

Chapter 6

Increasing Accountability at the Heart of the Federation

*Philip O'Meara and Anna Faithfull**

I Introduction

In a speech to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia in February 2011, Paul McClintock, Chairman of the Council of Australian Governments ('COAG') Reform Council, observed that 'the two most important executive governance structures we have in Australian national public life today are the federal cabinet and COAG'.¹ He suggested that the 'quality of the work done by these two executive bodies is crucial for the nation, and they both deserve more scrutiny than they get'.²

Comparing these two 'shadow' or 'soft' institutions of our governance structure provides a useful point of departure in considering the type of reform required for COAG to deliver on its significant potential. In comparing Cabinet and COAG it is instructive to understand their respective purposes, roles and institutional and procedural bases. An initial analysis would suggest that both institutional fora are tasked with managing key policy issues and strategically planning for the future. However, this chapter argues that COAG is fundamentally different from Cabinet in that it brings together first ministers of the Australian federation, and the Australian Local Government Association, to drive the best interests of the nation. This presents both challenges and significant opportunities for national policy reform.

In 2008, COAG developed a conceptual framework, the *Intergovernmental Agreement for Federal Financial Relations* (IGA-FFR), which builds on the strengths of Australia's federal structure. This chapter will explore the importance of the

* This chapter represents the views of the authors, not the Victorian government.

1 Paul McClintock, 'Renewing the Mandate: COAG and Its Reform Agenda in 2011' (Speech delivered at the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, Sydney, 9 February 2011) 1 <http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/media/speeches/speech_20110209_CEDA.pdf>; the authors note that in appreciating McClintock's analogy and using it as the basis for their analysis, it illustrates assumptions about a hierarchy of government. The quote ignores the role of state and territory Cabinets.

2 Ibid.

This is a preview. Not all pages are shown.