

# Beyond 'Sovereign Spheres': Public Officials' Views on Allocating Policy Responsibilities in the Australian Federation

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## 1 Introduction

The logic of any federal system – not only at point of creation but in its ongoing operation and evolution – rests on having an agreed understanding of the roles and responsibilities of its constituent governments. Little wonder, then, that debates over the strengths and weaknesses of federal systems frequently revolve around whether there is sufficient clarity about who is meant to be doing what. In Australia, these debates were revitalised between 2014 and 2016 by the Abbott Government's *Reform of the Australian Federation* initiative, with its preference for a federalism in which the Commonwealth and states would have sovereignty over their own distinct spheres of policy (for more details, see the Introduction to this volume).

Any sustainable resolution to the question of who should be doing what in the Australian Federation has to extend beyond agreement among politicians. The responses of the general public will also be critical, as will commitment to the new arrangements by the public officials on whom the operation of Australia's federal system depends. Elected politicians find it extremely difficult to carry through successful institutional and policy reforms, such as rationalisation and redistribution of federal policy responsibilities, where these reforms face resistance from public sector bureaucrats.

Despite the important roles of public officials, there has been almost no systematic research on their attitudes towards federal arrangements. The growing body of research on Australian public opinion on the operation of the federation,<sup>1</sup> which draws on a longstanding strand of comparative research in the United States,<sup>2</sup> has not yet been matched by research on the Australian

- 1 See, for example, AJ Brown, 'Escaping Purgatory: Public Opinion and the Future of Australia's Federal System' in Gabrielle Appleby, Nicholas Aroney and Thomas John (eds), *The Future of Australian Federalism: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) 365.
- 2 See, for example, Sandra K Schneider et al, 'Public Opinion Toward Intergovernmental Policy Responsibilities' (2010) 41(1) *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 1; John Kincaid

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