



FAMILY FIRST



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Adjournment Speech

Federalism

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Federalism—have you noticed how it is the new buzz word? Nearly every day, someone, somewhere is talking or writing about federalism.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has made a lot about federalism, and this week opposition leader Brendan Nelson will speak about federalism in a ‘headland’ style speech from the National Press Club.

So federalism must be important. But for all its importance I have a sneaky suspicion that most of us are left wondering what federalism will do for the average Aussie family. My dictionary defines ‘federalism’ as:
... a political system in which several states or regions defer some powers ... to a central government while retaining a limited measure of self-government.

More gobbledygook, but hold on to the word ‘self’ in ‘self-government’ because we will come back to that in just a minute.

So let’s see if we can break it down. Currently Australians are governed by a federal government that works, sometimes cooperatively with six state governments and two territory governments. In each of those states and territories there are vastly different laws, regulations and standards that regulate and guide our lives.

So depending on where you live, you might be governed by some really good laws. And every so often these six states and two territories get together with the big daddy of governments, the federal government, and have a big powwow and normally a spat over money. That is called COAG, the Council of Australian Governments. Just like a family, I suppose.

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They wrangle and they wrestle with their self-interest at the forefront to get a bigger slice of the family allowance, which is made up of our taxes.

And just like in any family, we have the older brother who thinks that he is entitled to the whole inheritance, the middle child who complains about getting squeezed and never getting what he wants, and the youngest child who seems to get everything she wants and has never had to work a day for it.

‘It’s not fair,’ is the catchcry of the sibling states as the parent federal government tries not to play favourites but everyone knows who the favourite is anyway; the youngest, who apparently cannot fend for themselves. All sound familiar? Well that is how federalism currently works. It is a lot about self-interest, which translates to state interests over anything else.

So how should new federalism work, given that for the first time we have the same Labor family in government in all states and territories? Firstly, it is okay to have different laws in different states and territories. However, in my book, a ‘fair dinkum’ federalism would be where common sense overcomes stubbornness—where the states are encouraged to put ‘best practice’ ahead of best interest or self-interest.

Surely, federalism should be about the states adopting models or laws that are already acknowledged to be best practice for the good of Australia as a whole. This new federalism should come in and stop the squabbles and self-interest. It should allow each state to benefit from policies that have been proven to work in other states, rather than allowing petty jealousies to define the relationships between our sibling states.

For example, here are three big issues that the states could agree on at next week’s COAG meeting.

First is the alcohol toll. Today, across Australia, we have a \$15.3 billion annual alcohol toll. That is right; it costs \$15.3 billion to mop up after alcohol. A lot can be done and should be done at the federal level, and Family First will be working with the current Senate inquiry into Family First’s *Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007* to recommend some common-sense action on alcohol labelling and advertising.

But we do not need to wait for the Senate inquiry to adopt some other best practice laws. Already New South Wales has laws in place to address the alcohol toll that the other states and territories would do well to implement right now.

Under New South Wales state laws, parents are not allowed to serve alcohol to under-age kids, thereby reducing the incidences of kids getting drunk at their mates' parties. This is an example of good practice, an example of best practice, and could be adopted by the other states around Australia. But, guess what; it is not—and the culture of binge drinking continues unchecked.

Secondly, what about drink container recycling? Did you know that South Australia has a scheme that offers a 5c refund on bottles and drink containers, resulting in an up to 85 per cent recycling rate for these products, compared to just a 38 per cent recycling rate elsewhere in Australia? This is undoubtedly best practice. So until the rest of the states agree to adopt a national drink container recycling scheme such as that contained in Family First's *Drink Container Recycling Bill 2008*, every state, except South Australia, groans under 40 per cent more litter in their waterways, parks and streets because of their refusal to turn trash into cash.

Thirdly, let us tackle the pokies plague. Best practice here is found in Western Australia, where the state government has refused to get blindly addicted to the millions of dollars of revenue from pokies and has kept them out of the pubs and clubs and restricted them to casinos—that is, a dedicated gambling venue.

The other states are now so hopelessly addicted to the taxes they glean off the backs of our problem gamblers that the only way forward is for the *Poker Machine Harm Reduction Tax (Administration) Bill 2008*, introduced into the Senate by Family First, to be adopted federally.

These are just three examples that are best practice but are being ignored by other states. If COAG were really fair dinkum about a new federalism, it would agree, when it meets again on Friday 28 March, to adopt these ideas and look for other laws that are best practice.