Australia has three levels of government: federal, state/territory and local. The federal government is the highest level of government.

Forming government

In Australia, the federal government is part of the federal Parliament. At an election, the party (or coalition of parties) with the support of the majority of members elected to the House of Representatives becomes the government.

Although government is formed in the House of Representatives, there are also members of the government in the Senate. The government may or may not hold the majority of seats in the Senate.

Minority government

If no political party or coalition achieves a majority in the House of Representatives, the result is called a hung parliament. It is still possible for a government to be formed if a majority can be achieved through agreement with Independent and/or minor party members. This type of government is known as a minority government. The 43rd Parliament had the first minority government formed in Australia’s Parliament since 1940.

Government responsibilities

The responsibilities of the federal government include:

- developing national policy; for example, plans for managing trade, foreign affairs, immigration and the environment
- introducing ideas for new laws or changes to existing ones (called bills) into Parliament
- putting laws into action, through government departments
- making important decisions on behalf of Australians, such as whether or not to send Australian troops to war zones
- representing Australia overseas, through key spokespersons such as the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Government leadership

The leader of the government is the Prime Minister, who is a member of the House of Representatives. A government senator is also appointed as the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

Some members of the government are selected to be ministers and are given an area of responsibility, called a portfolio. Each minister is in charge of a government department or assists in the administration of a department, developing policies and implementing laws passed by the Parliament. For example, the Minister for the Environment is responsible for the Department of the Environment. The Prime Minister and ministers are part of executive government.

The Cabinet consists of the Prime Minister and top-level ministers. It has an important role in leading the government, making most of the major decisions on policy and planning (see Cabinet).

Responsible government

To remain in government, a party or coalition must maintain the support of the majority of members in the House of Representatives. This is part of the principle of responsible government. It ensures that the government is accountable to the Parliament. In Australia, the principle of responsible government works together with the principle of separation of powers to guide the way in which law is made and managed (see Separation of Powers: Parliament, Executive and Judiciary).

LINKS

PEO website
Closer Look: Governing Australia: three levels of law-making

APH website
House of Representatives Infosheet: The Australian system of government
www.tinyurl.com/Infosheet20