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Executive growth and the takeover of Australian parliaments

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A long term trend across national and state governments in Australia has been the growing number and the growing proportion of parliamentarians serving in executive government roles. In recent years these trends have accelerated. Such trends further threaten the independence of parliament, reduce its capability to scrutinise executive government and undermine Westminster notions of accountability between parliament and the executive and separation of powers. This article identifies the extent of the growth of executive government in Australia, as measured by the number of parliamentarians appointed as ministers and parliamentary secretaries. It further outlines reasons for such growth, analyses the adverse implications of these trends in relation to the parliamentary accountability of executive government and suggests proposals to address this issue.

Defining executive government

For the purpose of this article executive government is defined as comprising all ministerial appointments including the more recent positions of parliamentary secretaries.[1] Parliamentary secretaries, a relatively new phenomenon in Australia (Uhr 2007), are included as being part of executive government as they are appointed by the government to assist ministers in their ministerial roles and perform some ministerial functions. Uhr (2007: 391) described a parliamentary secretary as 'a junior member of a governing ministry who is not officially a junior minister or member of the ministry as such.' In some jurisdictions including the Commonwealth and several of the states, parliamentary secretaries are authorised to

[1] Executive government refers to elected officials appointed to the ministry to serve in cabinet or in some jurisdictions as members of the outer ministry or as parliamentary secretaries. Executive government also includes at the Commonwealth level, the Governor-General who is vested with executive power (Section 61 of the Constitution) and who is advised by the Federal Executive Council attended by a small number of ministers (Section 62). State constitutions have similar provisions with governors presiding over executive councils (see Boyce (2007: 195–6).

attend executive council meetings which are the 'legal personality of cabinet' (Boyce 2007: 195). In other jurisdictions such as New South Wales, a parliamentary secretary although receiving a higher remuneration than a backbencher of parliament, is 'not a minister or a member of cabinet, but assists ministers in a number of areas, sometimes deputising on their behalf' (NSW Parliament 2008). Nevertheless, given the functions that parliamentary secretaries perform, their appointment by the prime minister or premier, and their closeness to ministers in assisting in their exercise of departmental responsibilities, they have been included as being members of executive government in this study.

Executive dominance of parliament

While there is often discussion about how executive government dominance is threatening democracy in Westminster systems, the focus is usually on the growth of executive government's powers relative to parliament. Explanations for this dominance have included such executive government's increased organisational capacities and greater centralisation of power within government itself, especially in the hands of prime ministers and premiers and strong party discipline that is seen to make most debates in parliament largely of ritualistic importance. The executive also controls most of parliament's budget. The increasingly perceived politicised nature of the public service and its 'over-responsiveness' to executive government demands, combined with the greatly enlarged ministerial staffs have further increased executive capabilities compared to backbench parliamentarians or oppositions. Although the existence of upper houses in bicameral legislatures has been seen as a possible counterweight to these pressures, especially where the government party is unable to attain a majority, executive government is still able to influence what largely happens in parliament. These different features of growing executive government capacities have enabled it to dominate decision making processes across government, set the policy agenda and manage policy issues, and minimise scrutiny of its activities (Hailsham 1976; Halligan, Miller and Power 2007; Uhr and Wanna 2000).

Although these trends have been exhibited in many different jurisdictions commentators have suggested that executive government dominance has long been more accentuated in Australia at both national and state levels, than in other Westminster democracies such as the United Kingdom. It has been argued that in Australia party discipline is more binding, that Australian parliaments sit less frequently, and that parliamentary committee systems are less extensive or effective, especially at the state level, than elsewhere. While parliaments in Australia have the outward institutional manifestations of Westminster, parliamentary procedures are more heavily weighted in favour of executive government control compared to other Westminster democracies such as the United Kingdom (Crisp 1971: 267; Horne 1964: 178; Reid 1964: 92; Reid 1971: 506; Uhr and Wanna 2000: 10). Further, ministerial dominance has been enhanced even more in Australia by the very large increases in federal and state ministerial staff that have occurred during the last two decades compared to their counterparts in other Westminster democracies (Maley 2000).

While these different factors explain how executive government has come to dominate the legislature in Australia this article suggests that another contributing influence that has been largely overlooked has been the growth in the number of parliamentarians now serving in executive government roles as ministers and parliamentary secretaries. It is not just the growth in the numbers of parliamentarians serving in executive government roles that is the issue, but the growing proportion of parliamentarians overall in these positions that is really significant in undermining the independence and capacities of parliament.

Trends in the growth of executive government

Tables 1–3 outline trends across federal, state and territory governments of the increasing number of ministers and parliamentary secretaries and their proportion of parliament.

Commonwealth government trends

When Australia federated in 1901 Section 65 of the Commonwealth Constitution prescribed that 'Until Parliament otherwise provides, the Ministers of State shall not exceed seven in number.' The first Commonwealth government under Prime Minister Barton (1901–1903) adhered to this limit, though it had an additional two ministers who were unpaid. There were no parliamentary secretaries or assistant ministers. This first federal ministry represented just 8.1% of parliament if all nine ministers are accepted.[2] Subsequent ministries included 'honorary' ministers. This limitation was soon overturned by the subsequent regular passing of the *Ministers of State Act* that has allowed the appointment of additional ministers.

Since federation there has been a gradual increase in the number of ministers although this has not always meant an increasing proportion of parliament serving in executive government. Forty years after federation at the beginning of the Second World War the number of ministers rose to 16 and their proportion of parliament was 14.4%. This increased to 19 ministers representing 17.1% of parliament under the post World War Two Chifley Labor Government.

Menzies (Coalition) began his second prime ministership (1949–1966) with 19 ministers and their proportion of the Commonwealth Parliament was 10.3%. This decline in the proportion of ministers of parliament reflected the large expansion of the House of Representatives and the Senate at this time. By the end of Menzies' term as prime minister, ministerial numbers had increased to 25 and their overall proportion of parliament had risen to 13.6%.

[2] These percentages and all subsequent calculations are based on the number of ministers and parliamentary secretaries as a proportion of the total number of members of both houses of parliament.

Table 1: Trends in federal executive government 1901–2011

Government	Number of ministers and parliamentary secretaries/assistant ministers	Size of parliament (upper and lower houses)	Proportion of parliamentarians in executive government roles
1901(Barton Govt Non Labor)	9	111	8.1%
1940 (Menzies Govt Coalition)	16	111	14.4%
1946 (Chifley–ALP)	19	111	17.1%
1950 (Menzies Coalition)	19	183	10.3%
1966 (Menzies Govt Coalition)	25	184	13.6%
1972 (McMahon Govt Coalition)	33[a]	185	17.8%
1973 (Whitlam Govt– ALP)	27	185	14.6%
1974 (Whitlam Govt–ALP)	27	187	14.4%
1975–77 (2nd Fraser Coalition Govt)	24	191	12.5%
1977–80 (3rd Fraser Coalition Govt reconstituted Dec 1979)	27	189	14.3%
1980–83 (4th Fraser Coalition Govt– Nov 1980)	26	189	13.7%
1983 (1st Hawke Govt ALP)[b]	26	189	14.2%
1987 (3rd Hawke Govt –ALP)	30	224	13.3%
1996 (2nd Keating Govt–ALP)	40	223	17.8%
1996 (1st Howard Govt – Coalition)	38	224	16.9%
2007 (4th Howard Govt – Coalition)	42	226	18.5%
2007 (Rudd – ALP)	42	226	18.5%
2010 (1st Gillard Govt – ALP)	42	226	18.5%
2011 (2nd Gillard Govt – ALP)	42	226	18.5%

Notes: [a] Includes 27 ministers and 6 assistant ministers
[b] The 1984 *Commonwealth Year Book* lists only 26 ministers, but overlooked that Mick Young, Special Minister of State was stood aside while under investigation. Kim Beazley took on this role temporarily while also retaining his other ministerial post.

Sources: *Commonwealth Year Books 1907–2007; Commonwealth Parliamentary Handbook 2007;* C.A. Hughes, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics various editions; Commonwealth Parliament website.*

During the 1950s Menzies, like several of his predecessors, attempted to relieve cabinet ministers of some of their less important duties by introducing assistant ministers, ministers without portfolio and also parliamentary undersecretaries. These efforts floundered. Such appointments were deemed to be in contradiction of Section 44 (iv) of the Constitution in relation to offices of profit under the Crown (Crisp 1971: 383–89). Subsequently, Menzies gave selected junior ministers an additional role of assisting a more senior minister. This overcame previous objections to parliamentary secretaries that they had no formal ministerial post.

Coalition governments after Menzies increased ministerial numbers incrementally. By the McMahon Government (1971–72), the last Coalition government before the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in December 1972, the size of the ministry and the proportion of parliamentarians serving in executive government increased substantially to 33, representing 17.8% of the Commonwealth Parliament — the greatest proportion since federation. This number included 27 ministers with direct departmental portfolios and six assistant ministers. As the Commonwealth Year Book (1972: 64) recorded, assistant ministers 'do not administer departments of state, but are designated to assist a minister in the discharge of his duties' and are 'sworn as Executive Councillors,' and are deemed to be serving in executive government for the purpose of this paper.

The election of the Whitlam Government (1972–75) saw the number of ministers with direct departmental responsibilities remain at 27 as with the previous Coalition administration, but the McMahon Government's experiment with assistant minsters was not continued. As the overall size of parliament increased with the appointment of additional senators and two more seats in the House of Representatives in 1974, this resulted in the proportion of members serving in executive government under the second Whitlam Government (1974–75) falling to 14.1% of parliament.

The incoming Fraser Coalition Government (1975–83) promised to reduce the size of government and number of departments. Initially, after the 1975 election in the second Fraser Government 24 ministers were appointed, a slight decline over the Whitlam Government's 27. This reduced the proportion of parliamentary members in executive government to 12.5%. However, during the third Fraser Government (December 1977–November 1980) a reconstituted ministry was announced in December 1979 and continued to November 1980. This increased the number of ministers to 27 ministers or 14.3% of parliament. Though similar to the level of the last Whitlam Government it was in a smaller parliament (reduction from 191 to 189 in time for the 1980 election). For his fourth government (November 1980–March 1983) Fraser appointed 26 ministers which represented 13.7% of parliament — a marginal decline over the previous ministry.

It was to be under the successive Hawke and Keating Labor governments (1983–1996) that ministerial numbers and their proportion of parliament showed marked increases. Under Prime Minister Hawke (1983–1991) the number of parliamentarians serving in executive government increased from 27 in 1983 to 37 by Hawke's

third term following the 1987 election. Indeed, it was after the 1987 election with the creation of amalgamated departments when the appointment of junior ministers and parliamentary secretaries became more widespread that the size of the executive became considerably larger. Previous constitutional impediments were overcome by allocating these parliamentary secretary appointees with direct departmental responsibilities. By the time of the second Keating Government (1993–1996) executive numbers had risen to 40 (30 ministers and 10 parliamentary secretaries) representing 17.8% of parliament.

The first Howard Coalition Government with 28 ministers and 10 parliamentary secretaries together comprising 16.9% of the slightly enlarged parliament maintained this proportion. By Howard's last term this number had increased to 30 ministers and 12 parliamentary secretaries, a total of 42 executive members or 18.5% of the Commonwealth Parliament.

The Rudd Labor Government (2007–2010) kept the same number of ministers and parliamentary secretaries representing the same proportion of parliament as its predecessor. So too has Prime Minister Gillard, who replaced Rudd as prime-minister in June 2010, in both her first and second ministries maintained these numbers including in her recent changes to the ministry announced in December 2011 (see Table 1).

The important trend is that it has been since the 1980s when executive numbers grew so large and represented the largest proportion of parliament. That this was despite the overall increase in the number of Commonwealth parliamentarians from 189 in 1983 to 226 by 2007 — a 19.5% increase — further emphasises the significance of the growing proportion of parliamentarians serving in the executive. Indeed, the rate of increase of executive government as a proportion of parliament during this same period (1983–2007) at 30.2% was even greater.

State and territory government trends

Across the states there have been similar trends in the growth of executive government numbers and the proportion of parliamentarians in executive positions during the last decade (see Tables 2, 3 and 4). Table 2 outlines the changes from the first decade of federation to the mid 1930s.

While many of the states, like the Commonwealth, had constitutional limitations on the size of their ministries, these strictures were overcome, usually by amendments to state constitutions.

Table 3 summarises state trends from the 1940s through to the mid 1970s. Gradual increases in the size of executive governments and the proportion of parliamentarians serving in executive positions can be discerned across all states.

Table 2: Proportion of state parliamentarians serving in executive government

	1907	1935
NSW	6.9%	9.3%
Vic.	11.1%	12.1%
Qld	6.9%	16.1%
SA	6.6%	9.0%
WA	8.7%	11.2%
Tas	9.4%	16.6%

Source: *Commonwealth Year Books 1907 and 1935*

Table 3: State executive members 1946–1975

State	Numbers of ministers / parliamentary secretaries				Size of parliament				Proportion of executive members of parliament expressed as a percentage			
	1946	1966	1972	1975	1946	1966	1972	1975	1946	1966	1972	1975
NSW	16	16	18	18	150	154	156	159	10.6	10.3	11.5	11.3
Vic	12	15	16	18	99	100	109	121	12.1	15.0	14.6	14.8
Qld	10	13	14	18	62	78	78	82	16.1	16.6	17.9	21.9
WA	10	12	12	13	80	80	81	81	12.5	15.0	14.8	16.0
SA	6	9	10	12	59	59	67	68	10.1	15.2	14.9	17.6
Tas	9	9	9	10	49	54	54	54	18.3	16.6	16.6	18.5

Source: Commonwealth Year Books 1945–1976

Table 4 highlights comparable figures from 1990 to 2007. The significant issue is not just that increases in executive numbers continued, but that it was during this period that the numbers and the proportion of those serving in executive government showed such large increases compared to previous times. For instance, in New South Wales the number in executive positions increased from 19 to 29 during this period — an increase of over 50%. The proportion holding executive government positions rose from 12.3% to 21.5% — a 74.7% increase. Other large increases may be observed in several of the other states during this period.

So by 2007 Victoria, with 35 ministers and parliamentary secretaries, had the largest number of parliamentarians serving in the executive, followed by New South Wales and Queensland with 29 ministers and parliamentary secretaries each. Victoria's ministry constituted 27.3% of parliament while for New South Wales it was 21.5%. Comparable figures for Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT were: 25.3%, 24.6%, 25% and 29.4% respectively.

Of the states, Queensland deserves particular attention. Although with its unicameral legislature Queensland does not have the largest number of parliamentarians, ranking fourth in terms of parliamentary numbers behind Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia, Queensland until 2009, tied with New South Wales in having the second largest number of ministers and parliamentary secretaries (29). More significantly, Queensland had the largest proportion of parliamentary members serving in executive government across all federal, state and territory governments except for the Northern Territory. Queensland's 29 ministers and parliamentary secretaries (18 ministers and 11 parliamentary secretaries) represent 32.6% of the State's 89 member parliament. These figures reflect the changes made by Premier Beattie immediately following the September 2006 state election when the number of parliamentary secretaries was expanded from 8 to 11 — a 37% increase. This high proportion of Queensland parliamentarians serving in executive government positions was twice as large as for the Commonwealth government (18.5%) and considerably greater than all other states or the ACT (see Table 4). Only Northern Territory with its 25 member Legislative Assembly has a higher proportion (44%) of its members holding executive government office.

Table 4: State and territory executive members 1990–2007

State government	Numbers of ministers/parl secretaries		Size of parliament		Proportion of executive members of parliament expressed as a percentage	
	1990	2007	1990	2007	1990	2007
NSW	19	29	154	135	12.3	21.5
Victoria	20	35	132	128	15.2	27.3
Queensland	18	29	89	89	20.2	32.6
Western Australia	21	23	91	91	23.1	25.3
South Australia	13	17	69	69	18.8	24.6
Tasmania	11	10	54	40	20.4	25.0
NT	9	11	25	25	36.0	44.0
ACT	4	5	17	17	23.5	29.4

Source: Commonwealth Year Books 1989–2007

The growing number of parliamentarians serving in executive government roles may also be assessed in terms of its impact on the governing party from which ministers and parliamentary secretaries are drawn. Such growth has meant that there is an increasing proportion of the governing party whose members are now working in executive government. For instance, in Queensland where the governing Labor Party after the 2006 election holds 59 out of the 89 seats, 29 of its members, or nearly 50% of the party caucus, now serve in executive government.

There have been recent developments following changes in government and/or leadership around the states. In New South Wales the 2011 election brought a sweeping victory to the Liberal and National parties. Premier O'Farrell has established a cabinet with 22 members and appointed 12 parliamentary secretaries. This is an increase of five compared to 2007. In Queensland, the opposite has occurred. Anna Bligh replaced Beattie as premier in September 2007 and won a convincing victory at the March 2009 elections, albeit with a reduced majority. Labor now holds 51 seats in Queensland's Parliament. Bligh has kept the cabinet ministry at 18 members, but reduced the number of parliamentary secretaries from 11 to 7, bringing the total number of executive members to 25 or 28% of parliament — down from 32. 6%. The proportion of those in executive positions as a proportion of the governing Labor Party is now 49% — the same proportion as previously given the loss of Labor 9 seats in 2009 (Mackerras 2010). In Victoria, the new Baillieu Liberal–National Party Government elected in November 2010 appointed 22 ministers and 12 parliamentary secretaries, 34 in total — a marginal decline over previous administrations. In Western Australia, the Barnett Liberal Government elected in 2008 appointed 18 ministers and 7 parliamentary secretaries — a total of 25, up slightly, but with an expanded number of members in the Legislative Assembly (from 2008) and Legislative Council (from 2009), the Western Australian Parliament now has 95 members compared to the previous 91, so the proportion of executive members has increased only marginally to 26. 3%.

Explanations for the growing size of executive government

There are several explanations for this growth in the size of executive government. Foremost amongst these is that increasing government intervention in modern society and growing public expenditure that has marked post World War Two governments, combined with the complexity of modern policy issues, has required more ministers to perform expanded government functions. Prime Minister Menzies believed that the multiplying functions of modern government necessitated an increased number of ministers because of the growing responsibilities of modern government and to counteract the tendency by which ministers would become 'more and more dependent on . . . departmental officers' (see Hughes 1975: 8–9). Menzies argued that the extra costs of more ministers were small in the 'broad sweep of national affairs' (Hughes 1975: 8–9; Weller and Grattan 1981: 25). Another related explanation is that increasing government intervention has been accompanied by a proliferation in the array of government departments. Indeed, it has long been observed that each new government function tends to be accompanied by the creation of new administrative units to carry out such functions (Coaldrake 1978). Such expansion in administrative agencies has led to the perceived need and demand for more ministers and more recently, parliamentary secretaries to oversee such bodies.

There are also political party management reasons for appointing more members to executive government. It has been suggested that governments with large majorities

need to find activities to keep their backbenchers busy, productive and non-disruptive to the existing political leadership. While chairing parliamentary committees may be one response to these demands, such appointments in the Australian political context rarely fully satisfy backbench ambitions. Serving in the ministry remains the prime career aspirations of most parliamentarians (Halligan, Miller and Power 2007). Thus, in states like Queensland, where the governing Labor Party has enjoyed near record majorities since the 2000 election up until the 2009 election, expanding the number of executive government positions, especially through increasing the number of parliamentary secretaries, may be as much about seeking to satisfy backbencher career aspirations, as it does in meeting the increasing demands of office. For Labor governments such arrangements have also provided another means to meet faction alliance expectations. The reduced majority Premier Bligh received at the 2009 election may explain her decision to reduce the number of parliamentary secretaries from 11 to 7. There were not only fewer members to choose from, but also with a reduced Caucus, less pressure to make appointments to executive positions.

A further issue deserving explanation is the disparity in the size of executive governments across the states, territories and the Commonwealth government. One reason for the relatively large number of ministers at the state level compared to the federal government is that all states have to provide a similar range of services and portfolio responsibilities regardless of their population size. This also explains why Tasmania and the Northern Territory for instance, although having small populations and fewer elected members than elsewhere, have ministries of comparable size to the larger states.

Then there is the issue of why Queensland, until recently, had the highest proportion of parliamentarians in executive government across state and federal governments. One suggestion is that Queensland's unicameral legislature, unique among the states, has fewer politicians relative to other jurisdictions with their bicameral systems. This results in a higher proportion of members filling executive government posts. However, Queensland, even with its unicameral parliament, has the fourth largest parliament across the states and territories. Another argument is that Queensland's significant population growth since the 1970s requires a larger ministry to respond to these pressures. Western Australia has also experienced a large growth in population during the last decade, yet had, until 2009, six fewer members in executive posts. They are now equal. The Queensland phenomenon may just have been the consequence of a large majority that Labor administrations enjoyed between 2000 and 2009.

Implications for democratic governance

There are several implications for democratic governance and Westminster processes of accountability arising from the increased number and proportion of parliamentarians now serving in executive government across all levels of Australian government.

First, at its simplest level, the more parliamentarians appointed to the executive means a higher cost of government. A minister earns approximately 25% more than a backbencher, and parliamentary secretaries also receive additional allowances. Furthermore, with ministers and parliamentary secretaries come more staff, cars and offices all of which add to costs. Second, more funding for the executive inevitably means fewer resources for parliamentary activities and services. After all, funding for parliament is largely decided by executive government. Funding levels can determine if a new parliamentary committee is appointed, or whether resources are available for committees to pursue particular investigations. The growth of executive government also has implications for the parliament as more offices and space are allocated to accommodate the additional ministers, parliamentary secretaries and their staff. Third, the growth of executive government gives rise to an even greater need for parliamentary scrutiny of the executive as there are now more members of the executive involved in more activities and making more decisions than previously. A public choice perspective would also argue that executive government members will seek to justify their existence by making proposals for more government actions and increased spending (Niskanen 1971). Fourth, with a greater proportion of parliamentarians now part of the executive there are fewer government backbenchers to meet on a range of parliamentary, as distinct from government, duties. As it is government backbenchers who usually chair most Australian parliamentary committees and constitute the majority of most committee memberships, fewer government backbenchers mean that parliamentary committee activity may be restrained. There are simply not enough parliamentary members available to meet all the potential demands for expanded parliamentary activities. Fifth, as the more senior, skilled and politically important backbenchers are usually the ones promoted to the ministry, the remaining government backbenchers are not only fewer in number, but also tend to be less experienced and influential. This further undermines parliament's ability to scrutinise the executive. Sixth, the growing size of executive government relative to parliament also threatens the separation of powers between the two spheres. Such separation of powers has always been less clear in Westminster democracies where ministers are drawn from and remain part of the parliament. It has also been argued that while the separation of powers is outlined in the Commonwealth Constitution, such provisions are not so constitutionally entrenched across the states (Alvey and Ryan 2005, 14–15; Alvey 2006). With the increasing proportion of parliamentarians serving in executive government roles, the distinctions between the executive and the legislature are becoming less clear and even more blurred than previously, thus further undermining the doctrine of the separation of powers. Last, there is the question of whether parliaments across Australia or more exactly, the government parties within each parliament have the necessary reservoir of talent to meet the demands of an expanding executive government. While lack of talent has not previously prevented appointments to the ministry, the complexity of public policy issues and the serious ramifications of ministerial decisions make this a more critical issue than previously. Mistakes concerning recent major projects and other policy failures (Wanna 2007) cannot all be accounted for as 'systemic failures,'

poor administrative processes, or lack of information, important as these may be. Such policy and project errors must also reflect on the quality of ministers who ultimately have the responsibility to make decisions on such matters, and who drive so much of the policy process.

Reforms

There have been several proposals to address this growth in the numbers serving in executive government and their growing proportion of parliament. One suggestion is to increase the size of parliaments. It may be argued that the real issue is not so much the growth in executive government members, but rather the growing proportion of executive members of parliament that reflects the lack of growth in the size of parliaments. To address this issue the size of parliaments needs to be expanded. For instance, although Queensland's population has grown by 43. 9% between 1990 and 2006 (twice the national rate), the size of the State's unicameral legislature has remained static at 89 members since the late 1970s. This suggestion was made some time ago (Reid 1978) and more recently (Laurie 2008) as a means to improve parliament in general. However, convincing the electorate that increased numbers of politicians are warranted remains problematical. Indeed, in recent times some state parliaments have actually been reduced in size (e. g. New South Wales). This issue largely has been overcome at the national level as there is a formula in relation to population and seat numbers and the Constitution's requirements concerning the relative sizes of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Exhortations for governments to exercise greater restraint in establishing new departments, agencies and organisations and, therefore, to reduce the need for more ministers to administer them seem futile. Establishing new departments and agencies is what governments do to highlight issue interest and to indicate new policy directions. Even governments elected on small government mandates soon diverge from their election platforms and succumb to the political temptations to initiate new programs and to tie these to new departments and agencies. The creation of large amalgamated departments that has occurred at the Commonwealth level could mean the need for fewer ministers. However, in practice this has resulted in the appointment of more assistant ministers or parliamentary secretaries at the Commonwealth level rather than less (Weller 1987). Similar machinery of government changes announced by the Bligh Government following the 2009 Queensland elections has, as noted, made only marginal differences to the number of ministers and parliamentary secretaries. Another suggestion is to make a career in parliament such as chairing a parliamentary committee, as attractive as serving in executive government as a minister. This might include considerable upgrading of pay, staff and benefits for those who chair key parliamentary committees like public accounts. Committee chairs do receive additional allowances now, but whether current levels are enough to resist the call to the ministry is another issue. It is not just an issue of remuneration that makes the

ministry so attractive. Prestige of ministerial positions and having power to make decisions are also very important.

Given these limitations it is time to review former Prime Minister Hawke's suggestion made in his 1979 Boyer Lectures (1979, 21–32) of the need to appoint ministers from outside of parliament. Such a reform, accompanied by parliamentary committee confirmation processes of these appointees, could inject more external expertise into the ministry and reduce the need to draw on so many members of parliament to serve in executive positions. This change would also reinforce more effectively the concept of separation of powers between the legislature and executive and allow more parliamentarians to concentrate on the scrutiny of executive government. However, while this proposal raises serious constitutional issues at the Commonwealth level given Section 64 of the Commonwealth Constitution where amendment would be difficult, such changes could possibly be more easily effected at the state level where constitutional change is more often made by the legislature than by resort to popular referendum.

Conclusion

There has been considerable growth in the size of executive government in terms of both numbers and the proportion of parliament since federation and especially during the past two decades at both federal and state levels. While these trends have now stabilised at the Commonwealth level, they are continuing across most states and territories. Despite these trends and their potential adverse impacts on the effectiveness of Westminster notions of parliamentary scrutiny and separation of powers, they have aroused little serious concern from the electorate, interest from opposition parties or comment by the media. However, the trends have been consistent for too long and their impact too potentially significant to ignore. It is an area needing ongoing monitoring and further detailed research to assess in more depth how this growth in the size of executive government is affecting the actual day to day workings of parliament and representing yet another factor that is further undermining the independence of parliament across Australian government. ▲

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