

Podcast 21 - Federal Government in Australia

by Rob McCormack - Friday, August 16, 2013

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Learn English while learning about daily life in Australia, with Rob McCormack

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Hi,

Who makes the decisions in Australia? I am talking about the big decisions about our economy, our taxes, our defence forces, our schools, our hospitals, our roads, our laws, our immigration – just to name a few. It's the government of course, the politicians in the government. Sometimes I don't agree with their decisions. In Australia you get the opportunity to vote for a new Australian Federal government about every 3 years. If you don't agree with government decisions, or you don't like what they are planning to do, or are not happy about how they are running the country, you can vote for someone else at the next election. That's what democracy is all about – it's the people who choose who will run the country.

In this podcast, I would like to tell you something about politics and how our democracy works in Australia. I must say I'm a great fan of our democracy. It's not perfect, and I don't always like who wins the election, but I believe it is a fair system and a good one.

Australia is a federation of 6 States and 2 Territories. Before 1901, there were 6 independent states and each was a separate colony of Britain, with its own government. There was no Australian government. In 1899 and 1900, the people in each state voted in a referendum. A referendum is where all the voters answer a question, either Yes or No. The question was whether or not the States should join to become one nation. There was a majority Yes vote in each state. A majority means more than half. In 1901, Australia's Federal government was created. That's when Australia became a nation. Each state and territory today still has its own government which manages certain aspects of Australian life, while Australia's Federal government looks after the big things at the national level.

Australia, like other countries, has a constitution. This is a document which describes all the rules for how Australia will operate as a nation, how the government must work including how laws will be made and what role the Australian Federal government and the State and Territory governments will have. I've only read small pieces of the constitution, but I think it must be a good document, because Australia has been a stable country, with a good democracy, ever since 1901.

Australia's democracy is called a parliamentary democracy. It's very similar to the democracy in Britain. Australia's parliament building is in Canberra, our capital city. Our parliament is made up of two houses. We have the Lower House, called the House of Representatives, and the Upper House,

called the Senate. The parliament building has two large rooms or chambers, where members of each house meet to carry out their roles. Their job is to follow the rules set out in the constitution in order to govern Australia.

In Australia's Lower House of parliament, the House of Representatives, there are 150* places or seats. Each seat represents about 90,000 people covering a small part or region of Australia. All the seats have been given names. For example, I live in the federal seat of Menzies, which covers my area of Melbourne. This seat is named after one of Australia's most famous politicians from the 1950s and 1960s, Sir Robert Menzies. The 90,000 people who live in the seat of Menzies elect one person who goes to the parliament in Canberra to represent us.

In Australia's Upper House of parliament, the Senate, there are 76 places. People elected to the Senate are called Senators. Unlike the Lower House, each Senator represents a whole State or Territory. Each of the 6 States has 12 senators and there are 2 senators for each of the 2 territories.

People who are elected to the parliament nearly always belong to a political party. A political party is a group of people who believe in certain types of policies. A policy is a way of doing things in government. For example, if you earn a high income, should you pay a much higher rate of tax? This is a policy question. In Australia, we have 2 major political parties – The Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party of Australia. They have different policies in many areas. The Australian Labor Party is more to the left, and the Liberal Party is more to the right. There are other smaller political parties too, including the National Party and The Greens. Sometimes two political parties work together because they agree on many policies. For example, at the moment the Liberal Party of Australia and the National Party are working together against the Australian Labor Party. Working together like that is called a Coalition.

So who is the head of the Australian Federal Government? Well that's an interesting question. You see, Australia has a Queen. She's Queen Elizabeth, who is British and lives in Britain. She is actually the head of Australia's government. She is also the head of the government for some other countries, including Canada and New Zealand. Because she lives so far away from Australia, she has a representative who lives in Australia. That person is called the Governor General and they are the head of Australia's Federal government. But in reality, neither the Queen nor the Governor General actually makes any decisions. They always act on the advice of the elected government and their role is quite limited. In reality, the elected politicians make all the decisions and they are the ones who really govern the nation.

There are many people in Australia who believe that we should not have the Queen as our head of government, and that we should become a republic. For example, India and the USA are republics. There are different opinions about this in Australia. In 1999 there was a referendum, asking if Australia should become a Republic. The majority of people voted no, so our head of government stays as the Queen. But perhaps one day this question will be asked again in another referendum. Personally, I would prefer a Republic. But our government continues to work well with the Queen as our head.

The real head of Australia's Federal government, the one who makes decisions for us, is the Prime Minister. He or she is the leader of the political party which has won a majority of seats in the Lower House, the House of Representatives. Since the House of Representatives has 150 seats, the political party which wins more than 75 seats in the election becomes the government. The leader of that party

becomes the Prime Minister and he or she appoints a team of ministers from among the other elected members and senators in his or her political party. Together, they control the government and make all the decisions for Australia. The largest political party with less than 75 seats is called the Opposition, because their job is to 'oppose' the government and make sure the government does a good job. It's no surprise that their leader is called The Leader of the Opposition. The Opposition could become the government after the next election, depending upon how the people of Australia vote. Debate in our parliament can be very vigorous at times. The Opposition are almost always very critical of what the government is doing and they ask tough questions in parliament, make statements and deliver speeches about what the government is doing wrong and how they would do it differently if they were the government. This keeps the government 'on their toes', which I think is good for our democracy.

The two houses of parliament play slightly different roles. Because the government is determined by whichever party has the majority in the House of Representatives, the Lower House, it is also called the House of Government. This is where the Prime Minister sits and is where most new laws are proposed, although new laws can also be proposed in the Senate. The Senate, by contrast, is also called the House of Review, since it must review and pass all the new laws which are passed by the House of Representatives. All laws must be voted on and passed by both houses of parliament.

In Australia, it is law that all Australians 18 years or older must vote. This helps to ensure that we get the government that the people want. And that is also what democracy is all about.

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it by clicking the comments link at the top of this story. You can leave your comment in English or in any language and I will translate it. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. Perhaps you could suggest a topic for a future podcast. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

**Note - at the 2019 election, the number of seats in the House of Representatives was increased to 151.*

[WpProQuiz 101]

Vocabulary

appoints = to choose

belong = when you are part of a group. For example, a family, a football team, a political party

Britain = another name for the United Kingdom. Includes England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Also called Great Britain.

British = someone who comes from Britain

chambers = large rooms

continues = when something doesn't stop

debate = when people talk about things. Usually they don't agree.

defence forces = the navy, army and airforce, who protect the country in time of war.

democracy = a form of government where the people decide who will govern the country

determined = when something is decided

different = when two things are not the same

document = where things are written down. For example, a book, a newspaper, a constitution

economy = describes all the goods and services in a country, including the money paid for them

elected = when someone is chosen in an election. Other people have voted for them.

election = when everyone votes. They choose what they want

famous = when someone is well known

govern = when you control something according to rules

immigration = when someone goes to another country to live and does not return.

including = when something is a part of something else

income = the money you receive for doing your job or for running your business

nation = a single country. For example, Australia, China, USA, India

national level = when things are a high level, the level of a country or a nation

'on their toes' = when someone has to be careful that they do the right thing

operate = to make something work

opinions = when someone believes something which they may not be able to prove

opportunity = when you have the chance to do something not normally possible

oppose = to be against something

opposition = when you are against something

personally = for one person

pieces = parts of something

politicians = people who are elected by the people to make decisions in the government

proposed = when something is put forward for others to consider. For example, an idea

representatives = people who speak for you, on your behalf

represents = to speak for someone else

republic = a type of government which has no King or Queen.

review = to look at something again and check that it is correct

similar = when two things are the same or nearly the same

speeches = when someone speaks before a group of other people and they listen

stable = when something has not changed much, does not vary much

states = a region which has a name and its own government

surprise = when you are not expecting something

taxes = the money that is paid to the government by the people, so the government can do its job

territories = a region which has a name and under the control of a higher government. It may also have its own government

tough = difficult

vigorous = when something is strong and active