

# The Five Pillars of Australian Democracy



# AusCivics



Constitution Education Fund  
Australia



**The Constitution Education Fund Australia Trust (CEFA) was established in 1994.**

**The CEFA charity has adopted the mission of educating Australians about their Constitution and its relevance to the Australian way of life.**

**More than 10 years ago CEFA developed the Five Pillars of Australian Democracy as the heart of its educational blueprint.**

**This document serves three main purposes:**

- (1) To define a core base of brief but accurate concepts about the Australian Constitution and system of government that could serve as a 'working knowledge' for every Australian.**
- (2) To provide the organising framework for CEFA's key civics education projects.**
- (3) To provide the organising framework for the free online education resources being constantly prepared and updated for educators and students.**

**In 2004 CEFA's work as a not-for-profit organisation was recognised by the Australian Parliament. It continues to attract the support of a wide range of Australians from all walks of life who believe CEFA's mission of educating for democracy is essential.**



Constitution  
Education Fund  
Australia (CEFA)  
Level 13  
189 Kent Street  
Sydney  
NSW 2000  
GPO Box 64  
Sydney NSW 2001  
Telephone  
+61 2 9251 8511  
Facsimile  
+61 2 9251 8677  
[www.cefa.org.au](http://www.cefa.org.au)

## The Five Pillars of Australian Democracy



Constitutional Arrangements



History of Nationhood



Constitutional Heritage



Shared Values



Participation of Citizens

### Prominent supporters of CEFA's work include:

**Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC  
Governor-General of the  
Commonwealth of Australia &  
CEFA's Patron-in-Chief:**

"What a splendid concept, to empower young Australians to become active, engaged and responsible citizens... We are a young country, but a strong one; a multicultural nation brought together by our democratic values and Constitution. In our fast-paced and globalised world, it is vital that all young Australians understand our governance systems, to enable them to participate effectively in current and future political discussions."

**The Hon. Julia Gillard MP,  
Prime Minister of Australia**

"Participation in CEFA's School Parliaments would give students opportunities to develop an understanding of, and commitment to, Australia's democratic system of government, law and civic life and the knowledge, skills and values that support active citizenship and the capacity to act as informed and responsible citizens."

**The Hon. Sir William Deane, former Governor-General, and Chairman of CARE Australia**

"The Governor-General's Undergraduate Essay Competition is an outstanding initiative. It will make a significant contribution to Australia's awareness and understanding of our Constitution, our system of government and their history and working. By doing that, the initiative will serve the interests of the Australian people generally."

**Steve Waugh, former Australian Cricket Team Captain and Australian of the Year**

"In my travels playing cricket for Australia, I saw a number of countries without the freedoms we enjoy. These experiences brought home to me the importance of the Australian Constitution. The more Australians understand the important role played by our Constitution, the stronger we will be as a community."



## **Australian Democracy: A Modern Miracle.**

CEFA believes that the way of life offered by Australian Democracy is genuinely a modern miracle. CEFA's mission is to ensure that all Australians understand Australian Democracy and why it is important for our way of life. CEFA takes a broad view of Australian Democracy. On the one hand, Australian Democracy involves the system of formal institutions laid down by the Australian Constitution. On the other hand it involves the commonly held values and ethos that allows our communal life to flourish.

## **The Five Pillars of Australian Democracy.**

CEFA has identified five pillars of Australian Democracy which all Australians need to understand if we are to continue to enjoy the Australian way of life. CEFA is committed to ensuring that all Australians have a basic understanding of the following five pillars of our unique Australian Democracy:

### **Pillar 1: Constitutional Arrangements.**

The formal institutions and system of government established under the Australian Constitution.

### **Pillar 2: History of Nationhood.**

The story of why Australia became a federation and how it became an independent nation.

### **Pillar 3: Constitutional Heritage.**

The philosophical ideas that underpin the Australian system of government.

### **Pillar 4: Shared Values.**

The commonly held values that underpin the Australian way of life.

### **Pillar 5: Participation of Citizens.**

The essentials for citizens to participate fully in Australian Democracy.

## **Pillar 1: Constitutional Arrangements.**

**The formal institutions established under the Australian Constitution.**

The system of government that we enjoy in Australia is a constitutional monarchy. It relies upon a number of institutions. Each institution plays its own role, and together they form a system of government. CEFA is committed to ensuring that all Australians are aware of the institutions that are part of the Australian system of government, and of the roles of the different institutions. The most important institutions and functions include:

### **The Australian Constitution.**

The document which lays down the structure of the legislative, executive, and judicial arms of the Commonwealth Government, and which delineates the relationship between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories of Australia. It is the higher law of the Commonwealth to which all laws and institutions in the nation are subject, enshrining the principle of the rule of law.

### **The Monarch and the Governor-General.**

The executive power of the Commonwealth is officially exercised by the Governor-General, in whom as the representative of the Monarch, the Constitution vests the executive power of the Commonwealth. Pursuant to the Westminster principle of responsible government implied in our Constitution, the Governor-General and the Monarch ordinarily act only on the advice of the Prime Minister and Ministers of State who are responsible to Parliament.

### **The Commonwealth of Australia.**

The federal union of the six Australian self-governing colonies, established in 1901, with a federal government (the Commonwealth Government) to exercise the powers granted to it by the Constitution over the people and territory of all the newly-federated States.



**The six States and two Territories that constitute the Commonwealth of Australia.**

The States of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia; plus the Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory; each of which share governmental power with the Commonwealth according to the Constitution.

**The Australian Federal Parliament (the Commonwealth Parliament).**

The body exercising legislative power over the Commonwealth of Australia, and consisting of the Monarch, the Senate, and the House of Representatives. Subject to the Constitution the Parliament is the supreme lawmaking body, though ultimately responsible and accountable to the people, thus enshrining the principle of representative government.

**Legislative power.**

The power of a legislature to create new laws and amend or repeal existing laws.

**The Australian Federal Government (the Commonwealth Government).**

The Australian Government uses the executive power of the Commonwealth to manage all aspects of the national life of the country, and is headed by the Prime Minister, whom the Governor-General appoints for this purpose, and who selects Ministers to be responsible for managing specific government departments.

**Executive Power.**

The power of an executive to do what is necessary to enforce existing laws and maintain order in society.

**The High Court of Australia.**

The highest court in Australia, which exercises the judicial power of the Commonwealth to interpret the Constitution and to hear appeals from all other Australian courts.

**The Common Law**

The Common Law in Australia and all its States and Territories derives from the framework of law in force in England at the time of British settlement. Founded on custom, and on a traditional Judaeo-Christian

understanding of right and justice, the common law developed during many centuries through legal argument and decisions in English courts. It has developed further in Australia to suit conditions here.

**Judicial Power.**

The power to determine the liability of subjects, or their legal rights, in particular factual circumstances, according to the common law and according to the Acts of Parliament and regulations (made with the authority of Parliament) that may apply; to interpret the text of the Constitution and Acts of Parliament; to ensure that Acts of Parliament conform with the Constitution; and to review actions of the executive government to ensure that they conform with the Constitution and Acts of Parliament.

**Referendum.**

A vote at which the Australian people are asked to approve an alteration to the Constitution, or the people of a State vote on a State matter.

**The Parliaments, Governments, and Court systems of the Australian States.**

Each State has its own Constitution, which lays down the rules according to which its Parliament shall legislate, its Government shall exercise executive power, and its Courts shall administer justice.

**Local Government**

An authority such as a city, municipal, or shire council established by a legislature to manage certain aspects of the government of a local area.

**The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), and State Electoral Commissions.**

The AEC is an independent Commission, set up by an Act of the Commonwealth Parliament, which is responsible for keeping a Federal electoral roll and for managing Federal elections and referendums. Each State also has its own Electoral Commission, set up by the State parliament, which is responsible for parliamentary and local council elections and for referendums in that State. Many States have made joint arrangements with the Australian Electoral Commission to use the Federal electoral roll for State elections.

## **Pillar 2: History of Nationhood.**

The story of why Australia became a federation and how it became an independent nation.

Understanding Australia's system of government is not just a matter of understanding how the system works at the moment. It is also a matter of understanding how we came to have the particular system that we have; why the Australians who chose this system of government over a hundred years ago believed it would be the best system for Australia; and how the system has evolved to enable Australia to become a fully independent nation. CEFA is committed to ensuring that all Australians understand the following aspects of their history:

### **Indigenous culture of pre-colonial Australia.**

The culture of the indigenous communities in Australia had a long history on this continent prior to colonisation. Its value as a dignified way of life, though increasingly appreciated as an important contribution to Australian culture, was neglected by many people during much of the formative period of Australian history as a result of earlier misconceptions.

### **History of the six Australian colonies.**

Through the establishment and growth of British colonies in Australia in the 18th and 19th centuries, the British constitutional heritage gradually took root in Australia, and our shared values began to develop alongside the institutions of Westminster government in the colonies.

### **The Federation movement.**

In each of the Australian colonies, Australians began lobbying to encourage the colonies to band together to form an Australian federation for the common good of all Australians. Following referendums in each state the Constitution Act to form the Commonwealth of Australia was signed by Queen Victoria July 9, 1900, and the first Australian parliament was held January 1, 1901. The Australian federation is admired worldwide for its effectiveness and stability.

### **Emergence of Australia as an independent and self-governing nation.**

In the 20th century, Australia became fully independent and self-governing through a gradual and peaceful process which was completed by the Australia Acts in 1986.

## **Pillar 3: Constitutional Heritage.**

The philosophical ideas that underpin the Australian system of government.

The system of government that we enjoy in Australia, often described as based on the Westminster parliamentary tradition, has been made possible by the ideas that we have inherited from the past. These derive principally from the heritage of classical Greece and republican Rome, and the ethical values which have evolved from the Judeo-Christian heritage shared by many other religious traditions and value systems, and which have informed our civic culture. This includes the concept of the innate dignity of the human person which may never be used as a means to an end. Some of these concepts and ideas date back to ancient times, some to England in the Middle Ages, the American and French Revolutions, and the history of Switzerland and the United States. CEFA is committed to spreading an awareness of key ideas in our constitutional heritage, and the challenges of maintaining them through appropriate checks and balances. Key concepts include:

### **Representative Government.**

A system of government in which the members of a legislature are elected by the people they represent in order to represent the interests of those people in the legislature.

### **Parliamentary Sovereignty**

The notion that Parliament can make or unmake whatever laws it wishes, and that the courts cannot invalidate such laws — but such power may be limited if the Constitution sets limits on what laws Parliament can make (as the Commonwealth Constitution limits the legislative power of the Australian Federal Parliament).



**Responsible Government.**

A system of government in which the ministers and the government are responsible, or accountable, to the lower house of the legislature, which in turn, according to the principle of representative government, is accountable to the people. This ensures that in order to form a government, a political party must have the confidence of the lower house, and in turn the confidence of the people who have elected the members of the house.

**Rule of Law.**

The principle that everybody, including the government and its members, is subject to the same set of laws: the executive government must obey the law as interpreted by the courts.

**Separation of Powers.**

The idea that the three functions of government (legislative, executive, and judicial) are separate, and that the arms of government that exercise these functions should be kept separate and independent.

**Liberal Democracy.**

A form of representative government which is both democratic, in that the power to govern is derived from the power of the people who are governed to choose representatives to make laws for them and govern them; and liberal, in that there are constraints on the elected government which aim to preserve the liberty of all of those whom they govern.

**Federalism.**

A system of government in which governmental power is shared among a number of entities according to the terms agreed by them and set out in a written constitution: a central — or federal — government, which exercises power over the whole country, and regional governments, which exercise power over their respective regions of that country.

**Pillar 4: Shared Values.****The values and ethos that underpin the Australian way of life.**

The Australian system of government does not operate in a vacuum. Whilst it is true that part of the success of the system depends on the way the

Constitution sets up the institutions, its success also depends upon the nature of the people who participate in and are governed by the system. For this reason, CEFA is committed to promoting amongst young Australians the shared values that underpin the Australian way of life. The following values have been adapted from the Federal Government's Values in Australian Schooling initiative:

**(1) Care, Compassion, Fair Go.**

Care for others not just self; pursue and protect the common good; treat all people fairly for a just society.

**(2) Doing Your Best.**

Seek to accomplish something worthy and admirable; try hard; pursue excellence; exercise vision, hope and optimism.

**(3) Freedom.**

Enjoy, and be prepared to defend, all the rights and privileges of Australian citizenship free from unnecessary interference or control; stand up for the rights of others.

**(4) Honesty, Integrity, and Trustworthiness.**

Be honest and sincere; honour agreements; act according to principles of ethical conduct; ensure consistency between words and deeds; expect the same of others

**(5) Remembering.**

Learn the key turning points of Australian and world history; honour the efforts and sacrifices of those who have preceded us.

**(6) Respect.**

Treat others with consideration and regard; respect another person's point of view; honour the roles and sincere efforts of those who serve in public office.

**(7) Responsibility.**

Be accountable for your own actions; resolve differences in constructive, non-violent and lawful ways; contribute to society; take care of the environment.

**(8) Understanding, Tolerance, and Inclusion.**

Be sensitive to others and their cultures; accept diversity within a democratic society; adopt a spirit of inclusion not exclusion; acknowledge and support basic human rights locally and abroad.

**(9) Informed Judgment.**

Be thoughtful and knowledgeable about all sides of each argument or issue in local, national and international current affairs, and when casting one's vote.

**(10) Health, Wellbeing, and Safety.**

Make the best available health and lifestyle choices; exercise and nourish mind and body; take appropriate precautions to protect life, health and property.

## **Pillar 5: Participation of Citizens.**

There are an unlimited number of ways in which Australians can participate in our democracy. However there are some essentials that are vital for the flourishing of Australian Democracy and for full participation of citizens. CEFA is committed to helping each citizen appreciate the following essentials :

**Understanding of the English language.**

The primacy of the English language is vital for enabling citizens to understand one another and participate in Australian Democracy.

**Awareness of the system of government and shared values of Australian Democracy.**

Citizens can participate more fully and help to improve Australian Democracy if they understand Australia's liberal democratic heritage and traditions. New citizens participate in education programs that result in formal ceremonies, usually hosted by local mayors.

**Registration on the Australian Electoral Roll.**

Voting at elections, Federal, State and Local, is the first and foremost contribution that each Australian makes to participating in Australian Democracy. It is the responsibility of each eligible Australian to make sure that he or she is properly enrolled at all times and therefore qualified to vote.

**Casting an informed vote.**

Voters participate more fully in Australian Democracy by making thoughtful, considered choices before attending the polling booth.

**Additional Involvement.**

Citizens can be involved by participating through community events; running for office; championing a cause; volunteering for a charity, school or community group; volunteering for emergency services such as surf life saving, fire fighting, armed forces reserves and other essential services. There are very many useful ways to be involved.



## **CEFA's Initiatives for Educating for Democracy.**

CEFA has been progressively developing a series of projects which educate Australians about each of the pillars of Australian Democracy.

CEFA's established projects:

### **CEFA School Parliaments.**

This project, which began with a pilot scheme in 2005, aims to educate primary & secondary school students about the parliamentary process by involving students in mock parliaments. They provide an opportunity to learn about the structure of legislatures, improve public-speaking skills, leadership, teamwork, and voting education processes.

### **Governor-General's Undergraduate Essay Competition.**

This project, established in 2004, aims to challenge university students by offering the opportunity to extend their understanding of Pillar 3 – Constitutional Heritage – through independent research into a legal, historical or philosophical subjects relevant to the principles and ideas that underpin Australian Democracy, and to investigate the practical relevance of such ideas, whilst improving oral and written expression skills. The 2010 competition judging was chaired by the chief justice of the High Court of Australia, Chief Justice French.

Each of the above programs has been tested and refined over several years and is being expanded progressively.

CEFA's newer projects:

### **AusCivics Film Festivals.**

Through a partnership with the Australian Electoral Commission and a number of other Australian institutions, several hundred AusCivics Film Festivals across the nation will be launched in September 2010 and run each year thereafter, commencing in the outback town of Broken Hill. The festivals are aimed at engaging upper primary and high school students with a broader awareness of the link between the Australian Constitution and our unique, safe and privileged Australian way of life. Each annual festival will also aim to consolidate young Australians' commitment to the values of each of the Five Pillars. At the core of the festivals will be inspiring Australian films, feature films and short films — new films each year — which help focus young minds on the importance of our shared values and our democratic heritage.

### **The National Civics Prize, including the Governor-General's National Film Prize.**

This is a parallel activity with AusCivics Film Festivals. While the festivals will be concentrated in one season annually the National Civics Prize will run year round, launching into 2011 from the platform of the 2010 festivals. Each prize season and each prize activity will be linked to one or more of the Five Pillars. The 'language' of teens is movies, music, games, texting, fashion, brands, sports, social network sites, etc. This is also the 'language' of the National Civics Prize, linking civics messages and knowledge with fun, adventure, travel, sports, etc; making civics cool by association and reaching the key youth audience 'where they live'. While the tone will be fun the learning outcomes are serious.

Each of CEFA's projects has at the core the goal of civics education and engagement, consistent with CEFA's mission and national and state curriculum outcomes. CEFA is putting in place substantial measuring tools to help identify national and local trends towards increased engagement in and knowledge of the Australian Constitution.

