

## War Cabinet records

### **The War Cabinet**

On 15 September 1939, less than two weeks after the outbreak of World War II, Prime Minister Menzies announced the formation of a War Cabinet. There had been no such body during World War I. It was to be Australia's key decision-making body during the course of the war.

Although the War Cabinet was established as a standing committee of the full Cabinet to ensure that decisions were made quickly, as the war progressed the War Cabinet increased in importance and authority. The main decisions about the conduct of the war soon came to be taken by the War Cabinet, with the larger full Cabinet left to deal with more peripheral matters.

The War Cabinet consisted of Commonwealth Government Ministers chosen by the Prime Minister. The three Chiefs of Staff attended meetings in an advisory capacity when matters relating to the military conduct of the war were being discussed, and from time to time other experts and representatives of Allied governments also attended meetings.

### **The Advisory War Council**

The Advisory War Council was established under National Security regulations on 28 October 1940 following the September 1940 general election at which the Menzies government retained power only through the support of independents. This led the Prime Minister to invite the Labor opposition leader, John Curtin, to join a national government. Curtin declined, and instead proposed a War Council consisting of members of both the government and the opposition. This was accepted by Menzies.

The Council, which was known as the Advisory War Council, was chaired by the Prime Minister and consisted of members of the War Cabinet with the addition of the opposition leader and three other members of the opposition. The Council's function was wide ranging. To avoid double-handling by the two bodies Prime Minister Curtin (who came to office in October 1941) suggested that because the Council included five of the eight War Cabinet Ministers, if they agreed to a proposal at a Council meeting the Council's decision could automatically be accepted as a War Cabinet decision. If anyone felt that a matter should go to the War Cabinet then that would be done. In effect this meant in some respects that meetings of the Advisory War Council took the place of War Cabinet meetings. The special status accorded the Council was largely a reflection of the increased strain on the War Cabinet following the outbreak of war with Japan.

## War Cabinet and Advisory War Council records

A War Cabinet Secretariat ([CA 1468](#)) provided administrative support to the War Cabinet and the Advisory War Council. This included the preparation of minutes and agenda and the maintenance of a filing system.

Because the minutes recorded decisions at the highest level about defence policy and strategy they were regarded as vital records. The War Cabinet often met in Canberra, and occasionally Sydney, even though the headquarters of the three Services, the Department of Defence and the Central War Room were all located in Melbourne. When it travelled interstate its papers were transported under close guard. The problems faced by the staff of the War Cabinet Secretariat when meetings were held in Canberra have been described by two former members of the Secretariat.

Most of the series listed below are held in Canberra. Where indicated microfilm copies or photocopies are held in all research centres, with the exception of the Melbourne research centre.

### War Cabinet and Advisory War Council records

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<a href="#">War Cabinet minutes<sup>1</sup></a>	1939–46	A2673
<a href="#">War Cabinet minutes<sup>2</sup></a>	1939–45	A5954
<a href="#">War Cabinet minutes and agenda<sup>3</sup></a>	1939–46	A2700
<a href="#">War Cabinet agenda files</a>	1939–46	A2671
<a href="#">War Cabinet minute schedules<sup>4</sup></a>	1941–46	A2675
<a href="#">Subject Index cards for War Cabinet minutes and agenda</a>	1939–46	A5935
<a href="#">War Cabinet &amp; Advisory War Council notebooks<sup>5</sup></a>	1941–46	A9240
<a href="#">Advisory War Council minutes, carbon copies<sup>6</sup></a>	1940–45	A2682
<a href="#">Advisory War Council draft minutes<sup>7</sup></a>	1940–45	A2683
<a href="#">Advisory War Council minute files</a>	1940–45	A2684
<a href="#">Advisory War Council agenda</a>	1940–45	A2679
<a href="#">Advisory War Council agenda files</a>	1940–45	A2680
<a href="#">Advisory War Council minute schedules<sup>8</sup></a>	1941–45	A2688
<a href="#">Index to Advisory War Council minutes</a>	1940–45	A2685

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- <sup>1</sup> These are carbon copies. For preservation reasons the originals in A5954 , items 803/1 – 811/2 are not issued.
  - <sup>2</sup> This is a photocopied set held in all research centres.
  - <sup>3</sup> This is a microfilm set held in all research centres, with the exception of the Melbourne research centre.
  - <sup>4</sup> Showing the date and location of the meeting, those present and the agenda items discussed.
  - <sup>5</sup> This is a microfilm set held in all research centres, with the exception of the Melbourne research centre.
  - <sup>6</sup> These are carbon copies. For preservation reasons the originals in A5954, items 812/1 – 815/2 are not issued.
  - <sup>7</sup> With annotations and amendments.
  - <sup>8</sup> Showing the date and location of the meeting, those present and the agenda items discussed.