

# **The organisation and management of intergovernmental relations in Australia**

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## **Introduction**

In December 2007 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), chaired by the new ALP Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, proclaimed in its communiqué that its leaders recognized there was:

...a unique opportunity for Commonwealth-State cooperation, to end the blame game and buck passing, and to take major steps forward for the Australian community (COAG 2007b).

It announced that a new, more extensive, COAG Reform Agenda (CRA), would be developed, focusing on:

- reforms to federal-state financial relations, centred on the Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations (IAFFR), and the provision of financial incentives for reform;
- the reorganisation of COAG's work activities, with Commonwealth ministers becoming the chairs of seven new working groups and, in 2009, a review of ministerial councils;
- an expanded role for the new COAG Reform Council (CRC).

In also agreeing to meet four times in 2008, a substantial increase on its average of two meetings a year in the previous three years, COAG signaled its commitment to driving the development and implementation of the outlined reforms.

The aims of this paper are, firstly, to outline the major features of the system for organising and managing Australian federal-state relations prior to the election of the Rudd Government in November 2007; and secondly, to describe and assess the extent to which the changes that have occurred in the subsequent two years represent major reforms to the system for intergovernmental management that existed prior to the ascent of the Rudd Government. Thus, the first section briefly outlines the major characteristics of the system for organizing intergovernmental relations that existed before the Rudd Government took office in late 2007; and the second section will focus on the recent years in terms of four major areas: COAG and the system of ministerial councils; COAG's work and the National Reform Agenda; the finance of federal-state relations; the National Competition Council and the onset of the CRC.

## **Organizing and managing Australian intergovernmental relations before 2007**

### *COAG and the system of ministerial councils*

The introduction of COAG in the context of the microeconomic reforms initiated in the early 1990s demonstrated the then leaders' lack of confidence in the established ministerial council forums that had slowly proliferated since federation. It was felt that most of the existing councils had demonstrated limited capacity and performance, often failing to make rapid, or any, progress in major policy reforms. There was no ministerial council with the authority or capacity to initiate and drive the wide ranging reform agenda that was then envisaged, for example, in relation to National Competition Policy. The ongoing commitment and involvement of the heads of government was needed through a permanent ministerial council. While a number of SPCs had been held in the

past for one-off issues, the new challenge was to undertake wide ranging reform with continuity of political effort. There was a recognition that a more permanent body would be needed to drive and oversee the reform effort; and would provide greater status and recognition for the cooperative, federal-state activities that would be undertaken. In addition, the annual meeting known as the Premiers' Conference had become a narrow forum focused on gaining 'agreement' to the distribution of federal grants. It was a forum with which Premiers had become increasingly dissatisfied, with little opportunity for discussion of substantial issues and no real negotiation (Edwards and Henderson 1995, Weller 1996).

Hence, the new COAG system – whose operational dynamic was provided largely by central agencies (notably Prime Minister, Premiers and Treasury departments) – came into being in 1992 alongside the existing system of ministerial councils. While the latter were reviewed and reduced in number during the 1990s, their relationship with the new COAG system initially was not made explicit. The ministerial council members comprised those ministers from each specific line portfolio; each council had a small secretariat and a support network of subsidiary committees, task forces and working groups. For example, the current Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs has a network of seventeen subsidiary bodies (MCEECDYA 2009).

In 1996, with a new federal coalition government under Prime Minister Howard, there was a distinct slow-down in COAG's policy development activities and performance. In part this was because many of the reform processes that had been initiated under the Hawke and Keating governments were heavily engaged in substantial implementation, not new policy development, for example the hundreds of reviews of legislation required in the NCP process which was ongoing until 2006. Also, the focus of the first Howard government was on reducing the size of the Commonwealth deficit, cutting budgets and revenue flows to the state and territory governments, rather than new policy reforms entailing further expenditure. Hence, COAG met only four times between 1996 and 2001.

The continued, parallel existence of the COAG system and the ministerial councils meant there was clear potential for unnecessary duplication. This was recognised in the 1995 COAG agreement to subject all ministerial councils to the 'COAG Principles and Guidelines on National Standard Setting', a structured set of procedures for policy development that culminated in a regulatory impact statement (RIS) requirement. Further clarification of the relationship between the COAG and ministerial council systems also took place in 2004, with ministerial council decisions now to be reported annually both to COAG and to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Appropriate consultation with all parties in all jurisdictions was to be undertaken, with minutes, lists of resolutions and relevant papers being circulated to Premiers' departments and to COAG (COAG 2004).

#### *Organising federal-state relations: COAG's work activities and the NRA*

At the most senior level, the formal aspects of the organization of intergovernmental relations, as noted above, focused on COAG. In essence, COAG's creation in 1992

distilled the organizational and management experience of the Special Premiers' Conferences that had taken place over the previous five years. It was intended as a forum for policy development and reform regarding issues of national importance that required national, cooperative action (Edwards and Henderson 1995: 22; Head 2007). At its peak were the heads of government, sitting as the Council, whose enthusiasm and commitment were vital for substantive, continuing progress on any matter. They were served by the COAG Senior Officials committee, drawn from the federal, state and territory governments. In turn, a number of subsidiary committees were established, some standing (e.g. the Working Group on Microeconomic Reform, chaired by the Commonwealth), most of more limited, though sometimes lengthy duration, each addressing key areas of reform. Some were chaired by state government officials, some by commonwealth, but all drew upon mixed teams of officials (e.g. the Committee on Regulatory Reform, chaired by NSW). All of the committees reported to COAG through the Senior Officials Committee (Edwards and Henderson 1995, Weller 1996).

Nevertheless, COAG remained a focus for both organizing and managing intergovernmental relations, as can be seen in the 1999 Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations in relation to the GST. Also, at first slowly, then at an accelerating pace, the years after 2002 saw COAG again becoming a more active centre for policy development, leading, endorsing and driving substantial agreed reforms regarding, for example, counter-terrorism, a national water trading and water management system and a national energy regulation system (Parkin and Anderson 2007). It became particularly active in 2006 following the successful promotion of what became known as the National Reform Agenda (NRA) in COAG by the state governments, led by Victoria (see Carroll and Head 2009).

As had been the case in the 1992-96 period, COAG decided to deal with the work involved in the development and implementation of the NRA by creating three major working groups, the Human Capital, Competition and Regulatory Reform groups, coordinating and directing a range of both new and established committees and groups, including, somewhat unusually, a number of ministerial councils (COAG 2006a, 2006b). In addition, it instituted three relatively new developments, also in 2006. The first two were introduced at the February 2006 meeting of COAG, the concept of Intergovernmental Action Plans (IAPs) and, in principle, an independent COAG Reform Council.

Each IAP, to be agreed by COAG, was to be developed by the relevant committee, setting out their agreed outcomes, commitments, progress measures, related actions and milestones. This was a more systematic, planned approach to policy development and implementation than had characterised the organisation and management of COAG in 1992, although the working group proposals that came to the Senior Officials Group and Council had increasingly displaying these characteristics as COAG matured.

#### *Finance and federal-state relations to 2007*

The introduction of the GST in a time of solid economic growth reduced many of the traditional financial concerns of the state governments, though they were left with an

almost equally irritating concern, the ever-expanding system of conditional grants for ‘Specific Payment Purposes’ (SPPs) from the Commonwealth. Such grants enabled the Commonwealth to intervene at the state level by prescribing policy and program conditions for state and territory grant expenditures. State Premiers also regularly complained about what they saw as unnecessarily tight controls on their use of the grant funds.

An attempt to reduce the complexity of SPPs, by the adoption of a system that focused on the rigorous audit of program outcomes, rather than the existing emphasis on input controls, had been put forward by Heads of Commonwealth and State Treasuries in 1999, but was rejected by the Howard Government. It was a complaint revived again in the early stages of the NRA by the Victorian Government, in a report that stressed how SPPs hindered the efficient administration of programs in health and education (Allen Consulting 2004). However, the complaint fell on deaf ears so that federal-state financial relations again became a bone of contention.

In addition, a new element had been added to the situation in the shape of the Premiers’ claims for funding for the NRA reform process. They stated that agreement to the NRA would be dependent on ‘a funding agreement that supports and encourages reform by all governments, and results in a fair sharing of costs and benefits’ (CAF 2007: 9). They were keen to see, as with the earlier National Competition Policy process, the establishment of a substantial fund to provide incentives and rewards (a ‘dividend’ for their efforts – see Brumby 2006, and CAF 2007, plus its attached letter to Prime Minister Howard). However, Prime Minister Howard would not agree to an incentive payment arrangement before the NRA reform program had been finalised. He did agree that he would

...provide funding to the States and Territories on a case-by-case basis once specific implementation plans have been developed if funding is needed to ensure a fair sharing of the costs and benefits of reform (COAG 2006a).

The Commonwealth’s position on funding for the NRA was reiterated at the July 2006 and April 2007 COAG meetings, the final two held under the auspices of Prime Minister Howard before his defeat at the November 2007 election (COAG 2006b, 2007a). At the April 2007 meeting, to the disappointment of the Premiers, he noted that any payments to the states and territories would not include generic, up-front payments, with the decision to be made by the Commonwealth, not by the proposed Commonwealth Reform Council (COAG 2007a, CAF 2007). As might be expected, with a national election due later in 2007, progress on funding became non-existent.

#### *From the National Competition Council to the COAG Reform Council*

The NCC had been established by COAG in November 1995 to act as a policy advisory body to oversee the implementation of COAG’s National Competition Policy reform. Although funded by the Commonwealth it was accountable to all jurisdictions through COAG. A key part of the NCC’s original role was to assess whether state and territory governments had met the conditions necessary in order to receive National Competition Policy incentive payments from the Commonwealth, thus acting, in effect, as an

independent assessor. At times it received strong criticisms from several Premiers, especially when it recommended against making payments to state governments for lack of progress in achieving agreed reform targets (Heyward 2004).

Nevertheless, the Premiers pushed hard for the establishment of an NCC-type body for the new, wider NRA process, regarding it as likely to make more objective funding recommendations than would the Commonwealth Government, especially where the latter was controlled by Prime Minister Howard. It was initially discussed and agreed to in principle at the February 2006 COAG meeting, where it was envisaged as an independent statutory body to replace the National Competition Council (NCC), with a final decision on its precise role to be determined at a later COAG meeting.

As might be expected given the political and financial implications of an independent CRC, the Howard Government was quite slow in regard to the development of the CRC, and the Prime Minister took until February 2007 to appoint Paul McClintock as chair of the new body (McMullan 2007). Not only was progress slow, at the April 2007 COAG meeting Prime Minister Howard stated, as noted above, that any decisions regarding funding would be made by the Commonwealth, rather than by the CRC as had been requested by the Premiers (COAG 2007a, CAF 2007).

Hence, in summary, as the time for the 2007 federal election drew near the system for organising and managing federal state relations in Australia can be characterised as:

- In structural terms, somewhat of a binary system, consisting of COAG and a cautiously revived set of key committees focused on the NRA, together with the ministerial councils, loosely linked to COAG through a simple monitoring and reporting system, as well as the use of a common, COAG mandated, regulatory impact assessment system. It should be stressed that COAG was a creation of, and dominated by, the Commonwealth government, albeit with the unanimous agreement of the states and territories. It was the Prime Minister who initiated COAG meetings and controlled the setting of the agenda, though the Premiers could and did influence both the agenda and the progress of its meetings.
- Increasingly acrimonious as regards federal-state financial relations, focused on the SPPs and Prime Minister Howard's position regarding the CRC's role, both in general, and in relation to funding for the NRA, especially up-front payments.

It was a system that was operating in an increasingly politicised environment as the 2007 elections drew near, with the Labor Premiers increasingly irritated at what they saw as the increasingly centralist conservative government of Prime Minister Howard, considerable peak business association support for major changes to Australia's federal system, and a lack of progress in driving the NRA (Parkin and Anderson 2007, Business Council of Australia 2007).

## **Recent developments in the organisation and management of Australian inter-governmental relations: change, reform, or more of the same?**

The aim of this section is to describe and assess the major characteristics of the system for organizing and managing Australian intergovernmental relations in the first two years of the Rudd Government since November 2007. There is little doubt that new Prime Minister was keen to usher in major change, given both his previous experience of federal-state relations when a senior public servant in Queensland in the earlier 1990s, the positions he and the ALP had adopted in the 2007 election and the fact that on coming to office all of the state Premiers were drawn from the ALP (McMullan 2007). The section focuses on three major areas: COAG and the system of ministerial councils; COAG's work, the CRA and the role of Commonwealth ministers; the finance of federal-state relations and the role of the CRC.

### *COAG and the system of ministerial councils*

In a low key announcement buried in the Communique from the April 2009 COAG meeting, it was announced that

Ministerial Councils are an integral part of the framework of intergovernmental arrangements in Australia and, in some cases, across the Tasman. In order to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of these arrangements, COAG agreed that Dr Allan Hawke will lead a review of Ministerial Councils. Dr Hawke is to report to COAG in November 2009 (COAG 2009a).

At the time of writing (October-November 2009), Dr Hawke's report on ministerial councils had not been completed, nor had there been a COAG discussion paper publicly released related to the topic, although substantial discussions have taken place with chairs and staff of the ministerial councils. It is scheduled for discussion at the December 2009 COAG meeting.

The low-key announcement of the review seems to have been a response to rising concerns with the existing, binary, COAG and ministerial council system. State leaders, for example, had initiated a 'Best Practice Federalism' project in 2008 to consider a range of reform possibilities (Council for the Australian Federation 2008). Victorian Premier Brumby, then chair of CAF, also argued on two occasions in 2008 that, in looking to the decade ahead, he would like to '...elevate the status of COAG and clarify the agenda of COAG', arguing that its current status and structure was outmoded, and that a new intergovernmental agreement should

- Clarify COAG's constitutional or legislative standing.
- Provide the states with the right to place items on the COAG agenda.
- Provide better opportunities for stakeholder participation.
- Formalise the role of the COAG Secretariat as an effective and independent secretariat, rather than as an appendage of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- Provide the CRC with clearer powers and independence.
- Provide for regular COAG meetings (Brumby 2008a, 2008b).

Brumby also went on to propose that the role of ministerial councils needed to be reviewed, especially their relationships with COAG working groups and COAG itself, arguing that these councils were too expensive to operate and consumed too much time for too few outcomes (Brumby 2008a). His views were mirrored in the recent 'Best Practice Federalism' report announced by CAF (Council for the Australian Federation 2009b). It is interesting to note that Brumby's concerns regarding COAG, as noted above, do not seem to have been included in the terms of reference for Dr Hawke, although the terms have not been made public, as far as the authors are aware.

What is clear is that when it comes to the initiation, development and implementation of major reforms that require extensive intergovernmental cooperation the ministerial councils have been, at least for the most part, regarded as inappropriate for such work, if for no other reason than the fact that they focus on relatively narrow, specialised areas of policy, rather than system-wide policy concerns. That is, there was no existing ministerial council with either the mandate for, or capacity to support, the type of extensive reforms envisaged in the early 1990s or, again, in 2006 in relation to the NRA or, most recently, the 2007 CRA.

However, it was not only a lack of a mandate or capacity that led to the development of COAG. Weller, for example, in an extract from a 1995 review of commonwealth-state reform processes commissioned by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, noted in relation to the Special Premiers Conferences (SPCs) that provided the model for COAG,

From the beginning there was a belief that the SPC might succeed in solving issues where ministerial councils had failed and a desire for the first SPC to be seen as a launching of a new initiative (Weller 1996: 97).

In other words it was also a sense of the failure of ministerial councils that led to the creation of the SPCs and then COAG.

What is surprising, at least in retrospect, is why successive Commonwealth governments, both ALP and Coalition, made little determined attempt to either improve the performance of the system of ministerial councils or to replace them with appropriate COAG committees. Moreover, while dissatisfaction with the ministerial councils might, in part, explain why COAG as the 'senior', ministerial council was established, it does not explain why new sets of COAG committees and working parties were created underneath the new Council with policy specific mandates, given that ministerial councils engaged in very much this type of work. It will be interesting to note the recommendations of Dr Hawke's report in these regards for, at least as regards the use of COAG and a related series of committees and working parties for pursuing the CRA, the advent of the Rudd Government has resulted in little significant change to the existing system.

#### *COAG's work, the CRA and the role of Commonwealth ministers*

As noted above, the bulk of COAG's work in the period leading up to the advent of the Rudd Government was dominated by the development of the NRA and the establishment of three major working groups, the Human Capital, Competition and Regulatory Reform

groups that, in turn, sprouted an increasing number of associated working parties. This organizational pattern changed significantly under the new Rudd Government in at least three ways. Firstly, COAG decided to incorporate the NRA within a new, broader, COAG Reform Agenda (CRA) that included a range of the ALP's federal election commitments. Secondly, there was a complete reorganisation of COAG's working groups, including the three NRA working groups, into seven COAG working groups responsible for seven broad areas of work: health and ageing; productivity; climate change and water; infrastructure; business regulation and competition; housing; indigenous reform. Thirdly, in what was a novel departure from previous practice, a Commonwealth minister was installed as the chair of each of the seven new working groups which, in turn, soon spawned a range of subordinate groups.

The changes had two major purposes. The first was to achieve 'more effective working arrangements' for the 'new model' of federal-state cooperation, with the new groups given only three months to draw up their detailed implementation plans in relation to the new government's election commitments, in addition to the NRA plans already in place (COAG 2007b). In addition, the incorporation of several key election commitments within the new CRA provided an expanded role for the Premiers and state governments in national policy making, a role largely denied them by Prime Minister Howard. The second was to demonstrate (very dramatically, by the placement of ministers as chairs), to all public and private stakeholders the high degree of priority the new Government gave to the COAG Reform Agenda. At the national level it gave a very clear sign to all public servants that their ministers were driving reform and that the administrative resources of key departments would be fully engaged.

The appointment of ministers as chairs of the working groups was a novel departure from past COAG practice. Their appointment introduced a more direct system of ministerial control and accountability over the reform processes, in contrast to the many examples from the 1990s when senior public servants had chaired the COAG major working parties. The new system enhanced control and accountability in the hands of Commonwealth ministers, albeit reporting to COAG. While the earlier working parties had normally ensured full ministerial and cabinet support for their work, this had not always occurred (Weller 1996: 108). Ministerial chairs represented a reassertion of, and preference for, the key role of elected political leaders in driving major policy reforms. While the appointment of Commonwealth ministers as chairs could have been interpreted as somewhat of a slight to the states, this was not initially, publicly criticised by state leaders. However, as somewhat of a counter-balance, in appointing both state and federal public servants to each of the seven working groups, the new Government was reaffirming its commitment to directly involve the states in decision making over national issues.

To date, the practice of ministerial chairs of COAG committees seems to have worked reasonably well, though the capacity of ministers to deal continuously with the workloads involved remains to be seen. A possible by-product may be more effective coordination with relevant ministerial councils, given that the new ministerial chairs are also key

members of those councils, and the more effective coordination of reform activities between Commonwealth and state departments in areas of shared responsibility. However, it was a development viewed with some concern by at least one Premier, John Brumby, who later noted that

...the accountability of COAG working groups could be improved and there is a mismatch – with the States represented at an officer level and the Commonwealth at a ministerial level (Brumby 2008a).

#### *Federal-state financial relations*

As noted, federal-state financial relations had deteriorated in the period up to December 2007, focused on the role of SPPs, funding for the NRA, especially up-front payments, and the role of the CRC in relation to funding. The new Rudd Government made the improvement of financial relationships a priority. It proposed and COAG accepted, the need for a new Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations (IAFFR), the reform of SPPs and very substantial funding for the CRA (COAG 2007b).

The result, some twelve months later, was the IAFFR, which commenced in January 2009 (Australian Government 2008). IAFFR entailed three changes. Firstly, it reaffirmed that GST payments could be used by the States for any purpose. This represented a reassurance for the states, rather than a change, but was welcomed after the threatened use of GST payments as a weapon in federal-state negotiations by the previous Treasurer, Peter Costello. Secondly, the complex system of over 90 SPPs was rationalised into five 'National SPPs', notably the National Healthcare SPP; National Schools SPP; National Skills and Workforce Development SPP; National Disability Services SPP; and National Affordable Housing SPP. Others may be added. This represented a welcome reduction in complexity for the states, and the new system entailed the removal of many of the prescriptive conditions on inputs that had reduced state discretion concerning implementation.

Thirdly, in return for the enhanced budget flexibility for the states regarding the National SPPs, the IAFFR introduced a system of public performance reporting against clearly specified performance indicators and benchmarks contained in the national agreements, to be monitored and assessed by a more powerful CRC. Moreover, the Productivity Commission was to report on the economic impacts and benefits of the CRA every two to three years (Australian Government 2008). However, performance reporting systems are by no means new in intergovernmental relations. They were a feature of the reforms introduced in the 1992-4 period and, in practice, have proved not to provide state governments with the degree of operating discretion they have sought (Monro 2003). Instead, they may well have increased the ability of the Commonwealth to monitor, assess and hold accountable the performance of state governments. Thus, the introduction of a new system of National Partnerships and related payments was intended as much to act as an incentive for reform and the improvement of service standards as it was to increase state government financial flexibility.

Overall, the new system for federal-state financial relations was similar in several respects to the unsuccessful 1999 proposal. However, with the prospect of an additional

\$7.1 billion in SPP funding over five years, plus \$8.1 billion for National Partnership payments, the financial incentives to undertake the NRA/COAG Reform Agenda that the Premiers had been requesting since 2006-07 were now in place (Australian Government 2008).

In addition, at the May 2008 COAG it was announced that the CRC would have a 'new and expanded role', consisting of the addition to its existing role of

- responsibility of reporting to the Prime Minister on the publication of nationally-comparable performance information for all jurisdictions in relation to individual national SPPs; and
- the independent assessment of predetermined milestones and performance benchmarks under the proposed National Partnership arrangements (COAG 2008a).

While the CRC's reports regarding the national SPPs were to be made public, its assessments in relation to National Partnership reward payments were not to be made public unless COAG specifically agreed to do so, reflecting their potential political sensitivity and earlier experience with similar NCC reports (COAG 2008b). Without any fanfare, the CRC's role was further expanded in July 2008, when it was given responsibility for assessing the performance of the parties to the Intergovernmental Agreement on Murray-Darling Basin Reform (COAG 2008c). In light of the much extended monitoring and assessment roles for the CRC, COAG agreed to provide an additional \$21 million between 2009-10 and 2012-13, jointly funded by the Commonwealth and state governments.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined a number of the major features of the system for organising and managing federal-state relations up to the election of the Rudd Government in November 2007 and the bulk of the changes that have taken place since that date. Our final task is to provide a provisional answer to the question of whether the post-2007 changes represent major reforms, while recognising it will be some time before the impact of the changes become fully apparent.

In terms of the overall structure or pattern for organizing the system there seems to have been little change, to date. The same, loosely coupled, binary system of COAG and ministerial councils still exists. It has been revitalised, but this process had begun, if more slowly and painfully, under the Howard governments from at least 2006. It is possible, of course, that Dr Hawke's report into ministerial councils might lead to significant change in their powers or in their alignment with the work of COAG. There seems to be little reason, for example, why the Ministerial Council for Health, Ageing, Community and Disability Services could not be more closely aligned with COAG's Health and Ageing Group, or the Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs with the Group for Indigenous Reform.

The management of the system has changed, however, in two important ways. First, the performance reporting system centred on the CRC, with its ambitious program of evaluations, could become the basis of a truly national reporting system. The increasing extent and complexity of intergovernmental relations as described above will generate increasing demands that they be held more fully accountable at both national and state levels, as noted by Premier Brumby. Secondly, the role of Commonwealth ministers in chairing the seven CRA groups and their associated web of working parties can be regarded as a significant change. Given the authority of ministers and the time pressures under which they operate, this represents a new degree of Commonwealth priority for managing intergovernmental relations in Australia. In that sense it is both a political and administrative response to the growing demands for a more effective federal system of government that had emerged with a new intensity in the previous two years. A strong cooperative element remains through the involvement of public servants from state governments.

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