The "Washminster" hybrid

History provides another vehicle for describing the Australian system of government. Historically, the Australian system of government is a hybrid. When the Australian founding fathers wrote the Australian Constitution in the 1890s they combined elements of the British parliamentary model and the federal model of government from the United States of America into something uniquely Australian.

In 1980, Elaine Thompson used the phrase "the Washminster mutation" to remind us that while the British heritage (Westminster) is dominant, the influences of the American model (Washington) on our system of government are substantial and cannot be ignored.

Westminster

From the British tradition Australia's founding fathers borrowed:

- a constitutional monarch (who is a non political, non-executive head of State);
- the Westminster model of representative parliamentary democracy and responsible Cabinet government; and
- the English legal system.

Washington

From the US tradition they borrowed:

- a federal system where powers are divided between the central (Commonwealth) and regional (state) governments;
- an entrenched constitution which provides the fundamental law, limiting the sovereignty of Commonwealth and state parliaments;
- a supreme court (known as The High Court of Australia), which rules on the validity and constitutionality of Commonwealth and state laws;
- a Senate, or "States House", as part of the legislature with equal representation from each state;
- different parliamentary terms for both Houses of Parliament, and a rotating system of elections for Senators; and
- relatively short terms for the House of Representatives of up to 3 years. (At the time the Australian Constitution was written there were two years terms for the House of Representatives in the United States and seven-year terms for the House of Commons in the United Kingdom).