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Dr Ian Holland, Secretary,  
Senate Select Committee on the Reform of the Australian Federation.

1. Thank you and the Chair for the kind invitation to participate, representing only myself, in the inquiry into the Reform of the Australian Federation.

2. I have no formal Submission to present, but I do have three brief propositions to put to the Committee at the 5<sup>th</sup> of May meeting. I do so drawing on my professional interest in Australian (and comparative) federalism as:

- \* an Australian political scientist trained in Canada in the 1970s
- \* a former Senate committee secretary in the 1980s
- \* a former (and indeed final) Head of the ANU's Federalism Research Centre in the 1990s
- \* the current Head of the Policy and Governance Program in the ANU's Crawford School of Economics and Government, managing the ANU's Masters of Public Policy/Public Administration degrees
- \* and also the Head of the Parliamentary Studies Centre in the Crawford School at the ANU.

3. My three brief propositions are:

(i). *Given the special status of the Senate as a House representing the States and Territories*, that the Committee recommend that the Senate establish a standing committee on (something like) 'the state of the Federation'. This committee would have a watching brief to report regularly on the constitutional and institutional development of Australian federalism, particularly the changing balance of powers and responsibilities shared by the Commonwealth, the States and the Territories. I can imagine such a committee adding substantially to Australian understanding of federalism by helping Australians understand 'who does what' well across the networked governance characteristic of federalism. The

committee itself need not become instant experts but could perform this public function by staging opportunities for those who claim to be experts on federalism to address the committee. The committee would then be free to follow up with more targeted inquiries as it deemed necessary.

(ii). *Given the practical importance of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as the central institution in our system of 'executive federalism' (a useful Canadian term),* that the Committee recommend that the proposed standing committee hold an annual inquiry into COAG. The annual COAG inquiry could contribute much-needed parliamentary oversight and accountability to Australia's most prominent example of governmental power-sharing. Working with, for example, the Australian National Audit Office, the committee could help hold the line on 'buck-passing': eg, by highlighting which levels of government are accountable for what levels of performance in policy implementation. Holding COAG accountable might seem an impossible task, with so many senior ministers around Australia performing important roles. But the task can be approached 'bottom-up', as it were, with initial inquiries limited to the appearance of senior public servants from Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, providing evidence to the committee on the factual and technical background of inter-governmental policy management and implementation.

(iii). *Given Australia's role as an outstanding federal democracy in the Asia-Pacific region,* that the Committee recommend that the proposed standing committee sponsor an ongoing regional dialogue among elected representatives and parliamentary bodies on the political management of decentralised and devolved national governance. The Australian federal system is one of the many decentralised governance systems in the region. Too often, however, parliamentary bodies take second place to executive bodies in international fora examining inter-governmental governance. There is an important international role here for the proposed standing committee as champion of a new wave of inter-parliamentary regional co-operation focused on the roles of parliamentary bodies performing broadly-federal roles as representatives of either sub-national governments or provincial populations or other 'special constituencies'. Australia would have much to teach but also much to learn from such international exchanges.

4. I am happy to clarify orally each of these brief propositions if the Committee so wishes.

Yours,

John Uhr

