and feasibility. Views often differ on the optimal design choices. Our task of prioritisation would be unmanageable if we tried to consider the impact and feasibility of every individual design choice. Discerning an expert and political view on the impact and feasibility of reforms (as we do above at Figure 1) depends on those consulted comparing a roughly similar version of each reform.

⁴⁵⁹ Daley (2021), p. 6; Lane (2014), p. 30; March and Olsen (2009), p. 7.

⁴⁶⁰ See, e.g., McChesney and Pickard (2014).

Figure 5: In-scope and out-of-scope reforms

Institution	In-scope reform categories	Out-of-scope reform categories
Constitution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing Constitutional review: e.g. establish a periodic Constitutional review mechanism Four-year terms i.e., amend the <i>Commonwealth Constitution</i> to provide for four-year terms in the House of Representatives Senate reform: e.g. introduce deadlock provisions for joint sittings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific substantive proposals for constitutional review: e.g. reform provisions relating to racial discrimination
Parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent Chamber leaders: e.g. appoint a genuinely independent President of the Senate Parliamentary committees: e.g. allow House of Representatives committees to conduct own-motion inquiries Parliamentary scrutiny and powers: e.g. reform the rules governing Question Time Parliamentary standards and integrity: e.g. establish an MP Code of Conduct Parliamentary approval of large contracts i.e., require that Parliament approve large contracts Fixed parliamentary terms i.e., legislate fixed parliamentary terms Free votes i.e., introduce more free votes in the parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parliamentary accessibility: e.g. allow for remote voting Parliamentary time and resourcing: e.g. ensure an appropriate number of sitting days Miscellaneous parliamentary procedure: e.g. update parliamentary sessional orders Non-government business: e.g. dedicate parliamentary time to discuss non-government business

Institution	In-scope reform categories	Out-of-scope reform categories
Elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Truth in political advertising: e.g. commit political parties to the same standards companies are bound by when they advertise during election campaigns Political donations: e.g. caps on donations Campaign finance: e.g. establish appropriate public funding for campaigning Franchise: e.g. lower the voting age to 16 Use of government advertising: e.g. enhance oversight of government advertising to ensure it is only used for appropriate purposes Voting systems: e.g. introduce multi-member Lower House electorates Other electoral information: e.g. pilot Australian Electoral Commission-issued candidate information packs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turnout: e.g. automatically enrol 18-year-olds Other electoral processes: e.g. provide appropriate resourcing for electoral commissions
Executive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministerial standards: e.g. establish stronger enforcement for a Ministerial Code of Conduct Ministerial advisers: e.g. hire more ministerial advisers from the public service Discretionary grantmaking: e.g. introduce penalties for breach of rules Lobbying: e.g. publish ministerial diaries Executive priorities and commitments: e.g. require governments to table a statement of legislative intent at the start of a parliamentary term FOI: e.g. establish a 'right to know' for information produced by government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other executive accountability: e.g. strengthen governance of delegated legislation

Institution	In-scope reform categories	Out-of-scope reform categories
Public service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of independent experts i.e., establish statutory standing expert bodies in key policy domains to provide independent advice to executive government Senior public service appointments: e.g. consider changes to tenure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public service innovation: e.g. establish The New Innovation Institute – an Australian NESTA Public service capability: e.g. establish an Agency Capability Review Framework MoG changes: e.g. legislate limitations on the frequency of MoG changes
Other independent bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing independent policy institutions i.e., strengthen existing independent policy institutions that build the public evidence base for reforms Integrity bodies: e.g. review thresholds for National Anti-Corruption Commission to commence investigation Long-term and wellbeing policy mechanisms: e.g. create a Commission for Future Interests Parliamentary Budget Office and similar bodies: e.g. establish a 'Parliamentary Policy Office' Inquiries: e.g. adopt optimal approach to Ministerial inquiries (by allowing Ministers to appoint an independent expert to investigate an issue, limiting Royal Commissions to instances where powers of investigation are critical) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
Citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Citizen engagement: e.g. commit to a trial of a citizen jury on a major national issue, or broader participatory processes like participatory budgeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broad measures to increase trust in government and democracy: e.g. anti-polarisation campaigns

Institution	In-scope reform categories	Out-of-scope reform categories
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional training and standards: e.g. establish a Committee on Standards in Public Life Public appointments i.e., establish regulatory arrangements to ensure that public appointments are merit-based and transparent Revolving door i.e., place restrictions on the revolving door between politics and lobbying in Australia Whistle-blowers: e.g. establish a parliamentary whistleblower office Evidence and evaluation: e.g. establish evidence requirements and evaluation standards for all Expenditure Review Committee and Cabinet proposals MP benefits: e.g. reintroduce defined post-service benefits for MPs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Federalism: e.g. appoint an independent Secretariat to develop an agreed forward agenda Governmental transition: e.g. formalise governmental transition arrangements International law and judicial review: e.g. legislate that failure by appointed officials to consider treaties and international law is subject to judicial review Technology governance: e.g. establish a Chief Technologist for Australia Civility: e.g. design programs to promote bipartisanship and civility in parliament Wellbeing: e.g. design programs to support post-MP transition

Consequently, we identified a ‘central case’ for each reform that defines the key design choices that:

- have previously been proposed on the public record (where available);
- reflect options most often preferred by advocates of that reform;
- most improve policy outcomes (on our assessment); and
- maximise feasibility (on our assessment).

We also exercised our judgment as we attempted to balance these criteria.

To make prioritisation manageable we did not attempt to detail every feature of every reform. Instead, we exercised our judgment on which key design choices were likely to significantly affect the reform’s impact and feasibility.

The definition of each reform, and these key design choices, are summarised in Appendix 2. A more detailed definition, and sources are further discussed in the consideration of each reform in the Background Materials. Although we have not provided detailed reasons for why we defined each reform as we did, we have explained the reasoning for the key design features of reforms identified as priorities in Chapter 4.

Views differ on the best design of many of the institutional reforms we have considered. Some may think that with a different design a particular institutional reform would be much higher priority. However, we hope that the definitions that we have selected provide a starting point for discussion. It is open to others to argue that a differently defined version of an institutional reform would have a substantially different priority.

⁴⁶¹ The various values pursued by government are discussed further in Daley (2020), pp.14-24.

⁴⁶² See e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), pp. 40-42; Daley (2021), pp. 39-57.

A1.3 Criteria for prioritising reforms

Our key criteria for prioritising institutional reforms are their impact, evidence base, and feasibility. The sub-dimensions of these criteria are detailed below

A1.3.1 Impact

The main impact of an *institutional* reform tends to be a means to promote subsequent *substantive* policy reforms that directly impact economic growth, health, education, and the other ends of government.⁴⁶¹ Well-designed institutions make good government policy, and therefore good outcomes for people, more likely.⁴⁶² The size of an institutional reform’s impact depends both on *how much* it influences the outcome of particular proposals, and *how many* proposals it influences. This impact on policy proposals also depends on the extent to which the institutional reform is robust against gaming that undermines its original intent. And the impact must also be judged net of any costs that the institutional reform imposes.

Institutional reforms can also have an indirect effect. They may change popular perceptions of government, affecting the relationship between citizens and government. That general relationship matters. In practice governments struggle to implement difficult but worthwhile reform if trust in government is low.⁴⁶³ If trust in government is high, people are more likely to cooperate without coercion, and more likely to support government action even if their first instinct would be to do something else. People are more likely to trust in government if they feel that they have a say in decisions.⁴⁶⁴ Consequently, institutional reforms that increase the *perception* that people can influence decisions have a broader effect. Trust in government is also higher if there is a *perception* that government is not corrupt and acts fairly – a ‘fair go’ may be valued in addition to the substantive outcome.⁴⁶⁵ Consequently, institutional arrangements that

⁴⁶³ Daley (2020), p. 6. OECD (2024), p. 15.

⁴⁶⁴ OECD (2024), p. 48.

⁴⁶⁵ Muers (2020), pp. 37–38.

promote open and fair government can also have a broader impact than simply improving policy decisions.

There is arguably also an intrinsic value to self-participation in governance.⁴⁶⁶ While this view is far from universally accepted, if the act of political participation is seen as an end in itself, then it has even more value than its very valuable contribution as a means to good governance.

Consequently, our analysis of impact assesses each proposed reform against the following sub-dimensions:

- **Depth of influence** on government policy decisions so as to promote the public interest. [Inherent within this assessment is whether the reform requires other substantial action to be taken to be useful. *E.g., it could be argued that a constitutional review mechanism will be of limited utility without civics education*].
- **Breadth of influence** on the total number of government policy decisions so as to promote the public interest.
- **Robustness** so that the reform's contribution to the public interest is not circumvented by gaming and vested interests.
- **Minimal unintended consequences** so that the reform does not negatively affect other outcomes.
- **Impact on citizen trust** in government more generally.
- **Impact on 'governance hot buttons'** – the governance issues that we know citizens value (e.g., a 'level playing field').

A1.3.2 Evidence base

Policy change in the public interest is usually promoted by a robust policymaking process. Better evidence and a better policy process can convince decision makers to act, shift public opinion, shift the balance of

power between interest groups, and increase the probability of successful implementation.⁴⁶⁷ While better evidence is neither necessary nor sufficient for worthwhile reform, it both improves the chances that changes will serve the public interest, and makes adoption more politically feasible (discussed further in the next section).⁴⁶⁸

The key components of a high-quality policy process have been articulated by a variety of sources that are largely consistent, including the NSW Standing Order on evidence-based policy-making, the Evidence Based Policy Research Project, Professor Ken Wiltshire's 'business case' policymaking framework, and Professor Eugene Bardach's 'policymaking pathway'.⁴⁶⁹ These components are the basis for the sub-dimensions that we have used in analysing the evidence base for each institutional reform:

- **Establishment of problem** and need that lays out the institutional, social, or economic problem that we are trying to solve.
- **Identification of reform options** and analysis of their impact that looks methodically at the major policy levers that might help to remedy the identified problem; and analyses their relative merits through economic, legal, qualitative, and costing analysis.
- **Identification of more detailed 'design choices'** and analysis of their impact that considers the major choices within the preferred reform option, and analyses their relative merits through economic, legal, qualitative, and costing analysis.
- **Public consultation**, with both stakeholder organisations and the general public, particularly to understand the public's view on the value judgments inevitably involved in institutional reforms.
- **Public communication**, including preparing and distributing the public-facing case for change.

⁴⁶⁶ Finnis (1979), p. 149; Elster (1986).

⁴⁶⁷ Daley (2021), pp. 27-30.

⁴⁶⁸ Daley (2020), pp. 25-28.

⁴⁶⁹ Evidence Based Policy Research Project (2022); Institute of Public Administration Australia (2012); Bardach (2012).

- **Preparation of detailed legislation**, regulations, or other critical material to support implementation.
- **Reform precedents** in other jurisdictions, which can provide evidence of reform options, design choices, be included in public communication, and provide templates for implementation, and which also provide added confidence that a reform is viable.

A1.3.3 Feasibility

Our assessment of feasibility is informed by Grattan Institute's report, *Prioritising a government's agenda*.⁴⁷⁰ That report argues that the feasibility of a reform – which reflects the costs of the political capital required – depends on the evidence base, political environment, and implementation costs.

In applying this framework to institutional reforms, the key factors in the political environment are the attitudes of the public MPs, and the existence or otherwise of a champion. While the position of interest groups and other participants in the political process still matter, they are less important for institutional reforms which often cut across their more focused interests.

We have summarised implementation issues as legal complexity, administrative complexity, and budgetary costs.

Accordingly, the sub-dimensions that we have used in analysing the feasibility of each institutional reform are:

1. **Public opinion:** Proportion of the public likely to be in favour of the reform, gauged where possible using individual issue polling.
2. **Political position:** Extent to which reform is supported by parties and independents, gauged from the public record (or where no public record is available, having regard to the public record on reforms or issues that are analogous in some way).

⁴⁷⁰ Daley (2020), pp. 25-33.

3. **Existence of a champion:** Whether or not there is a political champion or (less favourably for this purpose) high-profile champion from civil society who is consistently and proactively advocating for the reform to other decision-makers and electors.
4. **Legal complexity:** Complexity of drafting, enacting, and administering any legislative changes required to implement the reform.
5. **Administrative complexity:** Complexity of the rules, procedures and training required to implement the reform (assuming that appropriately qualified personnel can be recruited).
6. **Budgetary cost:** Ongoing annual cost of administering the reform (with any significant upfront costs roughly annualised over the forward estimates).

A1.3.4 Citizen perspective

Citizens' perspectives are incorporated into this framework in a number of ways, although they are not the only driver of priorities.

The citizen's perspective matters because:

- particularly where evidence is lacking, the citizen perspective may be a better guide to the best choice:
 - The wisdom of crowds tends to be a useful guide; and
 - Empirically, government decision-making in accordance with citizen perspectives is often better than the alternatives (not least because it tends to be a bulwark against vested interests);
- acting consistently with citizen perspectives is likely to promote trust in government, which normally increases government effectiveness;
- if political participation is seen as an end in itself,⁴⁷¹ then there is value in citizens participating in political choices about institutions; and

⁴⁷¹ See footnote 466 above.

- if political participation is seen as an end in itself, then how it is pursued, and how it is weighed against other ends enabled by delegation (such as through expertise or freeing up time for other purposes) is itself a value choice that should reflect citizens' values.

Consequently, the prioritisation framework described above incorporates citizens' perspectives in several ways:

- In assessing **impact**, we take into account:
 - the impact on citizen trust; and
 - the impact on 'governance hot buttons'.
- In assessing the **evidence** for a reform, we take into account the extent to which there has been public consultation about the proposal.
- In assessing **feasibility**, we take into account public opinion (i.e., the extent of popular support for the reform).

We have also considered reforms that themselves aim to improve citizen participation such as citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting.

We did not rely on popular views of relative impact, feasibility, or overall priority, because public polling is not available about how citizens perceive the relative importance of institutional reforms (in contrast to regular polling about which issues voters consider most important in an election).

A1.4 Assessing and weighting criteria

Our criteria for assessing each sub-dimension of impact, evidence, and feasibility are indicated in section 6.4.

We did not attempt to weight consistently the sub-dimensions of impact, evidence, and feasibility. Such precision is not justified by the methodology, and we have exercised judgment in combining these sub-dimensions to make an overall assessment of the impact, evidence, and feasibility of each reform.

Impact criteria

Extent of influence on key policy outcomes	Breadth	Impact on citizen trust	Impact on what citizens care about	Robustness	Minimal adverse consequences	Overall impact
Strongly shapes decision-making on salient policy issues; large scope to improve	Affects >75% of proposed legislation, new policy proposals or decisions	Strongly increases citizen trust	Strongly impacts key citizen concern (e.g., corruption)	Almost always effective for intended purpose	Negligible adverse consequences	Very high
Moderately shapes decision-making on salient policy issues; significant scope to improve	Affects 50-75% of proposed legislation, new policy proposals or decisions	Moderately increases citizen trust	Moderately impacts key citizen concern	Mostly effective for intended purpose	Some very minor adverse consequences	High
Strongly shapes decision-making on less salient policy issues, or may have minor impact on decision-making on salient policy issues; moderate scope to improve	Affects 20-50% of proposed legislation, new policy proposals or decisions	Somewhat impacts citizen trust	May have small impact on key citizen concern	Usually effective for intended purpose	Some relatively minor adverse consequences	Moderate
Shapes decision-making on salient policy issues to some degree; some scope to improve	Affects 10-20% of proposed legislation, new policy proposals or decisions	Minimally impacts citizen trust	Marginally impacts less established citizen concern	Some evasion, but still some impact on intended purpose	Significant adverse consequences	Limited
Limited impact on policy issues; little scope to improve	Affects 5-10% of proposed legislation, new policy proposals or decisions	Doesn't impact citizen trust	Doesn't impact citizen concern	Largely evaded or ineffective	Potentially major adverse consequences	Low
Almost never shapes decision-making on policy issues	Affects very little proposed legislation, new policy proposals or decisions	Actively decreases citizen trust	Significantly negatively impacts citizen concern	Not effective in practice to change outcomes	Major adverse consequences	Negligible or negative

Evidence criteria

Problem and drivers	Options & their impact	Detailed design choices & impact	Public consultation	Public communication	Detailed legislation and/or policy	Implementation precedent	Overall evidence
Comprehensive, high-quality sources (e.g., academic literature)			Comprehensive, deliberative public consultation including where appropriate, active solicitation of citizen views	Advocacy campaign supported by multiple leading stakeholders and/or politicians	Bill or policy drafted, supported by extensive consultation, and brought before Parliament	Implemented in other Australian jurisdictions or previously in Australia	Very strong
Missing minor pieces of analysis or research; analysis could be more rigorous			Open consultation process: e.g. parliamentary inquiry	Advocacy campaign, supported by multiple leading stakeholders	Bill or policy drafted but not supported by extensive consultation	Implemented in other international Westminster jurisdictions	Strong
Missing one or two significant pieces of analysis; methodology could be more rigorous			Targeted consultation with key stakeholders; representative and relatively independent	Selective advocacy, supported by prominent champions from politics and/or civil society	Bill or policy being drafted	Analogous reforms implemented in other Australian or comparable jurisdictions	Moderate
Missing multiple pieces of analysis; significant problems with analysis			Targeted consultation with key stakeholders; not representative or independent	Some piecemeal commentary (e.g., op-eds)	Analogous legislation or policy in other comparable jurisdictions	Some analogous reforms implemented elsewhere	Limited
Negligible analysis			Limited or confidential consultation	One or two recent op-eds or similar	Some analogous legislation or policy in less comparable jurisdictions	Little comparable precedent	Very limited
Analysis may be misleading			No consultation	Hardly any publicly accessible material	Drafting not yet in prospect	No implementation precedent	Negligible or misleading

Feasibility criteria

Budgetary cost	Public opinion	Political position	Administrative and legal complexity	Existence of a champion	Overall feasibility
Net budget positive (generates savings)	Public strongly in favour (~80-100%)	Bipartisan and cross-bench support	Low implementation risk and requires minimal legal change	Multiple parliamentary champions from multiple parts of the political spectrum	Very high
Negligible (<\$5m/yr)	Majority in favour (50-80%)	One major party and some cross-bench support. Opposition from other major party not entrenched	Moderate implementation risk or requires significant legal change	Several champions from within parliament, but from only one part of the political spectrum	High
Limited (<\$5-50m/yr)	Public indifferent (40-50%)	One major party could support, and cross-bench supports	Moderate implementation risk and requires significant legal change	At least one champion from within parliament	Moderate
Moderate (\$50-100m/yr)	Majority opposed (25-40%)	Neither major party likely to support, and some cross-bench support	High implementation risk or requires complex legal change	Several champions from civil society	Limited
High (\$100m-\$1b/yr)	Public strongly opposed (10-25%)	Neither major party likely to support, and cross-bench support unclear	High implementation risk or requires Constitutional change	One or two champions from civil society	Low
Very high (>\$1b/yr)	Almost no support (0-10%)	All parties and cross-bench actively oppose	Administratively or legally unfeasible	No champions from parliament or civil society	Unfeasible

Appendix 2: Key reasons for prioritisation

This table summarises the key features of proposed reforms, and our assessment of their impact, evidence base, and feasibility. More detail, including references, is included in the Background Materials that accompany this report.

A2.1 High priority reforms for near-term action

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Political donations and campaign finance Lower donation and expenditure caps to reduce major party and incumbency advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Political donations significantly affect perceptions (and to some extent, reality) of undue influence and therefore quality of policy making and trust in government ✓ Legislated rules likely to undermine competitive elections by entrenching incumbency and party advantage, and contributing to public concerns about a 'level playing field' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Need for controls on donations and campaign finance well documented ✓ Key elements of further reform required in Australia broadly recognised and well defined (particularly loopholes for major party donations and nominated entities) ~ Further work needed on campaign finance caps, particularly the interaction between overall and individual seat spending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Further reforms align with principles with strong public support, including concern about a level playing field and potential influence of big interests over government ✓ Significant public concern about recent legislated rules ✗ Major parties likely to strongly resist important elements of further reforms ✓ Reforms championed by independents and multiple civil society organisations
Secretary appointment and termination Legislate more independent appointment processes and restrict grounds for termination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Important foundation to increase independence and promote better advice ✓ Affects broad range of policy portfolios, more than 185,000 Australian Public Service employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Strong expert view, and Robodebt symbolic, that pendulum has swung too far from Australian Public Service independence to responsiveness ✓ Good evidence that better appointment and termination processes promote more independent advice ✓ Options, design choices well-researched, and strong precedent from other OECD countries for most elements of proposed changes (e.g., NZ) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Polling limited but public likely to support given polling in support of more independent government board appointments ~ Politically divided: Coalition resists; ALP has largely implemented in practice but hasn't committed; cross-bench likely to support ✓ Thodey report supportive ~ No active champion (although Sophie Scamps MP championing broader public appointments reform)
Fixed three-year terms Fixed, three-year parliamentary terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Could level playing field for elections ✓ Could reduce procedural compromise and disruption to planning processes affecting wide range of policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Problems with variable terms well-documented in theory and anecdotally ✓ Strong precedents for effective implementation in state jurisdictions ~ Some design choices to be resolved but good analysis from state committee reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Publicly supported (58-63% in favour) ✓ Supported by Greens and ALP; other cross-bench likely to support ~ Some concerns about constitutionality, although legislation likely to be effective in practice

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Civics education Mandatory minimum hours, curriculum for Years 11/12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ School students have low and falling levels of civics knowledge; adult knowledge patchy ✓ Civics education improves knowledge, attitudes, and participation; strongly correlates with trust in democracy ✓ Prevention tends to be best cure for misinformation ~ School interventions only affect entire electorate over a long time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Poor current civics understanding, teaching quality, and options for interventions well-documented ✓ Good evidence of positive impacts of high quality school civics education ~ More work required on designing interventions but several no regrets steps ~ Few ideas on how to provide civics education after formal education completed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Strong prospects for public support, although polling data limited ✓ Largely overlapping support from major parties and cross-bench ~ Significant implementation challenge to make room in school curriculum, implement national approach and to train teachers to deliver effectively
Parliamentary committees Require proportionate membership and chairs, and government response to reports within four months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Positive impact of committees as a forum for evidence-informed, multi-partisan discussion of key issues widely acknowledged: they undertake a large volume of work (e.g. 712 reports issued in the 43rd Parliament); and 2010 committee reforms facilitated one of the most legislatively productive periods ✓ Other Westminster parliaments have stronger committee systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Some obvious improvements have multiple precedents (proportionate lower house committee membership across the board; integrity committee chairs; legislatively required responses) ~ No comprehensive parliamentary review of system and benchmarks in past 15 years (although three recent or forthcoming expert reports have made thorough recommendations for reform) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Championed by crossbench ✓ Polling limited, but public likely to support given contribution to level playing field, accountability ✓ Major parties may resist, but 2010 establishes precedent for agreement to reform
Private MP Bills (PMBs) Allow minority of Selection Committee to schedule votes on PMBs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Currently, PMBs almost never debated or voted on (no PMBs voted on in 46th Parliament), so marginal improvement could be significant ✓ Significant breadth; nearly 90 bills introduced in 46th Parliament across a wide range of issues of high public interest ✓ Important tool for enabling agenda-setting that reflects proportionality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Some precedent for requiring PMB time in the House (although whether or not voted on still relied on government support) ✓ Specific design choices proposed in recent report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Polling unclear; public may be indifferent (but likely greater support in crossbench and opposition electorates) ✓ Crossbench likely to strongly support ✓ Major parties likely to oppose but precedent for reform as price of power in 2010
MP resourcing Remove Prime Ministerial discretion and increase personal staffing levels for independents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Significant impact on quality of crossbench legislative interventions (much more important if hold balance of power) ✓ Significant impact on ability of crossbench to add new proposals to public agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ PM discretion over staffing an anomaly relative to other jurisdictions ~ More work to be done to define alternative process and principles for allocation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Unlikely to be a major public concern, although intuitive resistance to increasing public service numbers ~ Major parties resistant ✓ Championed by independents

A2.2 Priorities for longer term research and advocacy

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Ministerial advisers Require minimum of 50% to be drawn from public service; legislate code of conduct; apply accountability mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Significant and growing impact across broad range of issues on policy advice, executive accountability and professionalisation of parties ~ Widespread but disputed view that reform would improve long-term policy advice ~ Some concerns (not widely shared) that greater accountability inappropriate given principles of ministerial accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Good evidence of impact on policy approach, executive accountability, and party dynamics ✓ Strong set of options identified by multiple materials with good precedents for most reforms in other international jurisdictions ~ Some more work to be done to craft workable, coherent package 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Major parties likely to strongly resist significant reforms ✓ Likely aligns with crossbench support for independent public appointments ~ Limited polling, and public not particularly engaged ✓ Supported by the Thodey Review
Four-year terms Amend Constitution to require fixed four-year terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ In theory should increase ability to plan and execute coherent longer-term agenda ~ Debatable whether longer terms increase democratic accountability, although requirement to implement through referendum provides some comfort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Evidence is typically based on stakeholder views and theoretical arguments ✗ Despite adoption in most States, limited empirical evidence that four-year terms have substantially improved long-term policy making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Requires referendum which is likely to struggle as public support only 51% as at March 2024 ✓ Tentative bipartisan support could provide foundation for long-term advocacy
Deliberative democracy Run deliberative democracy process on well-defined specific issues that are politically intractable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Significant potential impact on democratic engagement for participants ✓ Not yet attempted in Australia at the national level (via a government-commissioned process) but could improve consensus on targeted well-defined issues that are politically intractable, based on international examples ✓ Can provide a forum in which citizens consider issues from a longer-term perspective, with reference to balanced evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Growing body of international examples of successful impact on targeted issues ✓ Significant examples of domestic application at local and state levels ~ More work to be done in Australian context to pilot and evaluate strategies to engage public in process and outcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Promising levels of public support (~57% probably or definitely support in 2017) ~ Limited support from major parties, although crossbench has championed ~ Successful implementation depends on developing good models of public engagement
New independent expert bodies Establish new independent expert advisory bodies for targeted policy areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Independent expert bodies inherently take longer term view, and in practice have significant impact on parliamentarians and reducing influence of vested interests ~ Incremental impact depends on scope, mandate and design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Options for new bodies (what policy areas, what powers, and how designed) understudied in Australia ✓ Some useful UK work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Crossbench likely to support depending on remit (e.g., Allegra Spender championed tax reform commission) ~ Moderate cost to establish new body (depending on size: e.g. \$4M for Australian Law Reform Commission to \$76M for Productivity Commission) ~ Public support for existing bodies varies; support for new body depends on remit ~ Successful implementation dependent on strong appointments process amongst other things

A2.3 Phase 2 reforms

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Public appointments Legislate independent appointment processes for all public bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Would affect large number of public bodies, including several with integrity/monitory functions (e.g., ANAO), although less broad and salient than APS generally ~ Concerns that better appointment process may be subverted (as with ABC) unless Ministerial overrides not permitted ✗ Termination processes generally already satisfactory, confined to defined limited grounds ✗ Generally, stronger baseline already in place for terminations (e.g., greater checks on removal of Commissioners in the Productivity Commission) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Incidence of political appointments well-documented ✓ Detailed options and design choices identified ✓ Transparent and Quality Public Appointments Bill 2023 (Cth) drafted ~ Briggs Review intended to examine public sector boards, but not yet published ~ Review mechanism needed to understand any loopholes and minimise any unintended consequences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Strong public support (68% think government should be limited to appointing candidates shortlisted by an independent selection panel) ✓ Sophie Scamps championing with draft bill ✗ Major parties likely to resist
Discretionary grant-making Legislate requirements for publication of criteria, advice from officials on the merits of grants relative to guidelines, reporting of exceptions to parliament; establish parliamentary oversight committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ New Commonwealth Grant Rules and Principles likely to reduce historic abuses ✓ Issues remain because code not legislated, allows for a greater reporting lag than End Pork Barrelling Bill, does not apply to grants made via States and Territories or through a statutory authority, and is not overseen by a parliamentary committee ✗ Grant rules would affect material spending of about \$8b/yr, but impact on policy outcomes would be marginal because the net impact on welfare of a grant to one recipient rather than another may be limited ✗ Partisan allocation of funding does not seem to have much impact on electoral outcomes ✓ Better process could improve public trust because it could reduce widespread perception of abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Good evidence that governments disproportionately make grants to own seats ✓ Relatively comprehensive set of options and design choices identified by research and academic papers, with Bill drafted ~ More work needed to design mechanisms to deal with election promises and bailouts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Strong public support for reform (81% consider grants in marginal seats to win votes to be corrupt conduct) ✓ Strong support from the cross-bench ✓ ALP has already introduced guidelines (but not legislation) to improve processes ✓ Draft bill introduced (although does not address election promises)

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Ministerial inquiries Provide models of inquiry with powers to call evidence, but with less formality than Royal Commissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Alternative models (particularly bodies with powers to gather evidence that are not royal commissions) may make more useful recommendations ✗ Nothing to stop government commissioning different forms of inquiry when it wants to do so (although currently no framework for conferring power to collect evidence), and Australian Law Reform Commission consultation ultimately didn't recommend legislating circumstances in which to use other forms of inquiry ✗ Governments may prefer to use Royal Commissions (even where inappropriate) because of brand recognition, and preference for a process that is inherently slow when it is a controversial issue ✗ Better inquiry format would ultimately have limited impact – a government could still ignore inconvenient recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Good evidence that Royal Commissions often have limited impact, particularly on policy-focused inquiries e.g., a recent study found that 35 royal commissions with a policy focus ultimately had little policy influence ~ Australian Law Reform Commission's 2009 consultation extensively examined potential legal models, but two-tiered legal proposal doesn't address broader suite of models or what model should be used when 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Public may support alternative models because they are cheaper ✓ Crossbench may support and major parties may be prepared to support
Lobbying Publish Ministerial diaries; require registration of in-house lobbyists; limit revolving door	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ While lobbying is an important part of democracy disproportionate influence is possible, real, and breeds distrust in government ✗ Not clear that the proposed reforms would have a strong impact on behaviour, outcomes, or public perceptions – e.g. reporting may be thin, and many exemptions can still be used to limit available information ✗ Proposed reforms would also allow continued lobbying through less regulated channels: e.g. astroturfing, corridor meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Good data on prevalence of lobbying activity, and qualitative evidence on impact of lobbying on major issues like sugar consumption, alcohol ~ Limited evidence that specific regulatory controls on lobbying produce better outcomes ✓ Strong analysis of options and design choices ~ Limited evidence that greater regulatory controls in NSW, Queensland, and Victorian have significantly altered outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Does not seem to be direct opinion polling, but strong public interest in 2024 Senate Inquiry, and aligns with public concerns about vested interests ✓ Strong support from the cross-bench ✗ Major parties likely to resist, based on deferral of central recommendations to a review in 2024 Senate inquiry ✓ Several champions, including Monique Ryan and David Pocock

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Constitutional review body Establish ongoing body to make recommendations on Constitutional amendments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Not clear that ongoing process would increase prospects of successful referenda (given failure of 1988 referenda despite Constitutional Commission and Convention) and in general, high risk that referendum proposals ultimately fail ~ While a range of substantive proposals for reform have been put forward, whether they would promote the public interest is contested 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Clear that there is no regular or systematic process for constitutional review ~ Lack of process limits potential to change the Constitution to meet the needs and interests of contemporary Australians ✓ Significant precedents and recent analysis for systematic process of constitutional review ✗ More analysis needed on relative merits of committee vs commission, and on key design choices, particularly how to promote citizen input, and how to influence public opinion ~ Not much evidence on whether different mechanism would increase prospects of referendum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Inquiry recommendation for ongoing review appeared to have bipartisan support in Parliamentary committee, although standing body not clearly supported ✓ Public may be less averse to constitutional reform than is commonly assumed, provided sufficient background information is provided ~ No current politicians actively championing
Government advertising Limit use of taxpayer-funded advertising for political purposes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Limited impact on policy outcomes because advertising typically has little effect on voting preferences, and total advertising spend is small relative to total government spending ~ May improve trust in government as many voters cynical about government advertising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Rigorous analysis demonstrates the problem (quarter of taxpayer money spent on politicised campaigns) ✓ Most key options and detailed design choices laid out (e.g., legislate, confine campaigns to behaviour change) ~ More could be done to analyse pre-election ban option ✓ Useful UK precedent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Crossbench-aligned, but no current champion ✓ 85% Australians agree that taxpayer-funded advertising should only be used to inform ✗ Major parties likely to oppose as government advertising inherently an advantage for major parties relative to other politicians
Existing expert bodies Increase powers to initiate inquiries; increase resourcing for communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Existing bodies generally reasonably resourced, so additional funds may only have incremental impact ~ Some existing institutions close to realpolitik limits of intruding into core executive government functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Limited work to systematically document current resourcing, powers and needs ~ Limited literature on what works in the Australian context, although more commentary on some bodies such as the Productivity Commission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Independent institutions (e.g. Australian Electoral Commission, CSIRO, Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, Productivity Commission) generally have strong public support ~ Crossbench-aligned but major parties may oppose

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Truth in political advertising Legislate to prohibit misleading statements of fact (as in SA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Limited impact if restrictions confined to statements of fact, and broader reforms likely to have constitutional problems ✗ Tighter restrictions would be relatively easily to evade by framing ideas as opinions or predictions ~ Has not produced significant unintended consequences in other jurisdictions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Strong analysis of options and broader alternatives (e.g., bans on materially deceptive AI-generated audio), very detailed analysis of design choices (e.g., substance, form, temporality, materiality) ✓ Evidence from SA experience that impact is relatively small, notwithstanding cultural shifts in degree of scrutiny of wording of political ads as a matter of course ✓ Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Communications) Bill 2024 drafted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 9 in 10 Australians believe Australia should pass TiPA laws ✓ Labor promised introduction prior to 2025 election, Coalition has indicated in-principle support, multiple cross-benchers have consistently supported
Whistleblowers Establish a Whistleblower Protection Authority; clarify immunities from prosecution for preparatory acts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Commonwealth already has strong baseline for whistleblower protection compared to other jurisdictions ✓ Whistleblowers can still suffer serious repercussions under current rules ~ A Whistleblower Protection Authority could in theory encourage more reporting and action on public sector corruption, but impact in practice isn't clear ✗ There are substantial collateral impacts: broader protections increase the risk of whistleblower rules being used inappropriately 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Significant analysis and advocacy from academia and civil society about the nature of the problem and potential solutions ✓ Attorney-General's Department has undertaken extensive consultation on second stage of reforms ✓ Model exists with <i>Whistleblower Protection Authority Bill 2025</i> and design principles for Whistleblower Protection Authority ~ Questions remain about likely impact, other options, and trade-offs with other interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 79% of public in favour of creating Whistleblower Protection Authority ✓ Letter of support from 30 MPs to Albanese government; ALP supportive in principle of further reform ✓ Crossbench pushing for reform ✓ Consistent research and advocacy from multiple civil society organisations
Future Generations Commissioner Establish a Commissioner and legislation to require consideration of future generations' interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Impact of Welsh Commissioner in securing concrete policy change appears to be limited (e.g., its most recent impact statement was focused on processes rather than substantive policy change) ~ More potential in identifying concrete drivers of intergenerational inequity (e.g., tax, productivity, housing, climate, health) and exploring more direct mechanisms for tackling these issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Problem of intergenerational inequity is clearly established, and political drivers of short-termism are also well-studied and documented ~ Better evidence of actual impact (in Wales) and potential impact needed ~ Would be helpful to systematically examine broader range of mechanisms for futures work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ ~78% of public want to see Future Generations Commissioner established ✓ Support from a range of advocates across parties, and championed by Sophie Scamps MP

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Question Time Disallow questions about alternative approaches; ensure minimum number of constituency, opposition, and non-aligned questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Question time remains an important accountability mechanism with significant reach and visibility ✗ Rules to encourage better answers likely to be largely circumvented in practice ✗ Feasible changes to the nature of MP questions likely to have only marginal impact on policy outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ House of Representatives Procedure Committee (2019) considered problem, potential options and design choices and recommended changes ✓ Recent work published by Susan McKinnon Foundation recommended similar reforms ~ Not much analysis of ultimate policy impact of reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Indications of strong public support for reform from inquiry survey (though not representative) ✓ Crossbench has championed reform ~ 2019 committee recommendations were ultimately bipartisan, although major parties do not appear to actively support
National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) reform Allow public hearings even if not 'exceptional circumstances'; bring forward statutory review of the NACC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ More frequent public hearings (broader than in 'exceptional circumstances') may increase citizen trust through transparency, and strengthen incentives for public officials and politicians to behave well ~ Given baseline of independence, additional features (public hearings strengthened inspector powers) may only marginally improve administration and policy ~ Ultimately NACC primarily deals with the "pointy end" of corruption and only incidentally affects broader questions of policy, governance and institutional reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ State jurisdictions provide good precedents for more frequent public hearings although some argue their scope is too wide ✓ Strong case in principle for changing 'exceptional circumstances' test ~ Only anecdotal evidence that the statutory review should be expedited ~ Proposed broadening of NACC inspector powers requires clearer design choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 67% of public say hearings should be held when in public interest ✗ Attempts to broaden circumstances for public hearings have previously failed ✓ Helen Haines MP championing reform
FOI Increase resourcing to reduce backlog; require greater proactive disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Clear demand for reforms to reduce existing backlog, with more than 2,200 outstanding FOI reviews as of February 2024 (half more than 12 months old) ✓ FOI disclosures have uncovered some salient issues (e.g. sports rorts, mining influence on environmental reform) ~ However, FOI disclosures inherently ad hoc, so broader FOI requirements will still only provide ad hoc transparency; it may be better to require more proactive disclosure of defined information (e.g. discretionary grant criteria and allocation) ✗ Strong doubts about impact of broadening exemptions: many claim it would discourage written advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Good quantitative evidence about backlog per Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee (2023) ✓ Options for resourcing, operating model and review timeframe broadly canvassed ~ Options relating to proactive disclosure not addressed in detail by 2023 inquiry. ✗ Many design choices for reform not yet defined or translated into draft legislation or policy ~ Evidence of collateral impact of requiring greater disclosure hard to obtain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Limited public confidence in current system (only 20% confident that FOI gives Australians access to info entitled to) ✓ Cross-bench are strong advocates (with former Sen Rex Patrick championing reform) ~ ALP MPs called for comprehensive reform in dissenting parliamentary report in 2023; Coalition view not clear

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Electoral information packs Introduce Australian Electoral Commission-issued candidate information packs for elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Provision of electoral information packs is unlikely to change the nature and quality of candidates' communications about their policy because it's hard to effectively police quality and contents ✗ May have limited impact on voting decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Good argument in principle that democracy depends on informed decisions\ ✗ However limited evidence that information packs affect voting much ✓ Some precedent in other jurisdictions (e.g. Victoria) ~ Limited work on other options, key design choices (e.g., timing, format, oversight, enforcement) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Difficult to predict public opinion ~ Difficult to predict view of crossbench and major parties

A2.4 Lower priority reforms

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Voting age Lower the voting age to 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Inherently small impact on overall electoral outcomes because small proportion of electorate ~ May have marginal impacts on younger voter engagement and trust, but likely only if coupled with high quality civics education and registration ✓ Strong rights arguments in favour of reform ✓ Limited unintended consequences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Lower youth turnout and declining traditional political participation well-documented ~ Significant academic literature on impacts in international jurisdictions, but mostly in jurisdictions without compulsory voting (or optional voting for 16- and 17-year-olds) ~ More work to be done on potential impact if combined with other initiatives such as civics education ~ Greens have introduced several bills (for optional 16-17 year-old voting) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ 86% Australians oppose ✓ Make it 16 campaign is advocating for reform ~ Mixed political attitudes: Labor supports if voting compulsory; Greens support if voting optional; Monique Ryan MP and Stephen Bates MP championing; other crossbench attitudes may vary
Governance Commission Establish independent expert commission to issue advisory public reports on institutional reforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Recommendations would promote institutional reform agenda itself ✗ Recommendations likely to be ignored unless strongly supported by civil society ✗ Independent not-for-profit may be more effective because vested interests less able to control agenda, and body would have greater ability to influence public opinion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Absence of institutional reform body well recognised and models proposed ~ Models of independent advisory body need to be considered in detail, as well as detailed design choices (e.g., composition, agenda-setting, referral mechanisms) ✓ Precedents in Queensland Electoral and Administrative Review Commission, Canada & Scotland 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Crossbench likely aligned (e.g. based on support for bodies like NACC, but major parties unlikely to support) ✗ Not likely to gain strong public support without strong political / civil society push
Free votes Change parliamentary convention so there are more free votes in parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Likely won't make much difference as many MPs likely to vote down party lines anyway ~ May not increase trust much as likely to focus on moral/conscience issues where MP positions more likely to be influenced by personal position than constituency view 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Little literature that analyses other options, or detailed design choices ~ Some precedent from UK, but limited applicability in Australia where back-benchers have higher chances of promotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Likely to be resisted by major parties ✗ Very hard in practice to prevent a party imposing a de facto direction ✗ No current political champion, although some civil society proponents

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
House of Representatives proportional representation Introduce mixed-member proportional representation for elections to the House of Reps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Moderate impact on proportionality and representation of voter preferences, noting Senate already provides proportionate representation * Significant reduction in local connection of MPs * Can further strengthen party leader influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Large literature about theoretical advantages and disadvantages in the light of basic principles * Many non-trivial design choices to be worked through (e.g., balance between representational and 'list' seats) ✓ Precedent from other jurisdictions (including New Zealand) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Independents likely to strongly oppose ~ Coalition likely to strongly oppose, but ALP may support, and Greens likely to support ~ Would not require constitutional amendment, but unlikely to win popular support * Limited champions from civil society * Significant cost to educate, train citizens on system
Parliamentary Policy Office Establish a Parliamentary Policy Office (PPO) to provide confidential advice to MPs on proposed policy initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Parliamentary research services already provide factual analysis to support decision-making * Will be difficult for strictly independent parliamentary service to provide useful advice on controversial policy issues * Policy proposals with limited evidence typically motivated by political reasons rather than lack of access to evidence, so PPO unlikely to have big impact on policy outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ More analysis needed on actual demand from parliamentarians ~ More analysis needed comparing Parliamentary Policy Office to other options and of design choices (e.g., remit, prioritisation criteria etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Difficult to predict public support, although may be support on grounds of more evidence-based policy ✓ Crossbench may have appetite given limited resourcing; may be some appetite from major parties
Executive priorities and commitments Require Government to table statement of legislative intent at start of parliamentary term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Difficult to see how rules could be designed to create stronger incentives for laying out policy priorities than existing mechanisms (e.g., Governor-General's Speech), or for adhering to promises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Evidence of problem is weak – reasonable evidence suggests promises are regularly kept * Limited analysis of current state, options or design choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Limited public opinion data ~ May be crossbench-aligned ~ Unlikely to attract strong support from parties
Independent Chamber leaders Make offices of Speaker of House and President of Senate quasi-judicial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ultimate impact on policy likely marginal without further reform to procedural rules * Direct engagement with parliamentary proceedings is limited, so unlikely to affect trust in government much 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Limited rigorous analysis of whether Presiding officers biased, or the impact of bias ~ More analysis required of alternative mechanisms (e.g. a government member who severs party ties, or a non-government member) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 50% of Australians think Senate should choose an independent or minor party senator to be President, 60% think a 2/3 majority should elect the Speaker (although unlikely to garner significant public attention) ~ Crossbench may support * Parties unlikely to support

Reform	Impact	Evidence base	Feasibility
Deadlock procedure Allow government to identify Senate-blocked measures to put to joint sitting post-election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Limited impact as Senate has not been a key blocker for many major reforms ✗ Would expand executive power by reducing Senate leverage to pursue amendments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ General consensus that current double dissolution procedure for deadlocks is dysfunctional ~ Australian literature discusses three significant options, but many design choices not yet worked through ~ Options of mediation or conference committee (e.g., US, Germany) warrant further analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Would require referendum, with limited prospects of success ~ Public attitude unclear ✗ Minor parties likely to oppose ~ Coalition has been strongest advocate in recent years although ALP has historically been interested in reform to weaken the Senate
MP benefits Reintroduce defined parliamentary superannuation scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ May undermine public trust given unpopularity with electorate ✗ Unclear whether increasing benefits would reduce revolving door, and unlikely to impact other governance outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Little evidence – and inherently hard to show – impact on incentives to enter politics or choice of post-political career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Likely to be very unpopular with the electorate, and inherently high profile ✗ Likely material cost relative to total remuneration of parliamentarians

Appendix 3: Other reforms raised in interviews

A number of other reforms that have not been central to institutional reform discussions over the past decade were raised by one or two experts in the course of our interviews, as outlined in Appendix 4. We did not consider these in detail because our initial assessment is that they are outside our scope, or would have less impact, or be less feasible, than the reforms we have considered in more detail. Nevertheless many would benefit from additional consideration and/or advocacy, particularly from civil society.

A number of reforms were **outside our scope**, which focuses on changes to parliamentary and executive institutions, including:

- Ongoing mechanisms to review programs and services to cut back wasteful expenditure;
- Standing body to regulate misinformation/disinformation in the media; and
- A Human Rights Charter (which in practice effectively transfers decision-making power from parliament to courts).

Other reforms would be good outcomes, but we **struggled to identify government levers** that would promote them, including:

- Party preselection processes that involve substantially more people than members of local branches;
- Promoting greater adherence to existing political conventions; and
- A philanthropically funded standing citizens' assembly on federal issues.⁴⁷²
- Adult civics education⁴⁷³

⁴⁷² See Gruen (2023)

⁴⁷³ Noted in Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (2025), p. 83, although this did not the potential of a comprehensive media literacy strategy for adult populations, particularly for CALD communities and other vulnerable groups (p. 95).

In our view, some reforms are **unlikely to make substantial positive difference** to policy outcomes or trust in government, including

- Term limits for parliamentarians (the available evidence suggests there are significant adverse consequences⁴⁷⁴);
- Election manifestos
- Leader debates with standing rules and procedures

A number might be worthwhile, but the **evidence base is so thin** in an Australian context, that it was not possible to assess them, including:

- Reducing campaign funding to MPs with more advisers and personal staff
- Power of local electors to recall the MP and effectively force a by-election
- Requiring publication of regulatory impact statements before proposals are considered by the Expenditure Review Committee

Some were **particularly detailed**, and so might be worthwhile, but required more complex investigation to determine potential impacts and feasibility

- Allowing the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission to initiate its own market studies; and
- Revised processes to ensure that delegated legislation is not effectively exempted from parliamentary oversight.

⁴⁷⁴ Miller et al. (2018), p. 575: term limits can reduce elected officials' incentive to focus on the long-term consequences of policy decisions and term-limited governors in the US are associated with higher levels of taxes, spending and borrowing costs and lower economic growth.

Appendix 4: List of interviewees

A4.1 Expert interviewees

Category	Name	Role or former role
Public servants	Glyn Davis AC	Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
	Terry Moran AC	Former Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
	Ian Watt AC	Former Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
	Dr Gordon de Brouwer PSM	APS Commissioner
	Peter Woolcott AO	Former Australian Public Service Commissioner
Leaders of regulators and public authorities	Danielle Wood	Chair, Productivity Commission
	Rod Sims AO	Former Chair, Australian Competition and Consumer Commission
	Dr Catherine Williams	Executive Director, Centre for Public Integrity
	Iain Walker	Executive Director, The newDemocracy Foundation
	Prof Susan Harris Rimmer	Founder, EveryGen Coalition
	Saffron Zomer	Director, Australian Democracy Network
	Dr Nicholas Gruen	Lateral Economics
	Dr Aruna Sathanapally	CEO, Grattan Institute
	Bill Browne	Director, Australia Institute Democracy and Accountability Program
	Innes Willox	CEO, Australian Industry Group
	Liana Downey	CEO, Blueprint Institute
Academics	Prof Gabrielle Appleby	Professor of Law, UNSW
	Assoc Prof Yee-Fui Ng	Associate Professor of Law, Monash University
	Prof Anne Twomey	Professor of Law, University of Sydney
	Prof Andrew Podger AO	Professor of Public Policy, ANU
	Prof Ian McAllister	Distinguished Professor of Political Science, ANU
	Prof Cheryl Saunders AO	Laureate Professor Emeritus of Law, University of Melbourne
	Assoc Prof Aaron Martin	Associate Professor in Pol-Sci-Res Methods, University of Melbourne
	Prof Alan Fenna	Professor of Public Policy, Curtin University
Former politicians	The Hon. Arthur Sinodinos	Former Minister for Health, Minister for Industry
	Nick Greiner AC	Former Premier of NSW
	The Hon Maxine McKew AM	Former Member for Bennelong
International experts	Jill Rutter	Senior Fellow, Institute for Government

A4.2 Political interviewees

Category	Name	Role or former role
ALP	The Hon. Milton Dick MP	Speaker, House of Representatives
Coalition	The Hon. Paul Fletcher MP	Manager of Opposition Business, House of Representatives
Independents	Ms Kate Chaney MP	N/A
	Ms Zoe Daniel MP	N/A
	Dr Helen Haines MP	N/A
	Ms Dai Le MP	N/A
	Dr Sophie Scamps MP	N/A
	Ms Allegra Spender MP	N/A
	Ms Zali Steggall OAM, MP	N/A

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