After the Party: Public Attitudes to Australian Federalism, Regionalism and Reform in the 21st Century

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During Australia’s centenary of federation in 2001, the author, the Local Government Association of Queensland and Brisbane’s Courier-Mail newspaper surveyed 1,264 Queenslanders on their attitudes to the federal system and future constitutional change. The results suggest that, despite satisfaction with their political system, a majority of the population (62-63 per cent) also expect and look forward to change in its basic structure over the next 100 years. Further, the results indicate a substantial proportion (around 40 per cent) may be interested in more than minor change, including options such as complete replacement of the current States. This higher than expected interest in change challenges assumptions that Australians are inherently conservative in their views about their constitutional system and opens new lines of inquiry about the problematic relationship between Australian federalism and regionalism.

Introduction

How interested are Australians in the possibilities of major constitutional change?
This question has been problematic for at least a quarter of a century. In 1988, long-discussed “bicentennial” reform proposals failed at all four public referenda. In 1999, the failure of the republic referendum raised the prospect that Australia might be becoming incapable of effectively deliberating on constitutional change, with politicisation of the process leading observers to suggest deliberative democracy had reached an all-time low.1 It is now clear that such results have as much to do with problems of deliberative process and culture in our political system, as they do with substantive attitudes about change,2 yet we may not be learning much. In early 2002, Commonwealth government suggestions about further constitutional reform attempts have the hallmark of another merry-go-round, particularly if the “conservatism” of Australian voters continues to be identified as the largest potential barrier to change. Is there any evidence that this is the substantive problem?

This article presents the results of pilot research into public attitudes to certain major types of constitutional change, intended to throw light on the ways Australians think about their political destiny. The project was undertaken in Queensland during Australia’s 2001 centenary of federation — arguably a logical time to be thinking about long-term directions in governance, however devoid it was of such discussion in official circles. Supported by the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and Brisbane’s Courier-Mail newspaper, the project combined telephone interviews with a

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random sample of Queensland residents and public journalism methods to probe key issues about our federal structure. Altogether 1,264 individuals contributed their views (Table 1).³

The main question was whether Australians see their basic constitutional structure as fixed for all time, or something more evolutionary. Far from detecting overwhelming or inherent conservatism on the part of Australians towards such issues, we located signs of a substantial capacity to think constructively about long-term political development. The key issue used to provoke this evidence was one fundamental to the theory and practice of federalism — the place of regionalism in the Australian constitutional system, including attitudes to the future of our base federal “regions” or “first order civil divisions”⁴ (the States).

The first part of this article outlines the rationale for this focus, drawing on elements of Australian political debate in the federation’s first century. The second part describes respondents’ general attitudes towards democracy and the federal system, establishing a context for views about future constitutional change. The third part analyses the responses to specific questions about the probability and desirability of change, including options of either abolishing or enlarging the number of States. The article then interprets these results according to evidence about the concepts of “States” and “regions” contemplated by the respondents, highlighting the problematic relationship between these concepts in Australian constitutional theory.

In conclusion, the article combines these results to provide a refined indication of the extent of change considered desirable by the respondents, as well as a more informed assessment of points of tension in popular thinking about our constitutional structure.

Regionalism and federalism in Australia

How do Australians perceive the future role of the base units of the Australian federal system, the States? We chose this as our focus because the centenary of federation seemed a logical time to remember not only the overall success of Australia’s first century as a nation, but the century’s rich heritage of debate about the structure of federation itself.³ Recently, we have tended to assume that federation was intended to provide a once and for all constitutional system which Australians never expected to significantly change, but the last 100 years have also seen at least two major schools of contrary political thought.

On one hand, many have believed federation was a step towards a more “perfect”, “unitary” system of government in which the pre-existing colonies (now the States) would ultimately be replaced by a new patchwork of regional governments. From mid-century it became increasingly apparent that little formal change was taking place, or likely to take place towards this result.⁶ However, despite declining interest in a unitary system, the attractiveness of a simpler system which also recognises 30 or more regions has generally remained, for example restated in 1998 by author Rodney Hall.⁷

At the same time, others have seen federation as a transitional step in another direction. Far from being in doubt, federalism was often expected to deliver an alternative patchwork of regional governments not through abolition, but enlargement of the number of States themselves. This idea was also alive and well at the century’s halfway mark, for example when Justice H S Nicholas, founding editor of Australian Quarterly, documented “the magnitude of two states, Queensland and New South Wales” as one of only two major constitutional problems.⁸ In September 2000, historian Geoffrey Blainey stated that “in at least one sense, federalism has failed”:

“As Australia possesses a wide range of climates and terrains, as each region has a different mix of

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³ See below at 181.
⁴ The generic term applied to States in a federal system, or equivalent units in a non-federal system: see Glassner, Political Geography (1993).
⁵ For more of this rationale, see Brown, “Can’t wait for the sequel: Australian federation as unfinished business” (2001) Melbourne Journal of Politics 27 at 49-67.
⁷ Hall, Abolish the States! Australia’s Future and a $30 Billion Answer to our Tax Problems (1998).
⁸ Nicholas, “Fifty Years of the Constitution” (June 1951) Australian Quarterly 29 at 30.
geographical assets and liabilities and sometimes … people …. there is a case for each major region possessing its own state government. For a land of this size we do not have enough states.”

Are these views still alive more broadly in Australian thinking? If so, what, if anything, do they have in common? The answer could tell us something about attitudes to constitutional change, since all these issues require Australians to contemplate a big constitutional picture, and basic questions about the role of our institutions in response to global change, economic and administrative restructuring and the search for greater political cohesion.

An understanding of attitudes to these questions can also tell us something about the nature and value of the federal system itself. Federal systems are predicated upon the role of the regional systems within them; they constitute:

“a union of separate and semi-autonomous regional parts ... a political system in which the power to make laws is divided between a central legislature and regional legislatures”.10

Australian federalism endures, according to public policy experts John Wanna and Michael Keating, because of its capacity to “contribute to national unity while providing an outlet for regional differences”.11 Yet we seem to have competing schools of thought about which “regions” should underpin our constitutional structure. The only regions currently formally recognised in the federation are the six ex-colonial States and two Territories, whereas ideas about replacing or increasing the number of States involve an Australia with more regions. How many more regions, and how many people see their country this way? If prevalent, what do such attitudes say, if not about federalism per se then about federalism in Australia?

Although limited to Queensland, the survey undertaken in this pilot was well placed to test some broad Australian attitudes. As discussed in the journalism component of the project, Queensland still has the most “regionalised” population and economy of any Australian State.12 Moreover, while every State save Tasmania has experienced debates about subdivision, Queensland has perhaps the longest and most continuous history of “new state” activism.13 On top of this, it has been described as having a political culture recently dominated more by materialism and pragmatism than such abstract issues.14 Our samples (Table 1)15 provided a deliberate range of contrasts, based around a random telephone sample supplying a statistically reliable indicator of community views, supplemented with more detailed written surveys collected from experienced leaders in the local government community, and metropolitan-based self-selecting Courier-Mail readers and website visitors. While not necessarily providing a representative snapshot of Australia as a whole, Queensland was a particularly interesting place to start.

Do Australians like their federation?

Before inviting speculation about constitutional change, our questions sought to benchmark respondents’ attitudes against broader data about public attitudes to the political system as a whole. Previous surveys in Australia as well as internationally have tended to establish a high level of satisfaction with Western-style liberal democratic systems. Our initial questions established this to be true also of our samples (Table 2).16 Seventy-eight per cent of the random or “control” sample said they were either fairly or very satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia, and only seven per

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15 See below at 181.
16 See below at 182.
cent indicated they were “not at all” satisfied. This
general faith in our political system was repeated to
differing degrees in the other two samples — local
government leaders dipped only slightly to 75 per
cent indicating satisfaction with democracy, while
66 per cent of the self-selecting respondents
indicated satisfaction.

However, what role do ideas about the federal
character of the system play in these general
attitudes? Federalism’s importance has usually been
explained by empirical evidence that political
attitudes do differ from State to State17 and the
general conviction that Australians value the
conflicting checks and balances provided by State
governments as against a centralised national
government.18 This conviction was at least
superficially borne out by our random sample’s
responses to a question about satisfaction “with the
way the federation currently works in Australia”.
Eighty-two per cent indicated they were either very
or fairly satisfied, a four per cent increase on
satisfaction with democracy itself (Table 2).19

In fact, the apparent correlation between
federation and democracy in the public estimation
was not as direct as this might suggest. As many as
16 per cent of those who indicated satisfaction with
the federation, were nevertheless dissatisfied with
democracy; while 45 per cent of those not satisfied
with federation, were nevertheless satisfied with
democracy. Even more dramatically, 59 per cent of
those who indicated dissatisfaction with democracy,
were satisfied with the working of federation.
Accordingly, it is a mistake to assume that views
about one hinge on the other, or that federalism is
somehow intrinsic to the way Australians value
democracy.

What issues determine the way that Australians
make these assessments? We considered this too
complex to assess directly, but some answers ended
up indicating a definite consistency in the way this
distinction was made. In moving to our core issue of
the federation’s structure, we asked respondents to
indicate the relative importance of five issues of
political reform, then ranked the results in index
form (Table 3).20 These issues were deliberately
different — some fairly platitudinous — simply to
establish a basis for comparison between
respondents’ approaches to different types of
reform. Telephone respondents were asked to
indicate “most important”, then “next most
important”; the written survey asked respondents to
indicate whether the issue was “most important”,
“less important” or “least important”.

The random sample ranked “reforming the
structure, for example changing the number or role
of the States” lowest at seven per cent, confirming
most people do not naturally think about this kind of
reform when contemplating possible improvement
in their political system. However, these rankings
also produced three other results.

The first result was the local government
sample’s much higher interest in structural reform
than the general average or public “norm”. Such
interest was not surprising for the self-selecting
Courier-Mail respondents, who were clearly
attracted to the survey by this very issue (they were
almost three times more likely than the norm to
indicate dissatisfaction with federation, and almost
twice as dissatisfied with democracy).21 The local
government sample, however, was only minimally
self-selecting, having been “trapped” in the course
of normal business in their annual conference. These
respondents were nevertheless twice as dissatisfied
with federation than the norm, despite almost
normal satisfaction with democracy.22 The ranking
in Table 323 combines with this to suggest there may
be a direct relationship between knowledge and
experience with the workings of government (at
least at the local level), greater than usual
dissatisfaction with federation and interest in
structural reform.

Secondly, these issues also provided some insight
into differences in the way in which people judge
federalism as opposed to democracy. Table 324
includes the ranking given to each issue by those
indicating dissatisfaction with democracy (the D
columns) and dissatisfaction with federation (the F
columns). Despite the overlap, the assessment varied

17 A line of analysis commencing with Holmes and Sharman,
n 10.
18 A valid line of reasoning celebrated by Galligan, n 6.
19 See below at 182.
20 See below at 183.
21 See full results for this data.
22 See below at 183.
23 See below at 183.
depending on the different focus of the criticism. The most notable deviations were those in the random sample, ranging up to 125 per cent. None changed the overall ranking, but their direction provide some suggestion as to which issues people are more likely to have in mind when critically judging federation (structure and the republic issue) as opposed to democracy (political process and performance of political representatives). While perhaps obvious, this pattern confirmed that respondents were thinking in terms consistent with theoretical distinctions.

Thirdly, the D and F indexes build on the coincidence that the local government sample was quite dissatisfied with federation while holding a normal view of democracy. By comparison with critics of democracy, the F columns show that in each sample, critics of federation judged the importance of these various issues closely to the norm (but for a predictable higher interest in structural reform). Even if numerically in the minority, those dissatisfied with federation responded to this question in a manner that seems to suggest their broad views are otherwise surprisingly normal. Does this foreshadow something about attitudes towards change?

Do Australians expect or want change?

Most Australians are not out hunting for change in the structure of their federation. However, when asked, the respondents indeed revealed that it is fairly normal for Australians to both expect and look forward to significant change. We established this by asking respondents to choose among four different options of future constitutional structure, first the one they thought most likely in another 100 years, and then the one they would most prefer in 100 years (options A to D in Table 4). The options were rotated in the telephone interviews, and in all cases, the simplest option for any respondent challenged by the question was to fall back on “the same system as today”.

The options were intended to encourage respondents to think about their federal system in both hierarchical and spatial terms, in a form calculated to engage individual thought and avoid signalling importance with regard to any option. This included both the “new State” and “no States” positions discussed above. Nothing in the survey suggested any option might not be a federation, but at the same time nothing was said to suggest any option necessarily had to be a federation. The question “federalism — yes or no?” was deliberately evaded in order to test respondents on their practical view of the structure rather than how it might be technically or polemically described. This approach appears to have been broadly successful, if anything erring in leading respondents away from the simple option of “abolish the States”. We detected this from the fact that the most common “other” option suggested (two per cent of local government and Courier-Mail written respondents) was a two-tiered system involving only national government and existing local governments — perhaps a “true” abolition scenario.

The startling result was not only a surprisingly high preference for change (62 per cent of the random sample), but the comparison between the two answers. Table 5 shows that respondents also had a high expectation of change, with 63 per cent of the sample also predicting that in 100 years there will be something other than the status quo. At first the parallel suggests respondents might have misunderstood the questions, answering the first (expectation) as if it were the second (preference). However, this is not so; expectations varied significantly between preferences, with the number confident that their specific preference would come to pass ranging from 36 per cent to 60 per cent. Many also believed that change of some kind will occur, even if not their preferred option. Even about a third of those who would prefer “the same system as today” (scenario A) predicted the system will probably look different, with 78 per cent of all those preferring scenarios B, C or D expecting some change to happen. Most people do not expect Australian federalism to remain in its current form.

This high expectation of change was also confirmed, in varying ways, by the local government and Courier-Mail samples. The local government respondents disclosed a lower expectation that change will occur (55 per cent as against 63 per cent), even though, as Table 4 shows, they have a

24 See below at 184.
25 See below at 185.
26 See below at 184.
significantly higher belief that it should. The main reason for this was that 95 per cent of those preferring the “same system as today” are certain they will get it (Table 5, top centre). The balance (the substantial majority) still remain relatively positive about the prospects for change, even though confidence that it would be their preferred option varied more widely, those favouring more States being the next most confident (61 per cent).

These patterns were repeated by the Courier-Mail respondents in different ways. Confidence that their preferred option will come to pass was also highest among those favouring the status quo (79 per cent) and more States (70 per cent), but overall the level of confidence fell between the public norm and the local government sample. Most dramatically, general expectation that there will be change further outstripped the public norm with 69 per cent of the self-selecting respondents believing this will be the case (Table 5, bottom right).

For a population feared to have limited interest in, or capacity for, change this general faith in the prospect of significant change is dramatic. Among the random sample, the fact that over 30 per cent of the (sizeable) minority who do not seek change still expect it, suggests some even see constitutional development as inevitable, perhaps outside their control. On the whole, however, the picture seems positive; change appears to be something that most respondents believe will happen naturally, if indeed not already in train. One reason for Australians’ healthy faith in their system may be the very conviction that the system can and will regenerate itself into a better form.

A final confirmation of the apparent “normalcy” of this view is that no group indicating any one preference for change was significantly more likely than the others, or the sample norm, to have indicated dissatisfaction with federation. This provides something of a corollary to the evidence that those who did express dissatisfaction with federation seemed to have held quite normal broader attitudes. In the random sample, each of the three groups preferring a given change scenario had similar levels of satisfaction with federation as it currently works, each also paralleling the norm (79-82 per cent satisfied, 17-18 per cent dissatisfied). Most respondents appeared readily capable of thinking about change in positive terms, perhaps as a natural part of our political development, without first needing to feel that the system is actually failing.

What type of change? Tackling the regionalism dilemma

A majority of respondents, even in metropolitan areas, liked the idea of having “regional governments”. The single largest preference was for such governments to entirely replace the States, this being also the option most consistent with past interest in abolishing the federal system itself. However, the attractiveness of “regional governments” also went beyond that, since there was unexpected support also for the only other option to specifically mention them (option D, “a four-tiered system, with regional governments as well as the States”). In the random sample, these respondents outnumbered those preferring more States, despite this not being an option frequently canvassed in constitutional debate.

Behind these results lies the theoretical challenge for Australian federalism noted earlier. These respondents did not appear to see the role of “regional government” as fulfilled, or perhaps even capable of being fulfilled, by the current concept of the States. The choice of option is only partial evidence of that, however, since we had already decided the best means of testing this intuition was to simply imply it (namely, that “States” and “regions” were not the same thing) and look for contra-indications in the results. Better evidence comes from the next questions. Question 8 directly asked respondents how many States they thought to be ideal for the Australian federation, assuming it was to have more. Question 9 asked how many “regional governments” they thought to be ideal if “regions” became the base units of the federation. The response categories were the same for each question, ranging from “less than 10”, to “more than 40”.

The result provides some tangible indication of the gulf between the concepts in Australians’

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27 See below at 185.
28 See below at 185.
everyday thinking about government (Figures 1-3). This data comes only from the 963 local government and Courier-Mail generated responses, since these questions did not translate into a short telephone interview and so were not attempted for the random sample. Nevertheless, the mismatch between the lines provides a picture of the extent of Australians’ belief that they have a wider range of political regions than they do States.

Further analysis of this picture identifies three problems in the way Australians think about their constitutional structure, and particularly future change. First, can this sample really provide an accurate picture of how people think about these issues? The bulk of these respondents have already decided they want regions but not more States. The key becomes how respondents answered, depending on their different preferences for the future.

Figures 2 and 3 show the distribution curves for ideal numbers of “States” and “regions” respectively, separating out all eight groups of preferences — those out of each sample preferring each of the four options. Here a contrast emerges. Figure 2 shows that with one exception (arrowed), all groups have a fairly clear, shared idea of the concept of “States”. The consistency of view suggests our existing experience of the States as a small, fixed number of usually large entities outweighs our consciousness of any possibility that these could also be smaller in area or population, simpler in structure and larger in number. Figure 3, on the other hand, shows no equivalent clear or shared view of “regions”. More research needs to be done into “upper range” concepts about regions, but even within, let alone across, most groups the range of assessments was almost infinite. The frequent double “humps” indicate that six out of the eight groups were internally split as to whether a federation of “regions” would involve only a moderate number (between 10 and 30) or over 40 regions.

If concepts of “regions” vary so widely, how can we be more precise about the apparent overall conflict between these ideas and the concept of “States”? Luckily, not all groups necessarily answered the questions in the fractured way that Figure 3 implies. With the benefit of all its direct experience with Queensland’s political geography, the local government sample produced clear evidence that there is indeed a conflict in the views of two key subgroups — those who see more States as the answer, and those who would prefer to see States replaced with regional governments (Figure 4). Notwithstanding their different preferences, these groups gave similar assessments about both the number of States that would be appropriate if there were to be more, and in the alternative, the likely range of regions. In other words, where we do find a clearer picture of consistency across options, it tends to confirm the overall gulf between the two concepts identified in Figure 1.

Figures 1 and 4 do seem to show, therefore, that for the bulk of groups, and for key groups, our States are simply not “regional” in nature. While they may be regions of a kind, recognised in our federal political system, they do not seem to be our “real” ones. This conclusion has previously spurred questions from geographers and economists, given accepted definitions of “region” in the social sciences, but this is evidence that the same question extends to the political basis of our constitutional system. What do we make of this apparent break between constitutional theory and reality?

Immediately, we confront the second problem. We do not have a shared view that this break even exists. Notwithstanding the broad conflict, concepts about States and regions do align for some of our respondents. Those happy for the system to stay “the same as today” endorsed the current match between federalism and regionalism far more strongly than

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29 See below at 187-188.
30 See below at 187 and 188 respectively.
31 See below at 188.
32 See below at 188.
33 See below at 187.
34 “A region is a homogenous area with physical and cultural characteristics distinct from those of neighboring areas. As a part of a national domain a region is sufficiently unified to have a consciousness of its customs and ideals and thus possess a sense of identity distinct from the rest of the country. The term ‘regionalism’ properly represents the regional idea in action as an ideology, as a social movement, or as the theoretical basis for regional planning; it is also applied to the scientific task of delimiting and analyzing regions as entities lacking formal boundaries”: Vance, “Region” in Sills (ed), International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1968), Vol 13, pp 377-378; see also Schwartz, Politics and Territory: The Sociology of Regional Persistence in Canada (1974).
other groups or the general norm (Figure 5). The third question becomes, how do we bring about such a realignment on the part of the Australian community as a whole? If theory and reality do not need to be in conflict, how can they be brought back together?

Perhaps unfortunately, it is not possible to do this by forcing everyone to think the same fixed way about “States” and “regions” as those in Figure 5. Even if possible, actually forcing the majority to think like the minority would not be democratic. However, there are other options for bringing these concepts into alignment. They would equally match if we were able to arrive at a relative consensus about the number of regions that require political recognition, and increase our number of States to that number. The problem is that, as Figure 2 shows, the character of our States is relatively firmly fixed in everyone’s thinking, irrespective of whether they see them as the answer or not.

Everyone? Not quite. As noted above in Figure 2, there was a significant exception to the apparent consensus that the States can only be a few fixed, large entities. Figure 6 identifies this “bulge” as belonging to the 15 per cent of Courier-Mail respondents who favoured more States. The “bulge” stems from the fact that almost half of this group saw up to 20 or more States as ideal, a larger number than any other group. Further, Figure 6 also shows similar flexibility in the thinking of other Courier-Mail respondents. Of the majority wanting no States, over 50 per cent believed there would not need to be more than 20 “regions”. Accordingly, these apparently conflicting views actually start to come much closer together.

Why might these Courier-Mail written and internet respondents have shown such flexibility? The probable answer is that they followed the suggestions in Courier-Mail editorial content associated with the project, that perhaps there was a meeting place between ideas about abolishing the States and creating more. For example, the survey page carried comment by Geoffrey Blainey about why every major region should be its own State, and comment by Brisbane Lord Mayor, Jim Soorley, as to why the States should be abolished, both under the same heading, “Time to redraw the lines on the map”. These views were published deliberately to help measure the degree of common ground between these positions.

Irrespective of whether these respondents held pre-existing views or were simply drawn by the project to “vote” with either Professor Blainey or Lord Mayor Soorley, the result suggests there was indeed common ground to be explored, that this positive encouragement brought it out and that it could be measured in empirical terms. This is a new result, since it is a relatively new question — in the past, analysts have tended to assume “regionalists” simply did not want a federal system at all. Accordingly, the two issues — creating more States and abolishing the States — have been presumed not to be connected. The real potential for convergence indicated here suggests that is not necessarily the case. It might increase confidence that Australia is fertile ground for federalism, and that the majority of Australian voters who endorsed a federal structure in 1898-1900 did not leap into the dark, while also indicating the falsity of assuming that the federation immediately took on a permanently optimum form.

The current picture urges both a way forward and caution in the resolution of the regionalism dilemma. The diversity in concepts of regionalism probably explains some of the past difficulties of policies in this area. While it carries almost unlimited possibilities for new solutions, it suggests that if we were to move quickly towards reform based on regional governments, we would reopen wildly conflicting ideas about where we are going. With the right deliberative process, there may be some new answers on offer within the collective Australian political psyche. Without it, the inevitable conflict could be guaranteed to ensure we remain exactly where we are, even though that is not where the majority of the population think we should be.

**Conclusions: How interested are Australians in change?**

The early parts of this article suggested the

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35 See below at 189.
36 See below at 187.
37 See below at 189.
38 “Time to redraw the lines on the map”, Courier-Mail (4 September 2001), p 11.
apparent normality of respondents’ views on broad issues of democracy and federation, and presented the results of questions about the future of Australian federalism. The latter part explored evidence about the problematic relation between concepts of “regionalism” and “statehood”. What does the combination of evidence suggest about the overall extent to which Australians — in this case, Queenslanders — are really interested in change?

The surprising result was the indication from the random sample that perhaps 62 per cent of Queensland adults are looking forward to a structure which in 100 years will be something other than that existing today. However, this evidence does not necessarily answer how much change respondents are prepared to contemplate before conflict over the options makes them retreat to the safety of no change. Further, even if we ascertain the dimensions of change which Australian citizens are prepared to discuss, is it adequate to conclude that because a majority of the population favours change, any change will actually follow? Precedents such as the 1999 republic referendum suggest otherwise.

This question leads to the first of three major conclusions from this pilot. Against assumptions that most Australians simply do not, or cannot, think about such issues, it becomes clear that it is both possible and important to more accurately establish the boundaries of public interest in constitutional change. In the case of Australia’s federal structure, this can be done by contrasting the evidence of a simple preparedness to consider change, with evidence about how respondents might actually imagine the result. This evidence comes, again, from the responses about the number of regions or States considered “ideal” for Australia. This data not only helps indicate possible common ground between options, but provides a means of measuring the extent of change towards which respondents are inclined.

Table 6 highlights this in relation to the local government and self-selecting respondents. Seventy-eight percent of these respondents chose an option implying a readiness for change (B, C or D). However, analysed according to whether they had in mind “major” change (more than 30 State or regional governments), “moderate” change (between 10 and 30 States or regions) or relatively “minor” change (less than 10 States or regions), a more refined picture emerges. Only 54 per cent of the respondents, not 78 per cent, have a preference for moderate or major change. Even if representative of society as a whole, these reform enthusiasts would be unlikely to be able to carry a reform proposal to fruition in the absence of a wider consensus, even assuming they could agree on the optimum type of change in the first place.

With this insight, we can revise our assessment of the extent of interest in change amongst the population as a whole (Table 7). Assuming a similar spread of ideas about “ideal” numbers, we can extrapolate that while 62 per cent of the population is interested in change, those interested in moderate to major change may be closer to 40 per cent. Moreover, this section of the population would need to agree on the general type of change before it would be safe to describe it as a coherent body of public opinion. Even assuming theoretical barriers were resolved between different options, on this analysis the single biggest group of respondents ceases to be those interested in various possibilities for reform, and becomes those content with the status quo. Confronted with any conflict over the direction of change, those interested in consistent but minor change could well be anticipated to opt for the current system, immediately ensuring a “no change” majority. If the options remain beset by theoretical conflicts, for example if all those favouring more States decided to opt for the status quo despite in some cases desiring major change, the prospects for change revert from promising to minimal.

Figures 7 and 8 present the same result graphically. Figure 7 shows the split of views for the telephone sample, presented in terms of “change versus no change”, while figure 8 repeats the same views if interpreted according to the extent of change. The parallels with the reform dilemmas confronted by republicans become even more obvious. Figure 8 provides a clear picture of how it is possible to have a population largely positive about its political heritage and future, open-minded
towards, if not positively interested in, the possibility of change, which is nevertheless incapable of acting on that interest. Perhaps here we begin to see more of the real story of 20th century Australian federalism.

Based on this evidence, the second major conclusion is that opinion leaders need to make a more informed assessment of the key points of tension in debate about constitutional change before taking positions on its value or viability. If some consider talk of change to be dangerous, then simplistic notions about change must be considered more so — whether these be overgeneralisations that federalism is inherently flawed, or more recently, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”. The views depicted in Figure 8 show it is illusory to posit issues of structural change in terms of “Australian federalism — yes or no”, or even “change — yes or no”. The real points of tension are between different types, scales and criteria for change, as much as any tension between the idea of change itself and the security of the status quo. These points come down to vision, even if this is not something for which Australian politics is recently famous. On one hand, a probable majority of Australians (or at least Queenslanders) do have some kind of positive vision — they do not think the structure is broken, but are nevertheless capable of seeing ways in which it could be improved, if only their political system provided the necessary deliberative tools to define the direction these improvements should take. On the other hand, the political skill required to exploit conflicts between such views and thus prevent change is far lower but perhaps more familiar to us than the skill needed to find the right change for the modern world.

Thirdly and finally, it is clear that definite conclusions about attitudes to federalism and structural change across Australia depend on more research. This project was only ever intended as a pilot. Within Queensland, despite a century of constitutional stasis and 25 years of increasing academic confidence in the permanence of Australia’s federal system, public attitudes remain alive with old and new ideas about how that system might evolve. However much students of political culture might surmise that similar results could exist elsewhere, this requires a national project working with refined and expanded research tools. Until that occurs, various conclusions remain hypotheses in the process of development.

In To Constitute a Nation, historian Helen Irving emphasised the idea that Australians chose their 20th century political form in the course of a “Utopian moment”:

“… a time of both optimism and dismay, of disillusionment with old constitutional relations and of confidence in the local ability to forge new ones.”

These results suggest that while this kind of utopian capacity can surely ebb and flow in Australian political thinking, if it ever left us then it may also have recently returned. How is it to be turned to best effect in charting the best possible path for our system of government? This becomes a 21st century challenge not just for individual Australians but for our political system itself.

Acknowledgments

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43 See, for example, Walter, Tunnel Vision: The Failure of Political Imagination (1996).


Table 1: Responses to “Australian Regionalism: Federation to Future” survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collection method</th>
<th>Telephone interview</th>
<th>Written survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Local government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samples</td>
<td></td>
<td>Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total responses</td>
<td>3 minute i/view by NFO CM Research 4 &amp; 5 Sept 01</td>
<td>Hand distributed &amp; collected LGAQ Annual Conference 4 Sept 01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid responses (eg Qld residence)</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>301</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=301</td>
<td>n=259</td>
<td>n=704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Stratified random sample, weighted results accurate to within ±5.6% at 95% level of confidence</td>
<td>Unknown - 48 mayors, 108 councillors, 45 CEOs, 12 other officers &amp; 46 other Qld-residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range/mean</td>
<td>18-&gt;60 / 40</td>
<td>20-&gt;60+ / 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean gender (% male)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean location (% metropolitan)</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Satisfaction with democracy and federation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% (n=301)</th>
<th>“On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with …”</th>
<th>Correlations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the way democracy works in Australia?” (Q1)</td>
<td>% of those who answered similarly to Q1, as to Q4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the way the federation currently works in Australia?” (Q4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly satisfied</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Satisfied</td>
<td><strong>78%</strong></td>
<td><strong>82%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very satisfied</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all satisfied</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Dissatisfied</td>
<td><strong>20%</strong></td>
<td><strong>16%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Don’t Know)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

46 While the written surveys perhaps encouraged a high correlation by asking this question as Q2 directly after the democracy question, the telephone interviews asked this as the fourth and final question, having first led respondents to think about federation in critical structural terms. This reduced the likelihood of an automatic parallel answer to Q1 or an answer based on satisfaction with, say, the current federal government or with centenary of federation celebrations — and makes the apparent satisfaction with the federal system all the more striking.
### Table 3: Importance of select reform issues in federation’s second century

> "Which of the following issues are going to be most important in development of the federation over the next 100 years?" (Q2/Q5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Total (n=301)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total (n=259)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total (n=704)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Local govt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Written &amp; internet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Developing a Bill of Rights</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. More direct say for the people in govt decisions</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reforming the structure, eg changing no of states</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Stronger leadership by politicians</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Becoming a republic</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D: % of those in sample dissatisfied with democracy, citing issue to be of high importance.
F: % of those in sample dissatisfied with federation, citing issue to be of high importance.
Table 4: Preferences for future constitutional structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred option</th>
<th>Telephone (n=301)</th>
<th>Local government (n=259)</th>
<th>Courier-Mail (n=704)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. The same system as today.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. The same three tiers but with a larger number of States.</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. A two-tiered system, with regional governments replacing State government.</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. A four-tiered system, with regional governments as well as the States.</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>9%(^{47})</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total preferring no change (A)</strong></td>
<td><strong>29%</strong></td>
<td><strong>22%</strong></td>
<td><strong>12%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total preferring change (B, C, D + Other)</strong></td>
<td><strong>62%</strong></td>
<td><strong>76%</strong></td>
<td><strong>87%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Total)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(100%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(100%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(100%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{47}\) “Don’t knows” are presumed to include “Other” for the telephone sample.
Table 5: Expectations for future constitutional structure

"Australia currently has a 3-tiered system of federal, state and local government. Thinking forward, which of the following best reflects how you think our system will probably look 100 years from now?" (Q3a/6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expected option</th>
<th>Telephone (n=301)</th>
<th>Local government (n=259)</th>
<th>Courier-Mail (n=704)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Same as today.</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Same three tiers, larger number of States.</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Two-tier, regional govts replacing States.</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Four-tier, regional govts and States.</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know / Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Totals**
- 1: 100%
- 2: 51%
- 3: 63%

1 Telephone percentages reflect weighting for statistical validity.
2 Totals include expectations of change for nominated options only.
3 Totals include expectations of change for ‘other’ options (local government and Courier-Mail).
Table 6: Implied extent of change (local government and Courier-Mail samples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred option</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Minor (&lt;10)</th>
<th>Moderate (10-30)</th>
<th>Major (&gt;30)</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Same as today.</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Same three tiers but larger no of States.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Two-tiered system, regional govs.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Four-tiered system, regional govs &amp; States.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/other</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Adjusted real preferences for change (Telephone sample/table 4 revised)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred option</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Same as today.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Same three tiers but larger no of States.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Two-tiered system, regional govs.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Four-tiered system, regional govs &amp; States.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/other</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. 'Ideal' number of States and/or regions for Australia

Figure 2. Ideal number of States (all preferences)
After the Party: Public Attitudes to Australian Federalism, Regionalism and Reform in the 21st Century

Figure 5. Ideal number of regions/States (all status quo preferences)

Figure 6. Ideal number of regions/States (Courier-Mail)
Figure 7. Preference for change by option (Table 4, Telephone)

- No change
- Change
- Don’t know

Preference for change (% of respondents (n=301))

- Same as today
- Same three tiers - larger number of States
- Two-tiered system - regional govts replacing States
- Four-tiered system - regional govts as well as States
- Don’t know

Figure 8. Preference for change by extent and option (Table 7)

- No change
- Minor (<10)
- Moderate (10-30)
- Major (>30)
- Don’t know

Extent of change implied (no of regions/States)

- Same as today
- Same three tiers - larger number of States
- Two-tiered system - regional govts replacing States
- Four-tiered system - regional govts as well as States
- Don’t know