Pragmatic Federalism

A term developed by Hollander and Patapan (2007) to describe the *ad hoc* approach to federalism followed by successive Commonwealth Liberal and Labor governments, since Menzies. For these authors, pragmatic federalism is “characterised by a direct engagement or confrontation with pressing problems, an engagement unmediated by larger theoretical concerns.” They contend that Australian federalism has always lacked an underlying “grand theory” or close link to the ideology of either political party, rather it is one best characterised as political problem solving. This may take the form of increased centralism (for eg, the National Competition Policy) or increased cooperation between the centre and the periphery (for eg, the Council of Australian Governments).

Hollander and Patapan recognise that such an *ad hoc* approach to federalism has both benefits and costs. On the one hand, it offers problem-specific solutions and incremental change unencumbered by traditional arrangements and political ideology. On the other hand, it lends itself to “crisis driven” policy-making with little coherence.

**Further Reading:**