

The Australian Way Of Federalism

The first edition of the series on federalism dealt with the experience of the United States of America. Let us take the journey further and look at the Australian way.

The Federal system in Australia is the product of its colonial history. The states of Australia in colonial era had their own constitutions with a wide range of powers. But in 1901 Australia emerged as a constitutional monarchy with a strong union government. The Australian constitution refers itself as ‘*One Indissoluble Federal Commonwealth*’ with no provisions to secede.

Select unique features of the Australia’s model:

Council of Australian Governments (COAG): It is a first of its kind intergovernmental forum which acts as a facilitator between the commonwealth (union), state and the local governments. It is chaired by the Prime Minister and its members include the Premiers/Chief Ministers of all states/territories, President of the Australian Local Governments Association (ALGA).

COAG promotes federalism by constituting several councils such as education council, health council, federal financial relations council etc.

Double Dissolution at the Union Level: Both the House of Representatives and Senate can be dissolved at the same time by the Governor General in case of a deadlock between both the houses. This makes the legislative business hassle-free.

In India, currently the Rajya Sabha (Council of states/ Upper House) which is a permanent house cannot be dissolved and hence is at times not a true reflection of the people’s mandate at the Union level. This has led to a conflict between both the houses, creating an impasse for carrying out the legislative business.

State’s Autonomy in deciding the electoral process:

States by law can decide upon their own voting system and the electoral boundaries based on the local dynamics. *For example, the state of Victoria opted for a preferential voting system (full and optional) in state and local council elections as it ensures that most preferred candidates are elected.*

Furthermore, electoral enrolment register, scheduling and the superintendence of the state parliament elections are done by the respective state electoral commissions.

Local Governance: State may also create subordinate bodies such as municipalities and delegate them the responsibility to take care of local interests. Such bodies are constitutionally recognised by every state.

Local governments are the direct point of contact with citizens and play a key role in the service delivery. The fact that 80% of the local governments raise their own revenue through taxes and user charges, make them more independent and powerful. Interestingly, four former Prime Ministers of Australia served as local government authorities before assuming the highest office.

Australian Local Governments Association (ALGA):

ALGA is lobby group which represents all the local bodies of Australia in the COAG. It aims at strengthening the local finances and addressing the local issues. ALGA is instrumental in the on-going white paper process on *Reform of Federation and Taxation*, which ensures that the states and territories are sovereign in their own sphere and also have their own income taxing powers.

The Australian experience shows that the states can be empowered by giving them the electoral responsibility and making them more independent. Further, the representation of the local interests at the federal level not only enhances the federal structure but also visualizes the concept of democracy at the grass roots.

Please click on the thumbnail to know more about the Australian federalism.

