INTRODUCTION TO LAW
SUMMARY

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# INTRODUCTION TO LAW SUMMARY

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>..................................................................................................................</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF AUTHORITIES</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOPIC 1: THE WESTERN LEGAL TRADITION</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 COMMON LAW</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 CIVIL LAW</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOPIC 2: ENGLISH LEGAL HISTORY</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 FEUDALISM</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1 The formal social hierarchy in Feudalism</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 THE CREATION OF THE COMMON LAW</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1 The creation of legal structures</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2 The writ system</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3 The earliest trial procedures</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.4 Equity</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.5 The creation of constitutionalism</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.6 Reforms in the common law and the courts</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.7 The creation of the legal profession</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 THE RULE OF LAW</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOPIC 3: SOVEREIGNTY AND INTERNATIONAL LAW</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 WHAT ARE THE TWO DIMENSIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY?</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.1 Internal Sovereignty</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.2 External sovereignty</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 HOW HAS THE MEANING OF SOVEREIGNTY EVOLVED?</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1 Pre 17th Century - Europe feudal model of sovereignty</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1 17-20 century - Liberal Euro-American model</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THE CONTEMPORARY MODEL OF EXTERNAL SOVEREIGNTY?</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.1 Origins of the model of sovereign interstate governance was C17 Thirty Years War in Europe</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.2 What are the 7 key elements of the Westphalian model of external sovereignty</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.3 How successful was the Westphalian Model in averting inter-state crises</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 WHAT EMERGED AFTER 1945 TO REMEDY THE DEFICITS IN THE WESTPHALIAN MODEL?</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.1 The UN Charter Model</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.2 1945 Post War Political and economic reconstruction</td>
<td>..................................................................................................................</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.5.3 What are the key assumptions of the post 1945 UN Charter Model? ........................................... 30

3.6 WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE UNITED NATIONS? ................................................................. 30

3.6.1 Article 1 - The Purposes of the United Nations are: ................................................................. 30

3.6.2 How does UN Charter Article 2 reconcile sovereignty and inter-state cooperation? ................. 31

3.7 INTERNAL SOVEREIGNTY ................................................................................................................. 31

3.7.1 Separation of Powers ................................................................................................................... 31

3.7.2 Principle of Constitutionalism ................................................................................................... 32

3.7.3 Principle of the Rule of Law ....................................................................................................... 32

3.7.4 Who is the sovereign in Australia? .............................................................................................. 32

3.7.5 Where does Australian sovereignty come from? ....................................................................... 32

3.7.6 Is sovereignty in Australia based on the grant of Imperial sovereign to its colony, or on Popular sovereignty? ......................................................................................................................... 32

3.7.7 Constitutionalism in Australia - Compact between the colonies to create a federal state .... 33

TOPIC 4: AUSTRALIAN LEGAL HISTORY .................................................................................................. 34

4.1 THE TRANSPORTATION OF ENGLISH CONVICTS ........................................................................ 34

4.2 THE ARRIVAL OF LAW TO NEW TERRITORIES ........................................................................... 34

4.3 THE DOCTRINE OF TERRA NULLIUS ............................................................................................. 35

4.4 THE RECEPTION OF ENGLISH LAW IN AUSTRALIA ................................................................... 36

4.5 THE AUSTRALIAN COURT STRUCTURE AND ITS CREATION ....................................................... 37

4.5.1 Bigge’s recommendations – the New South Wales Act ............................................................ 38

4.6 THE CREATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT ................................ 38

4.6.1 The New South Wales Act ......................................................................................................... 38

4.6.2 The Australian Courts Act ........................................................................................................ 39

4.6.3 Australian Constitutions Act (No 1) (5 & 6 Vict, c 76) 1842 .................................................... 39

4.6.4 Australian Constitutions Act (No 2) (13 & 14 Vict, c 59) 1850 ................................................ 39

4.7 CURBING THE EFFECT OF THE REPUGNANCY DOCTRINE ...................................................... 40

4.8 THE JUDICIAL COMMITTEE OF THE PRIVY COUNCIL ................................................................. 41

4.9 THE CREATION OF A FEDERATION AND AUSTRALIAN INDEPENDENCE .................................... 42

4.9.1 The Treaty of Versailles ............................................................................................................. 43

4.9.2 The Balfour Declaration ............................................................................................................. 43

4.9.3 The Statute of Westminster 1931 .............................................................................................. 43

4.10 NATIVE TITLE .................................................................................................................................. 44

4.10.1 Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 ............................................................ 45

4.10.2 The Mabo case ......................................................................................................................... 45

4.10.3 The Native Title Act 1993 (Cth) ............................................................................................... 46
4.10.4 The Wik case .......................................................... 46
4.10.5 Native Title Amendment Act 1998 (Cth) ........................................ 46
4.11 INTERNATIONAL LAW ......................................................... 46

TOPIC 5: THE AUSTRALIAN LEGAL SYSTEM ........................................ 48

5.1 THE COMMON LAW SYSTEM IN AUSTRALIA .................................... 48
  5.1.1 Doctrine of Precedent .................................................. 48
  5.1.2 Hierarchy of Courts ................................................... 49

5.2 EQUITY ........................................................................ 50

5.3 FEDERATION AND FEDERALISM ........................................... 51

5.4 THE COMMONWEALTH CONSTITUTION AND CONSTITUTIONAL LAW ........................................ 51

5.5 THE SEPARATION OF POWERS ............................................. 53

5.6 BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT .................................................. 53

5.7 THE EXTENT OF SEPARATION OF POWER IN AUSTRALIA ...................... 54

5.8 HOW THE COURTS INTERPRET THE SEPARATION OF POWER ..................... 54

5.9 CASE LAW .................................................................. 55
  5.9.1 Law reports ............................................................... 55

5.10 LEGISLATION (STATUTES) .................................................. 56
  5.10.1 How case law and legislation interact ....................................... 56

5.11 CUSTOMARY LAW ............................................................. 57

5.12 INTERNATIONAL LAW ......................................................... 57
  5.12.1 Treaties ................................................................. 57
  5.12.2 Customary international law ............................................. 58
  5.12.3 How can international law become part of Australian domestic law? ............ 58

TOPIC 6: STATUTE LAW AND STATUTORY INTERPRETATION ...................... 60

6.1 HOW IS STATUTE LAW MADE? .................................................. 60

6.2 HOW CAN STATUTE LAW BE AMENDED OR REPEALED? ..................... 60

6.3 COMMON LAW RULES OF STATUTORY INTERPRETATION ..................... 61
  6.3.1 Literal Rule .................................................................. 61
  6.3.2 Golden Rule ............................................................... 62
  6.3.3 Purposive Rule ............................................................ 62
  6.3.4 Mischief Rule ............................................................. 63

6.4 RULES OF STATUTORY INTERPRETATION ..................................... 63
  6.4.1 Acts Interpretation Act 1901 (Cth): s 15AA ....................................... 63
  6.4.2 Extrinsic materials: s 15AB ............................................. 64
TOPIC 7: THE COMMON LAW AND PRECEDENT ................................................................. 68
7.1 HOW IS THE COMMON LAW DIFFERENT FROM STATUTE LAW? ....................... 68
  7.1.1 What is the nature of the common law? ............................................................. 68
7.2 WHAT IS A PRECEDENT? ......................................................................................... 69
  7.2.1 Ratio decidendi ................................................................................................... 69
  7.2.2 Obiter dicta ....................................................................................................... 69
7.3 HOW DOES THE DOCTRINE OF PRECEDENT WORK IN PRACTICE? ................. 69
  7.3.1 Binding and persuasive judgments in the court hierarchy ................................. 70

TOPIC 8: LEGAL CONCEPTS ...................................................................................... 72
8.1 LEGAL PERSONALITY ............................................................................................ 72
  8.1.1 What is legal personality? .................................................................................. 72
  8.1.2 Who or what has personality in legal terms? ..................................................... 73
  8.1.3 Why is legal personality important? ................................................................. 73
  8.1.4 Personality begins with life ............................................................................... 74
8.2 HOW AGE IMPACTS CAPACITY ......................................................................... 74
  8.2.1 Capacity to be criminally liable ......................................................................... 74
  8.2.2 Capacity and liability (Reasonable person test) ................................................ 74
  8.2.3 Age impacts on capacity to make contracts ...................................................... 74
  8.2.4 Age impact on capacity to consent to medical treatment .................................. 75
8.3 CORPORATE PERSONALITY ............................................................................. 75
  8.3.1 What is a corporation? ...................................................................................... 75
  8.3.2 Presumptions about the capacity of corporate persons ................................. 75
  8.3.3 Why extend personality to corporations? ......................................................... 75
  8.3.4 Implications of legal personality for corporations? .......................................... 75

TOPIC 9: LIABILITY .................................................................................................... 76
9.1 WHAT IS LIABILITY? ............................................................................................. 76
9.2 WHY ALLOCATE LIABILITY? ............................................................................... 76
9.3 PRESUMPTION ...................................................................................................... 76
9.4 HOW IS LIABILITY ALLOCATED? ....................................................................... 76
15.2 What is a Patent? .................................................................................................................................................. 89
15.3 What cannot be patented? ........................................................................................................................................ 89
15.4 What is a design? .................................................................................................................................................... 89
15.5 What is a trademark? ............................................................................................................................................... 90
15.6 What is the nature and purpose of copyright? ....................................................................................................... 90

TOPIC 16: FIDUCIARY RELATIONSHIPS ..................................................................................................................... 92
16.1 How does civil/private law control power and protect the vulnerable? ................................................................. 92
  16.1.1 When does a relationship become a fiduciary/principal relationship? ....................................................... 92
  16.1.2 Economic relations where fiduciary obligation may arise (the categories are never closed) ................. 92

TOPIC 17: THE ADVERSARY SYSTEM AND ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION .......... 93
17.1 What is the adversary system? .................................................................................................................................. 93
  17.1.1 What is the inquisitorial system? ....................................................................................................................... 93
17.2 What are some barriers to the adversary system? ................................................................................................. 93
17.3 What is alternative dispute resolution (‘ADR’)? .................................................................................................... 94
TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Statutes
Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth) .......................................................... 45
Acts Interpretation Act 1901 (Cth) .................................................................................................. 56, 64
Acts Interpretation Act 1915 (SA) .................................................................................................. 36
Australia Acts .................................................................................................................................. 44
Australia Acts 1986 (Cth) ............................................................................................................ 42
Australian Courts Act 1828 (Imp) ............................................................................................... 36, 38
Australian Courts Act 1850 (Imp) ............................................................................................... 39
Civil Liability Act 2002 (NSW) .................................................................................................. 70
Colonial Laws Validity Act 1865 (Imp) ....................................................................................... 41, 44
Commonwealth Constitution ........................................................................................................ 54
Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 (Imp) .......................................................... 42
Copyright Act 1968 (Cth) ............................................................................................................ 88, 90
Designs Act 2003 (Cth) .............................................................................................................. 88, 89
Federal Court of Australasia Act 1976 (Cth) ............................................................................. 42
Interpretation Act 1984 (WA) ....................................................................................................... 36
Interpretation Act 1987 (NSW) .................................................................................................. 64, 65
Judicature Act 1876 (Qld) .......................................................................................................... 23, 50
Judicature Act 1878 (SA) ............................................................................................................ 23
Judicature Act 1883 (Vic) ............................................................................................................. 24
Law Reform (Law and Equity) Act 1972 (NSW) ...................................................................... 50
Legal Procedure Act 1903 (Tas) .................................................................................................. 24
Native Title Act 1993 (Cth) ......................................................................................................... 46, 87
New South Wales Act 1787 (Imp) ............................................................................................... 38
Northern Territory Acceptance Act 1910 (Cth) ........................................................................ 36
Patents Act 1990 (Cth) ................................................................................................................ 88, 89
Privy Council (Appeals from the High Court) Act 1975 (Cth) .................................................. 42
Privy Council (Limitation of Appeals) Act 1968 (Cth) ............................................................... 42
Seat of Government Acceptance Act 1909 (Cth) ..................................................................... 36
Supreme Court Act (NT) .............................................................................................................. 24
Supreme Court Act 1880 (WA) .................................................................................................. 23
Supreme Court Act 1933 (ACT) .................................................................................................. 24
Supreme Court Act 1935 (SA) .................................................................................................. 50
Supreme Court Act 1935 (WA) ........................................................................................................ 50
Supreme Court Act 1958 (Vic) ........................................................................................................ 50
Supreme Court Act 1970 (NSW) .................................................................................................... 50
Supreme Court Civil Procedure Act 1932 (Tas) ............................................................................. 24, 50
Trade Marks Act 1995 (Cth) ........................................................................................................... 88, 90

Cases
Cooper v Stuart (1889) 14 App Cas 286 ............................................................................................ 35
Cubillo v Commonwealth of Australia (2001) FCA 1213 ................................................................. 44
Donoghue v Stevenson [1932] AC 562 ............................................................................................... 36
Grey v Pearson (1857) HLC 61 ......................................................................................................... 60
Mabo v Queensland (No 2) 175 CLR 1 ............................................................................................... 34, 45
Milirrpum v Nabalco (1971) 17 FLR 141 ........................................................................................... 80
Phillips v Eyre LR 6 QB 1 ............................................................................................................... 40
State Government Insurance Commission v Trigwell (1979) 142 CLR 617 ................................. 36
Telstra Corporation v Treloar (2000) 102 FCR 595 ............................................................................ 49
Wik Peoples v Queensland (1996) 187 CLR 1 .................................................................................... 46
Topic 1: The Western Legal Tradition

Both the civil law and common law traditions are derived from ideas in Christianity and Roman Law. The common law and civil law systems are what are known as the Western legal tradition.¹

During the peak period of the Roman Empire, the Romans had a Roman Code that was derived from Greek legal principles and Christian legal principles. This code was collected together and was called the Corpus Juris Civilis.² The Corpus Juris Civilis was also known as the Justinian Texts because they were organised by Emperor Justinian. When the Roman Empire ended, most of the Corpus Juris Civilis was lost, and it was not until later in the 11th century that these texts were rediscovered by legal philosophers. Alongside Greek Philosophy and the Bible, the Justinian Texts formed the basis for the contemporary Western legal tradition.

While the common law and civil law systems come from the same origins, they soon developed in different directions.

1.1 COMMON LAW

Australia’s legal system is based on the English common law system. Around the world, common law jurisdictions include:

• Australia;
• Canada;
• USA;
• New Zealand;
• Ireland;
• Kenya;
• India;
• Israel; and
• Malaysia.

1.2 CIVIL LAW

All the laws of civil law countries are contained in documents called “codes”. This includes both substantive and procedural law.

Civil law countries include:

- Most of continental Europe (notably France);
- Some states in South America;
- Thailand; and
- Japan.

Contemporary civil law is heavily influenced by the detailed code Napoleon drew up when he came into power after the French Revolution. This *Code Napoléon* became law in 1810 and consisted of:

- The Civil Code;
- The Code of Civil Procedure;
- The Commercial Code;
- The Code of Criminal Procedure; and
- The Penal Code.³

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Topic 2: English Legal History

The year 1066 was a signpost for a series of cumulative changes, beginning with the conquest of England by William, the Duke of Normandy. These changes have resulted in Australia and other former British colonies sharing the common law legal tradition. Before the Norman Conquest, there was a legal system already in existence in England. The problem with this pre-Conquest legal system was that it was not consistent across regions. Pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxon laws were based on different sets of customs that were in force in different parts of England, as such there were no single set of uniform rules across the country. These laws were administered in localised Anglo-Saxon courts.

2.1 FEUDALISM

The Normans established a series of land ownership called feudalism, which helped create a stable and uniform administrative system of government throughout England.

- **Feudalism**: a system of land ownership based upon a formal social hierarchy.

2.1.1 The formal social hierarchy in Feudalism

- **KING**
  - Has dominion over all the lands in the kingdom.

- **TENANTS-IN-CHIEF**
  - Land-owning nobles who held title to their land by virtue of direct grant from the Crown.

- **DESCENDING LEVELS OF SUBTENANTS**
  - Held land by virtue of a grant from the next higher level in the chain.
  - Lowest level: land-holding freemen.

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This formal hierarchy meant that alongside loyalty to the king, each landholder also owed feudal loyalty.

- **Feudal loyalty:** Loyalty owed to one level upwards. Each landholder swore allegiance to their immediate superior in the chain. Swearing allegiance meant being obligated to provide the lord with a share of the crops and serving military service on the lord’s behalf. The lords in turn promised to protection and assistance to their tenants.\(^8\)

### 2.2 THE CREATION OF THE COMMON LAW

The old system of localised Anglo-Saxon courts was not abolished by William, but they slowly grew out of favour as the new kings asserted their overarching dominion derived from feudalism.

As part of their duties as king, the Norman kings travelled the kingdom to hold court and hear complaints from the people. The kings, instead of looking to local customs to solve the dispute, worked under the premise that they would treat like cases across the kingdom in a similar manner – thus creating the doctrine of precedent.\(^9\) People preferred this system because they believed that the king and his delegates would be free of local prejudice. In addition, the king’s decrees had force all through England. The king’s royal rulings soon built up and set the foundations for the creation of the common law.

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