

Australia's political system needs overhaul: researcher

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Australia's political system needs a major overhaul if it is to re-engage the public and produce effective government in the 21st century, according to Professor Dean Jaensch.

The scrapping of State Governments, changes to the [voting system](#), the recruitment of more talented [politicians](#), and a more liberal attitude to the disclosure of information are amongst a suite of reforms that the doyen of political commentators says should be considered.

Presenting the inaugural Dean Jaensch Lecture this week, Professor Jaensch said he had, since his first study of Australian politics in 1963, considered that while [Australia](#)'s system was envied by many around the world "it is by no means the best democracy that it could be."

Before a discussion panel of former Federal Minister and Flinders academic, Dr Neal Blewett, Senator Nick Xenophon and political lobbyist, Ms Mia Handshin – moderated by the ABC's Tony Jones – and an invited audience, Professor Jaensch said "there needs to be a continuing debate about how we, the people, can achieve improvements to our political system".

"There is a sense of urgency about this, as my opinion is that Australia seems to be sliding away from, rather than towards, more democratic structures, institutions and processes," Professor Jaensch said.

He said an early target for reform should be the Australian Constitution

because “its content in 2010 is an anachronism, it needs to be brought into the 21st century”.

“A federal structure was essential in the formation of a nation. In 2010, it has also become an anachronism, a hindrance to efficient and effective government. Duplication, even triplication is rife and inefficiencies abound,” Professor Jaensch said.

“We need a new federalism. But this will be difficult. Whenever I raise a proposal for abolishing the States and establishing a national-regional system, the opposition is best described by one reaction I received: ‘but what about the Sheffield Shield?’” he said.

Professor Jaensch said the so-called “reform” of Federal Parliament initiated by the Independent MPs since the 2010 election has only touched the surface, and the Parliament and the political processes that support it remains flawed.

“The process of real reform should start with the appointment of an independent Speaker, drawn from outside the Parliament.

“In representation, in elections, Australians should have the widest possible choice. But why should I have to provide preferences for candidates I would not feed? Optional preferences, then the abolition of above-the-line voting, a proportional representation system (preferably the Tasmanian Hare Clark system), more transparent laws on funding of political parties in the election process, and truth in political advertising would be major improvements.

“Responsible government, a keystone of a Westminster system, has been significantly eroded. The concept, simply defined as a chain of accountability: public service accountable to a Minister, who is accountable to Cabinet, which is accountable to Parliament, which is

accountable to the people, has too many broken links in the chain. It can be argued that the only time responsible government works to any real degree is when there is a hung Parliament.

“If an outside Speaker is accepted, then why not go one step further? One problem of Cabinet government, especially in the smaller State Parliaments, is the difficulty in finding enough people of quality to become ministers of State. Low numbers in State Parliaments provide a limited gene pool.

“For this reason alone, Australia needs to consider the appointment of ministers from outside the Parliament. This, like the Speaker proposal, would be a radical transformation of the so-called Westminster system, and would lead to further debate about Australia becoming a republic, with full separation of powers.”

Professor Jaensch, an Adjunct Professor of Politics at Flinders University, will be honoured with an annual \$1000 scholarship in his name to be offered from 2011 to the highest performing student in the first-year subject, *Australian Politics: A Comparative Study*.

Provided by Flinders University

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