

Wren's Week: National Cabinet should be a model for government reform

By John Wren

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The success of the National Cabinet's operation during the pandemic could be a model for a better type of government, writes [John Wren](#).

ON MONDAY NIGHT, ABC's [Q+A](#) current affairs show featured the premiers of Australia's three biggest states on its panel: [Daniel Andrews](#) of Victoria, [Glady Berejiklian](#) of NSW and [Annastacia Palaszczuk](#) of Queensland. Two Labor and one Liberal. It was an important show for many reasons.

The states and territories have been doing the heavy lifting (all of them, not just the three above) during the pandemic. Australia's success at keeping the virus under control is due to the excellent work being done by state employees under the leadership of the premiers and chief ministers and their local scientific and medical advisors.

The pandemic has exposed the Federal Government, at least this one under Prime Minister [Scott Morrison](#) anyway, as powerless and petulant. In many cases, it has attempted to directly undermine the authority of state premiers, particularly Victoria's Daniel Andrews, who has emerged as the *de facto* [national leader](#) during the crisis. The Federal Government has shown itself to be more concerned about economics than the lives of Australians.

Given that the fundamental purpose of any government is the safety and wellbeing of its citizens, this has demonstrably been a major failure of the Morrison regime. Even as I write this, Morrison has marshalled his federal and state-based Liberal MPs to continue their attacks on Andrews. Unfortunately for Morrison, they are so [childish and inept](#), all they do is degrade the already blemished reputation of the Liberal Party even further.

In Victoria with control freak wowers like Dictator Dan running the show, you can't even sit down for a coffee, let alone a beer. Our Premier is such a friendless loser, of course Victoria has no plans to reopen licensed venues, who would invite Lurch for a drink? [#danhasnomates](#)
pic.twitter.com/rFGqJbGx9i

— Tim Smith MP (@TimSmithMP)
[May 13, 2020](#)

Morrison was not mentioned once during the entire Q+A show, further demonstrating how irrelevant he is.

This begs the question: do we actually need a Federal Government? The answer, of course, is yes, for both constitutional as well as national interest reasons (such as defence, currency and international trade). However, we can do better.

Australia has three levels of government — federal, state and local. There have been calls for years to remove a level of government and that has almost always been focused on the elimination of state and territory governments. The COVID-19 crisis has suggested that perhaps it's the Federal Government that needs reform.

Before I make my suggestion, I'd also like to add that Australia is long overdue becoming a republic. This tardiness is another legacy of [John Howard's miserable regime](#). Decades later, Howard's toxic miasma still lingers over Australia, stifling the economy and our cultural development. To paraphrase former PM [Paul Keating](#), no self-respecting nation has the flag of another on its own.

Our head of state (represented by the Governor-General) is a foreigner appointed for hereditary reasons rather than merit. It is also a requirement of this individual that they be an Anglican. In egalitarian secular Australia, this mechanism of itself is unAustralian, to say the least.

Morrison created the National Cabinet as a way of presenting himself as being in charge during the crisis. He saw early on that he had no power in

the crisis so "Scotty from Marketing" kicked in to create the cabinet. He then appointed himself as Chair and spokesperson. He could not compel the premiers to attend the cabinet. He has no power over them.

The cabinet, disregarding Morrison, has operated extremely well. The premiers and chief ministers (five Labor and three Liberal) have put their political differences aside and have worked together constructively to put their citizens first — all of them, not just the chosen few. This is how governments should work. It has put Morrison's corrupt federal rabble to shame. To a significant extent, the success of the National Cabinet has backfired on Morrison as it has exposed his failings as a leader.

Wren's Week: Time to reshape our political and economic model [@IndependentAus](https://t.co/efF7vpwYiL)

— IndependentAustralia (@independentaus) [April 3, 2020](#)

So how can we persist with this model?

I propose the following.

We leave the Senate as is. It is a constitutional requirement. It also serves the purpose of holding the Federal Government to account. Its role as the "house of review" should remain.

We do not need a Federal Lower House. We will create a permanent National Cabinet to

determine policy direction and submit legislation to the senate. This cabinet will be made up of the premier or chief minister from each state and territory, the deputy leader from each state and territory and a further eight members selected by the PM from state and territory parliaments based on their subject matter expertise. Twenty-four members in total. The 16 core members will elect the PM from their number. In order to make this work, state elections must be brought into line nationally with fixed four-year terms.

This federal cabinet will meet in Canberra four times a year for a month each time. There will, of course, be *ad hoc* meetings as circumstances dictate. The rest of the time, these cabinet members will function in their state and territory parliaments as normal. National Cabinet members will thus have dual roles often holding both national and state ministerial portfolios. The role of the senior public service as both advisors and implementers will remain critical at both state and federal levels.

I expect many critiques of my suggestion. I encourage it. The purpose is to start the conversation.

Most of us who have watched Australian politics over the last ten years will know that our political system is broken. We have had too many inept prime

ministers held captive to extremist views. Corruption has run rampant, particularly over the last five years, further degrading the public perception of our political class.

Preferential voting must be replaced with a NZ-style mixed-member proportional representation ([MMP](#)) to ensure broader parliamentary representation. I'm no fan of the Greens, but it is not correct that they win ten per cent of the vote but gain only one seat in our 150 seat lower house. Conversely, the Nationals win an even lower proportion of the vote yet hold a dozen seats. It's simply undemocratic.

Of course, if the National Cabinet model I suggested above is adopted, then it would be the states who should adopt MMP.

To see a need for change and not work to address it is laziness. "She'll be right" fixes nothing. The world is changed by those who show up. Make sure you do.

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— TwoEyeHead[?][?]
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