



Unit 6: The Constitution, Federalism and Westminster System – Year 6 - Civics and Citizenship (C & C) Strand: Government & Democracy

Topic 6.2: Introducing different elements in the Australian Constitution, Westminster influences, and the covering clauses and Preamble.

## Why was the name 'Commonwealth of Australia' chosen and what is the Commonwealth of Nations today?

Most of us would think that our country is called 'Australia'. But if you open a copy of the Constitution you will notice that its official name is the 'Commonwealth of Australia'. You might have also heard the federal Government being called the 'Commonwealth Government'.

The Commonwealth Constitution was written over a period of about a decade before federation in 1901. It was Henry Parkes, affectionately known as the father of federation, who proposed the term 'Commonwealth' when the drafting process of the Constitution was beginning. A vote was taken and a substantial majority of the delegates at the 1891 Constitutional Convention in Sydney accepted the name 'Commonwealth of Australia'.

The British Colonies that became the six States were not uniting into one colony out of fear or after a war, but for the common good.

At the later Constitutional Conventions other potential names were discussed. In their 1901 *Commentaries on the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia*, Quick and Garran wrote:

'Other names were submitted for consideration, such as "United Australia," "Federated Australia," "The Australian Dominion," "The Federated States of Australia," &c., but the name Commonwealth was generally accepted.'

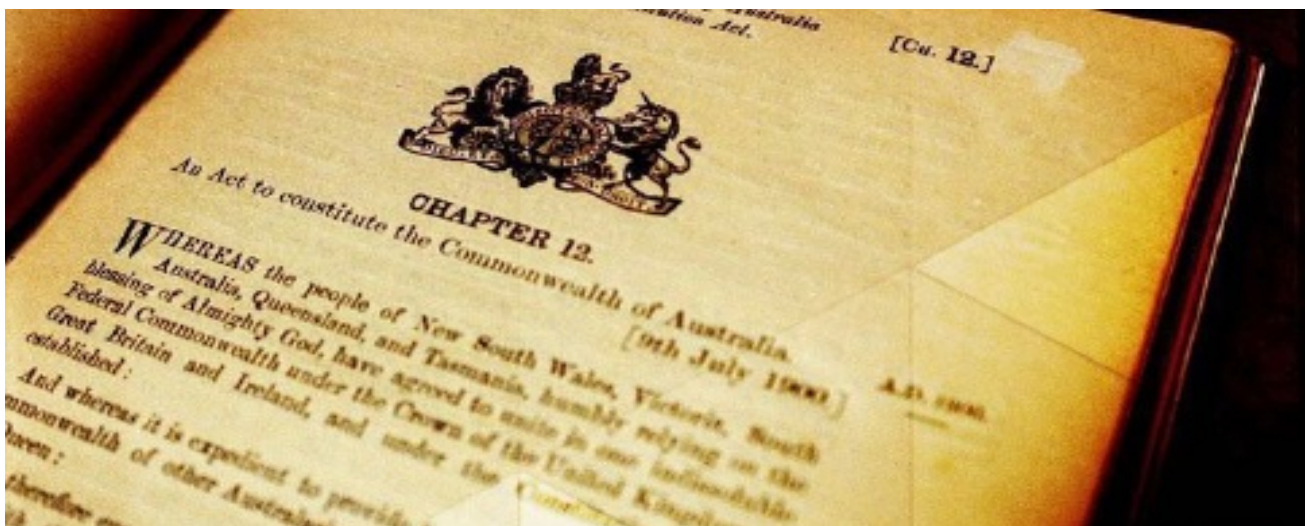
They continued:

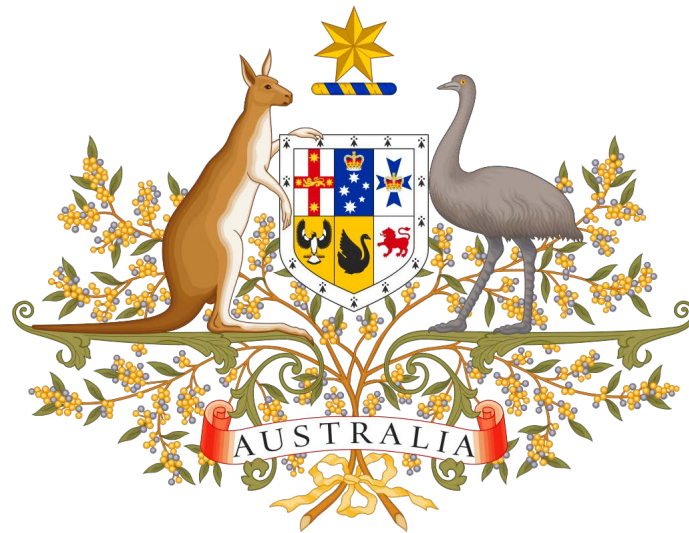
'According to the derivation of the term from "common" and "weal," or "wealth" it signified common well-being or common good.'

### Common good

Many philosophers and thinkers have mused over this term, going back to ancient Greece. Generally, the common good is defined

*The Australian Constitution*  
Source: Wiki Commons





*Australia's Coat of Arms  
Source: Wiki Commons*

throughout history as government that operates for the good of all citizens, and is not taken over by special interests. The Webster Dictionary, in 1901, defined 'Commonwealth' as follows:

'A Commonwealth is a State consisting of a certain number of men united by compact, or tacit agreement under one form of government and one system of laws. It is applied more appropriately to governments which are considered free or popular, but rarely or improperly to absolute governments. Strictly, it means a government in which the general welfare is regarded rather than the welfare of any particular class.'

The current Webster Dictionary (now known as Merriam Webster) is not as poetic with its definition these days, but the phrase common good is mentioned:

'A commonwealth is a nation, state, or other political unit: such as

- a) one founded on law and united by compact or tacit agreement of the people for the common good
- b) one in which supreme authority is vested in the people
- c) a republic.'

It then goes on to describe different individual uses of the word Commonwealth (with a capital

C), and includes the Commonwealth of Nations (formerly the British Commonwealth or Empire).

You will notice that there is a definition of commonwealth as a republic. This meaning for the word 'commonwealth' was a concern for some of the people who wrote our Constitution. Speaking about republicanism back then was very unpopular. According to Quick and Garran, a few delegates dissented on the vote to call the new federation the 'Commonwealth of Australia':

'The only objections raised to it being that it was suggestive of republicanism, owing to its association with the Commonwealth of England, under Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate.'

Most, including Quick and Garran, accepted, however, that the term 'Commonwealth' was a 'grand old word, rich in meaning and tradition' which had been developed before the English Civil War and did not necessarily imply a republic.

## **Cromwell's Protectorate**

There was a brief period of British history when the monarchy was replaced by a republic. It only lasted for just over a decade from 1649 when Parliament declared England to be a Commonwealth. Later, from 1653, it became known as the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland, or the Protectorate.

It wasn't a particularly democratic republic in the sense that we would expect now (you would more

# Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act.

A N A C T

*Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act*  
*Source: National Archives of Australia*

likely describe it as a military dictatorship) and it began with the execution of King Charles I. Oliver Cromwell was the mastermind behind the coup and took on the role of the Lord Protector of the republic. When Cromwell died in 1658 his son took over that role. However, the army that had supported Cromwell and kept the Government in place didn't support his son. In May 1660 the restoration of the monarchy occurred, but with the underlying principles of parliamentary democracy. The term 'Commonwealth' then went out of fashion for some time.

## A federated Australia for the common good

The six Australian colonies agreed to unite in 1901 in one 'indissoluble Federal Commonwealth'. This meant that tasks that could be better performed by a central government for the common good could be allocated to the Commonwealth Government. The structure of the federal system was designed to leave most functions, however, to the States because they are closer to the people. Most of the powers that the new Commonwealth Parliament could exercise are set out in section 51 of the Constitution. Over time, as Australia's nationhood developed, the Commonwealth level of government has become more powerful as the interpretation of Commonwealth legislative and executive powers has expanded.

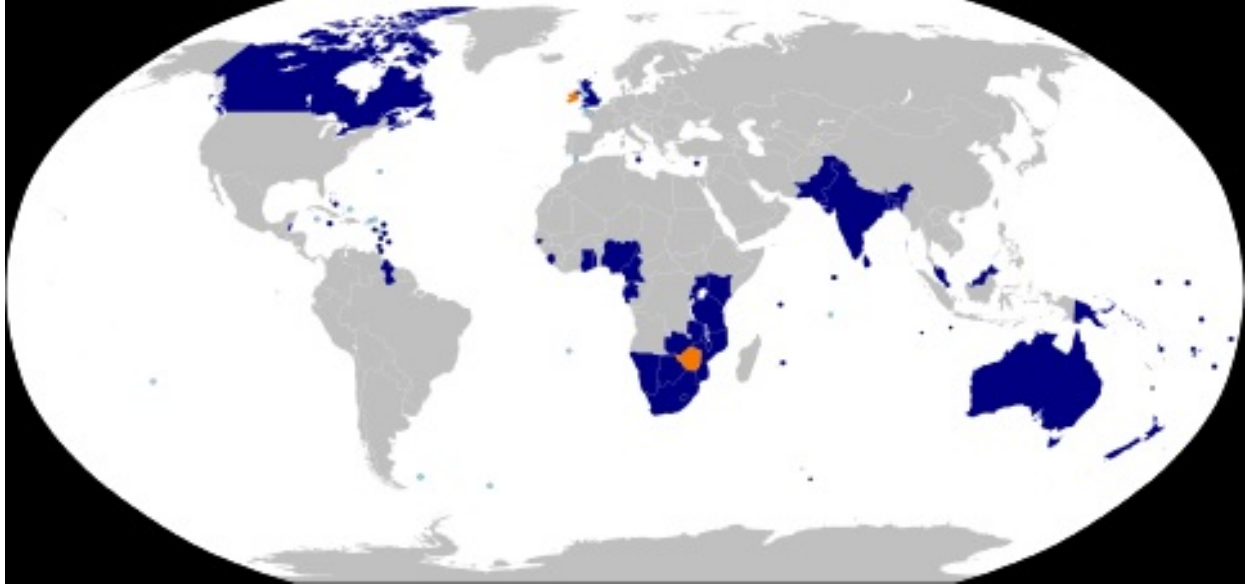
## What is the Commonwealth of Nations?

The Commonwealth of Nations, generally known simply as the Commonwealth, is a political association of 56 member states, almost all of which are former territories of the British Empire going back to the days of colonisation. The chief institutions of the organisation are the Commonwealth Secretariat, which focuses on intergovernmental aspects, and the Commonwealth Foundation, which focuses on non-governmental relations amongst member states.

The Commonwealth dates back to the first half of the 20th century with the decolonisation of the British Empire through increased self-governance of its territories. The Balfour Declaration made at the 1926 Imperial Conference stated that Britain and her Dominions were equal in status. This was formalised in law by the enactment of the *Statute of Westminster* in 1931. This equal status was the foundation of what was known as the British Commonwealth of Nations. The current Commonwealth of Nations was formally constituted by the London Declaration in 1949, which modernised the community and established the member states as "free and equal".

The head of the Commonwealth was Queen Elizabeth II until her death on September 8 2022.





*Current Commonwealth members (dark blue), former members (orange), and the British Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies (light blue)*

*Source: Wiki Commons*

The 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting recognised Charles, Prince of Wales, to be the Queen's designated successor, although the position of Head of the Commonwealth is not hereditary. King Charles is now Head of the Commonwealth, which is comprised of 15 Commonwealth realms, of which Australia is one, 36 republics and 5 countries which have their own monarchs.

Member states have no legal obligations to one another but are connected through their use of the English language and historical ties. Their stated shared values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law are enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter.

Commonwealth values are also promoted by the quadrennial Commonwealth Games.

In 2018, the Commonwealth Games were held at the Gold Coast, Queensland, in Australia.

Did you know that the 2026 Commonwealth Games are to be held in regional Victoria, with events taking place in a number of different places including Geelong, Bendigo, Ballarat, Gippsland and Shepparton?



Commonwealth Flag  
Source: Wiki Commons



## Topic 6.2: Lesson/ Activities Four



**AUSTRALIAN  
CONSTITUTION  
CENTRE**

Why does the Constitution call our country the Commonwealth of Australia and understanding the concept of common good

Time/Lesson	Learning Goal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1 hour</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Students will know why the Constitution gives Australia the official name.</li><li>"Commonwealth of Australia" and how that name was chosen.</li></ul>
Rationale	Success Criteria
<p>Students will understand that...</p> <p>the meaning of the 'Commonwealth' in general terms is 'the common well-being or common good'.</p>	<p>Students will understand...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>That in 1901 the six British colonies agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown and the Constitution, for the common good.</li><li>The descriptions of the Commonwealth of Australia in the Australian Constitution covering clauses, and in particular clauses 3 and 6 and why the name Commonwealth was chosen.</li></ul>
Teaching Reference Document	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>TRD 52: Why was the name 'Commonwealth of Australia' chosen and what is the Commonwealth of Nations today?</li></ul>	
Resources	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Thinking routine: Q &amp; As</li><li>Pocket Edition of Australia's Constitution or online copy</li></ul>	
Teacher Instruction	
<p>Lesson outlines and guiding questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Research the meaning of the Commonwealth. Why is a country called a Commonwealth? Which four States in the United States call themselves a Commonwealth?</li><li>Use the thinking routine question to start to understand why the name Commonwealth of Australia was chosen (Resource 1).</li><li>Each student to look at a copy of Australia's Constitution at the covering clauses and consider what is meant by the term Commonwealth in clause 3 (Proclamation of Commonwealth) and clause 6 (Definitions).</li><li>Use the thinking routine options explosion to come up with alternative names to that of the Commonwealth of Australia. Ask the class to vote on its preferred name.</li><li>Create a poster detailing the reasons for Australia being called the Commonwealth of Australia.</li><li>Brainstorm "ideas for the Australian nation" and have each student list 12 things they think are really important to Australia.</li></ul>	

## Differentiation/Enrichment

Differentiation opportunities:

- Performance tasks allow for students to show their understanding in different styles.
- Have there been any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander medal winners? Explore their stories, such as the story of Cathy Freeman.

## Assessment Strategies

Assessment tasks following lesson activities:

- Produce an infographic, produce a 3 minute film, or write an opinion piece for a newspaper on how Australia today is a nation founded on law and united under the Constitution for the common good.

