The Australian Constitution establishes a federal system of Australian governance in which the states control their internal affairs and a federal parliament addresses the national agenda. This lesson investigates possibilities for future representation. Students develop and present proposals for a new division of powers within the Australian federation including new regional or state boundaries and conduct a quasi referendum to determine whether the proposal is supported or defeated.

**Outcomes**

Students will:

- describe the relationship between state and federal parliaments
- identify responsibilities shared between federal and state and territory governments
- explore an alternative federal structure by creating new state boundaries and redistributing power
- explain and justify the new federal model.

**Focus questions**

- What is a federation?
- Why did the Australian colonies federate?
- What are federal powers?
- What are state powers?
- Do you think the Australian federation needs revision? Why/why not?

**Concept words**

Governance • State government • State rights • Federation • Federalism
Commonwealth • Constitution • Referendum • Governor-General • Head of state
High Court of Australia • Representative democracy • Jurisdiction • Legislative powers
Geopolitical • Checks and balances • Economies of scale • Efficiency • Regions

**USEFUL TOOLS**

**Definitions**

Federation: a nation formed by the union of a number of states which give up some of their powers to the national parliament.

Commonwealth: an association of states or nations which are self-governing and share a common purpose.

Constitution: a written set of rules by which a nation or state within a nation is governed.

**Documents and resources**

PEO Fact Sheets:
- Australian Constitution
- Federation
Parliamentary Lesson Plan
A new federation

Getting started
1. Begin by asking: What is meant by the term federation?
2. Provide students with a relief map of Australia. Ask students to imagine they have been given the task of dividing the country into new political regions. What are the possibilities?
3. Invite students to brainstorm possible regional powers and possible federal powers. Put the lists under the heading ‘A new Australian federation—state and federal powers’.
4. Lead a discussion about what such a proposal would involve (formation of new states; a referendum; amendment to the Constitution)
5. Tell the students that a referendum is required to change the Constitution.

Main activity
Defining new borders
1. Divide the class into groups of 3 to 5 students. Ask each group to select a spokesperson.
2. Distribute 4 Australian data maps to each group for analysis. (population, rainfall, resource, topographic map etc.)
3. Ask each group to establish criteria for the redefined regions. (consider aspects of representation, size, land use, river catchments, landforms, population, regional identity, climate, proposed capitals etc.)
4. Groups draw alternative borders on a blank map of Australia including a capital city where each parliament will meet.

Defining new powers
1. Ask each group to select a second spokesperson.
2. Draw up a list of current federal and state powers e.g.
   - Federal: trade, taxation, immigration, defence, welfare, foreign affairs etc.
   - State: natural resources, transport, police, housing, emergency services, water etc.
3. Ask each group to establish criteria for a new division of power and responsibility. (consider aspects of cost, infrastructure, administration, efficiency, identity, scale, scope, revenue, responsibility, accountability, equity etc.)
4. Groups create a list of federal and state powers to match the needs of the new federation.

Holding a quasi referendum
1. Groups/spokespeople present and justify their proposals to the whole class.
2. Students vote to determine the most popular model and hold a quasi referendum on it. Tell students that in a referendum, voters would vote 'yes' or 'no' to the proposed model, and that to be approved 4 of 6 Australian states and a majority of voters overall must approve the change. (this could translate to a 2/3 majority of the class)

Debrief
1. Reflect on the group activities. Were any issues difficult to agree on? If so, what were they? Why?
2. What criteria were central to decisions about how to form new regions?
3. What criteria were central to decisions about how to divide power and responsibility?
4. Was there a conflict between how to provide adequate representation and how to distribute power equally?
5. What powers, if any, did all groups say should be controlled by the Commonwealth? Why?
6. What powers, if any, did all groups say should be controlled by the regions?

Parliamentary context
- What are some of the characteristics of the Australian federation? (written constitution, power distributed between states and the Commonwealth, parliaments to create the law, executive governments to administer the law and a judiciary to interpret the law and to settle disputes)
- If enough citizens wanted a new federal system, what steps could they take to achieve this? (petition federal Parliament for a referendum or parliamentary committee; organise a constitutional convention, lobby state and federal members of parliament; create an organisation promoting the cause etc.)

Extension activities
- Write a report of recent issues which illustrate conflict between state and federal governments. (euthanasia, nuclear waste and energy, wilderness and heritage, Mabo, gay union, industrial relations)
- Write a report demonstrating state and federal cooperation. Illustrate with examples. (Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme, social services, defence installations, commonwealth acquisition of state debt, natural disasters etc.)
- In 500 words trace the changing distribution of power between state and federal governments since Federation.