101 KEYWORDS IN AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

Aa

Accountability
(accountable)

Accusations of a failure of accountability are regularly made against Australian governments and the political process more generally. At its core, accountability is a type of **power** relationship in which some actors can require other actors to provide information explaining and justifying their actions. Accountability may also entail sanctions and rectification if the actions are not explained adequately. The fact that one actor has the right to demand an account from another is enough in itself to define their relationship as one of formal accountability. In practice, however, deciding whether accountability is real or not requires judgements about the comprehensiveness of the information provided by the formally accountable actors and the strength of the sanctions and rectifying measures imposed on them when their actions are not adequately justified.

In **democracies**, the key questions about accountability have centred on how elected **representatives** and non-elected public officials can be kept accountable to **citizens** for their actions. The long-standing answer to these questions in **Westminster**-style systems such as Australia has involved a chain of accountability in which junior public servants within the **bureaucratic** hierarchy are accountable to more senior public servants, those senior public servants are accountable to government **ministers**, who are in turn accountable to **parliament**, whose members are accountable to citizens.

Accountability has close links with the ideas of **responsibility** and responsible government. Although some academics distinguish between accountability and responsibility, the two terms are often

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used interchangeably in Australian political debate. Those who argue that the two words refer to different things usually view responsibility as centring on an actor's internally held **values**, including a sense of professional ethics or duty, while reserving accountability for externally imposed requirements on actors to disclose information and justify their actions. Understood this way, the two ideas can be seen sometimes to produce competing demands on government officials. Accountability mechanisms, for example, may force public servants to disclose information about government practices that they feel they have no ethical or professional **obligation** to reveal. On the other hand, public servants may feel a responsibility to the public to reveal government information despite the absence of an external body requiring that they do so.

From the 1960s, recognition that the traditional Westminster chain of accountability was not working terribly effectively in Australia led to the establishment of new legislative measures and bodies that were independent of the **executive** and designed to improve the accountability of **public sector** agencies. These measures and bodies – sometimes labelled the new administrative **law –** include ombudsmen, various administrative appeals tribunals, and freedom of information legislation. Ombudsmen investigate complaints made by the public about the actions of government officials and recommend changes to bureaucratic practice. Administrative appeals tribunals review specific administrative decisions affecting citizens to determine whether they comply with relevant laws. Freedom of information laws allow citizens, **advocacy** groups and the **media** access to some government documents that would otherwise be hidden from public view.

The exposure of serious government **corruption** in the 1980s led some states to introduce anti-corruption bodies, whose work is often seen as helping to ensure public sector accountability (see also **ethics**). In addition, the **economic rationalist** thinking that has dominated Australian public policy debate since the late 1980s has demanded that government bureaucracies become more accountable for the ways in which they spend public money. As a result, those agencies are now required to be more transparent in their financial reporting and must also publish information on a range of performance measures. The task of ensuring this financial and

performance accountability falls largely on auditors-general, whose roles have expanded in the past two decades.

The development of these new accountability measures has not diminished debate about government accountability in Australia. Some debate centres on whether the new accountability measures diminish the role and power of elected parliaments in controlling executives. Issues also surround the form of accountability that should be required of statutory authorities such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which are expected to be independent of the government of the day but accountable to the public. Other questions concern whether the private **businesses** and **third sector** organisations that undertake functions outsourced by governments following economic rationalist policies can be held to the same standards of accountability as the government agencies they have replaced. Recent Senate inquiries into issues such as border **security** have focussed on the unclear place in the Westminster chain of accountability of the growing bands of **ministerial advisers**. Finally, while no recent Australian political figures have argued that accountability is unimportant, some have complained that increased accountability measures impede the efficient delivery of government programs.

Introductory reading

Richard Mulgan and John Uhr, 'Accountability and Governance', in Glyn Davis and Patrick Weller (eds), *Are You Being Served? State, Citizens and Governance*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2001, pp. 152–74.

Further reading

Warwick Funell, *Government by Fiat: The Retreat from Responsibility*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001.

Richard Mulgan, *Accountability: An Ever Expanding Concept?*, Canberra: Australian National University, 2000.

Advocacy
(advocate, advocated, advocates)

Advocacy is a strategy that involves a group speaking or acting on behalf of those less capable of speaking up to or approaching

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government. For example, **community** service organisations often seek to advocate proposals for reforms to reduce and prevent poverty and inequality (see **equality**). They speak on behalf of the poor and the homeless, which are groups within society who do not usually have the political resources to act collectively and lobby governments.

Advocacy is a well-established strategy used by **third sector** organisations to influence government **policy**-making for marginalised groups in Australian society. One of the most well-known advocacy organisations is the Australian Council for Social Services (ACOSS). ACOSS is the peak council for community **welfare** organisations in Australia; on its website it promotes itself as 'the principal voice of low income and disadvantaged people in social and economic policy matters'. In the 1950s ACOSS was central to the establishment of communication mechanisms between the community welfare sector and government, and has continued to play an important role along with the state-based social service councils. ACOSS has always had a limited resource base as the people it **represents**, the unemployed and those in poverty, do not have the resources to fund advocacy. As a result successive Commonwealth governments have provided funding to ACOSS for undertaking advocacy work, and to many other peak representative organisations. Governments and advocacy groups often used to consider that it was important for governments to enable disadvantaged groups to **participate** in the formulation and implementation of policy that will affect their lives.

Advocacy groups have had to adapt their role as policy advocates. In the past the role of these types of organisations was primarily to appeal on behalf of disadvantaged people, based on social or moral **values**; now these organisations are expected to be able to present persuasive arguments based on evidence-based research and rationality. This expectation is particularly seen through the government-led shift away from the large-scale funding of various representative organisations that took place during the 1970s and towards the establishment of new government-sponsored, consultative mechanisms that foster individual participation, not group-based representation. Therefore there has been a decline in funding in Australia for **traditional** advocacy organisations. This has also coincided with a broader debate, led by private sector funded **think**

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tanks, about the involvement of the general community and third
sector organisations in public policy-making.

Introductory reading

Michael Hogan, 'Advocacy and democratic governance', in Adam Farrar
and Jane Inglis (eds), *Keeping it Together: State and Civil Society in
Australia*, Sydney: Pluto Press, 1996, pp. 155–81.

Further reading

Philip Mendes, *Australia's Welfare Wars: The Players, the Politics and the
Ideologies*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003.
Marian Sawer, 'Governing for the mainstream: Implications for community
representation', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 61 (2002),
pp. 39–49.

Affirmative action

Affirmative action is a **policy** process that provides access to insti-
tutions for people of a minority group who have **traditionally** been
discriminated against. The idea of affirmative action is to create a
more **equal** society by providing access to education, employment,
health care, or **welfare**.

In employment situations affirmative action requires that insti-
tutions increase hiring and promotion of candidates of particular
groups, such as women or **Indigenous** Australians. There are also
related policy processes on equal employment opportunity (EEO)
and anti-discrimination **law**. For example, anti-discrimination laws
in most Australian states mandate that all employers and super-
visors must generally treat all their employees and job applicants
fairly. In particular, they must not treat them unfairly, or harass
them, because of their: sex (including pregnancy and transgender
status); **race**, colour, **ethnic** or ethno-**religious** background, descent
or **nationality**; marital status; disability (including past, present or
anticipated physical, intellectual or psychiatric disability, learning
disorders, or any organism capable of causing disease, for exam-
ple, HIV); homosexuality (male or female, actual or presumed); age
(including not enforcing a retirement age); or carers' responsibili-
ties. Organisations often now have EEO officers to ensure that correct

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employment practices are being followed with regard to discrimination. **Public sector** organisations are generally required to have EEO plans in place to show how they provide equal opportunity for all in their hiring practices.

Affirmative action strategies tend to fall within an organisation's general approach to implementing EEO. That is, a strategy is put in place that levels the playing field for groups identified as disadvantaged. For example, an employer may run special training or recruitment programs for groups such as Indigenous Australians. Affirmative action strategies like this help give previously disadvantaged groups the skills and confidence to allow them to compete on equal terms with everyone else. In politics affirmative action is used in some political **parties**, such as the Australian Labor Party, to ensure that more women are preselected for winnable seats and thus that there will be more women in **parliaments**.

Affirmative action as a policy strategy is often criticised for singling out particular groups such as women or people with disabilities for special treatment. This criticism takes two directions. In one, it is suggested that singling out one group and treating them differently undermines customary employment by merit. In the other, the criticism is that a group's difference from mainstream society is actually emphasised rather than de-emphasised by a focussed affirmative action strategy. Some even argue that it is patronising to groups in society, especially women, to give them special treatment through affirmative action.

Introductory reading

Chilla Bulbeck, 'Australian Feminism: The End Of "the Universal Woman"?', in Paul Boreham, Geoffrey Stokes and Richard Hall (eds), *The Politics of Australian Society: Political Issues for the New Century*, second edition, Sydney: Pearson Education, 2004.

Further reading

Carol Bacchi, 'Affirmative Action for Men: "A Test of Common Sense"?', *Just Policy* 36 (2005), pp. 5–10.
Julie O'Brien, 'Affirmative Action, Special Measures and the Sex Discrimination Act', *University of New South Wales Law Journal* 27 (2004), pp. 840–48.

Agenda setting

Agenda setting is the dominant explanation of the relationship between the **media** and its audience in **liberal** democracies such as Australia (see also **democracy**). This set of theories suggests that news does not *change* basic political attitudes, but that it does influence some types of beliefs and attitudes. News media is portrayed as influencing and shaping what people believe to be significant problems in the nation or in society. Thus the media sets the agenda for broader public and **policy** debates.

In this view, the media becomes the 'gatekeeper': making judgements about which issues to report (and which not to), as well as about the placement and prominence to be given to the issues selected for inclusion in newspapers and radio and television news bulletins. Over time some public issues will receive more frequent and more prominent coverage than others, and some will be altogether ignored. The consumers of media over time will believe that some policy issues are more important than others because of the media's agenda setting effects. This idea can be traced back to Walter Lippmann's classic 1922 study *Public Opinion*, in which he portrayed the media as able to paint those 'pictures in our heads' that we have of the outside world of politics.

One problem with the agenda setting approach is that it does not fully recognise that society and **public opinion** will also influence the media agenda, and that agenda setting can be a two-way, rather than just a one-way process. That is, news is a commercial, money-making venture and journalists and editors with a keen eye on ratings and sales will continually assess which news will interest their particular audience and attempt to give the public the news coverage it wants. For example, producers and journalists from Australian current affairs shows on commercial television (such as *A Current Affair* or *Today Tonight*) argue that when they follow particular stories they are responding to what their viewers want.

Recent developments in agenda setting theory have tried to develop the model. The theory now focusses on how both news media and public opinion influence the priorities of policy makers. Thus the media agenda can directly shape both public perceptions and government policy agendas. Agenda setting theory also

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recognises that both media and public opinion agendas are influenced by events that happen in the real world. Furthermore, people's judgements about the importance of issues are influenced by their personal experiences, information that they get from other people in their lives such as family, friends and workmates, as well as from the more distant media. In this view of agenda setting, the media affects its audience but its stories are filtered through people's other sources of information and events, which form their established frameworks for understanding politics. This view recognises that people go through individualised processes of **political socialisation** that shape how they think and feel about politics. Nevertheless, the media still has a very **powerful** role in that it provides our window into the political and policy-making world.

Introductory reading

Ian Ward, 'Media Power', in John Summers, Dennis Woodward and Andrew Parkin (eds), *Government, Politics, Power and Policy in Australia*, seventh edition, Sydney: Pearson Education, 2002, pp. 401–14.

Further reading

David Protess and Maxwell McCombs (eds), *Agenda Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking*, Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1991.
Ian Ward, *Politics of the Media*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1995.

Aspiration
(aspirational, aspirations)

To aspire is to have an ambition to achieve an elevated or worthy goal. The word aspiration carries with it the idea of movement in a socially desirable direction. Aspiration took on political significance in Australia from the late 1990s, when it was increasingly used by political **leaders** and media commentators to describe the outlook of voters seeking to secure upward social mobility for themselves and their children through educational attainment, employment advancement, property ownership and higher disposable incomes. These voters are generally seen as concentrated in the mortgage belts of outer suburbs of capital cities, in electorates that had once

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supported Labor but now solidly vote Liberal. The recent federal electoral successes of the Liberal Party are widely interpreted as being partly due to successful Liberal appeals to aspirational voters. For this reason, aspirational Liberal voters are sometimes called 'Howard's battlers'.

Aspirational voters, sometimes just called 'aspirationals', thus describe an apparent **value** shift among some Australians, associated with a change in voting behaviour. Ideas of **class**, **equality** and **welfare** are bound up in most explanations of the aspirational phenomenon. Aspirational voters want to move from unskilled jobs and older working class suburbs to middle class occupations and new suburbs. This has implications for government. Rather than imposing uniformity through state education, aspirational voters believe that governments should provide opportunities for attainment by subsidising non-government schools. Rather than spending on welfare programs in the hope of creating base-line equality, governments should encourage people into self-reliance through work, while reducing taxes to allow people to spend more of their money as they choose.

Some commentators question whether aspirational voters really exist as a distinctive group and little research has been done to demonstrate their existence. Nonetheless, they exist as a **powerful** idea among politicians and commentators. The aspirational pattern clearly has stronger affinities with **individualism** than with the more collectivist ideals of the Labor Party. In some ways, the aspirational voter is a renovated version of the idea advanced in the 1970s by David Kemp and others that Australia's working class electorate had gone through a process of embourgeoisement, or middle classing, since the Second World War, making it impossible for Labor to win elections with its ideals of **socialism**, **union** solidarity and equality. Although Labor adjusted its understanding of these ideals during the Hawke and Keating governments of the 1980s and 1990s, some recent prominent figures in the Labor Party have called for it to shift further towards a 'Third Way' politics that speaks more directly to aspirational voters. Former Labor leader Mark Latham was a key proponent of such a shift, and based his 2004 federal election campaign around the aspirational image of Australians climbing 'the ladder of opportunity'.

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