Background to the Multi-Level Governance Symposium

Public debates about the constitutional status of the Australian federation do not always capture the complexity of multi-level governance systems in Australia. An expanded version of concept of multi-level governance is increasingly attracting the attention of policy-makers around the world. This version of multi-level governance is defined as the dispersion of authority upwards, downwards and sideways between levels of government – local, regional, national and supra-national – as well as across spheres and sectors including states, markets and civil society. However, beyond a broad consensus that effective governance is increasingly coordinated across multiple levels, there is little convergence on best practice models of how to design and effectively operate multi-level governance systems. Without ideal models, this forum takes a pragmatic, problem-driven approach to investigating multi-level governance.

The symposium brings together policy experts and practitioners from government and universities to consider distinctive features of existing and proposed multi-level governance models for key Australian policy challenges in the areas of: health and well-being; finance and accountability; water planning and climate change adaptation; and sustainable settlements.

Questions for investigation include: what are the key structures, processes and outcomes in multi-level governance in Australia that contribute to policy innovation and problem-solving capacity? How is risk best managed? Who is accountable and to whom? What is the relationship between problem-solving capacity and institutional legitimacy? What are the key gaps in our knowledge and practice that should be investigated in future research and implementation programmes?

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