

Cabinet notebooks

Notetaking at Cabinet meetings

Since 1950 it has been the practice for senior public servants to attend meetings of the Federal Cabinet as notetakers in order to prepare an accurate record of the decisions of Cabinet. The notes they take are intended purely as an aide-memoire for drafting the formal Cabinet decision after the meeting. The documents in which their notes are recorded are referred to as Cabinet notebooks.

The notebooks are not, nor are they intended to be, a verbatim account of Cabinet's discussions. While notetakers may record the discussion in any way they wish, and while the personal views of individual ministers on particular issues may be recorded, by their nature the notebooks provide an incomplete record of the discussions.

Until 1941 the discussions of ministers at Cabinet meetings were not recorded, but in 1941 a system of notetaking was introduced at meetings of the War Cabinet. This system was discontinued at the end of World War II, but was reintroduced in 1950 and has been in place ever since. For further information please see *Fact sheet 127 – War Cabinet records*.

The system of notetaking

The earliest postwar notebooks date from 1950. While the arrangements for Cabinet notetaking have changed over time, a brief description of the system in place since the 1970s will illustrate how the system operates.

Three notetakers are present, the third of whom is required to take the fullest possible record of the meeting. This is used to produce the first draft of the decision, which is then passed to the two other notetakers (the most senior of whom, until 1996, was the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet – since then the senior notetaker has been the Secretary to Cabinet, not the Secretary of the Department). The resulting Cabinet Minute provides the only formal (and 20 years later, public) record of the decision. Notetakers use their discretion in judging what to record in their notes, but they are required to take a full record of any conflict of interest declared by a minister, and any request by ministers that their dissent from a Cabinet decision be recorded.

As one would expect of notes hurriedly recorded during discussion, the notebooks contain a variety of styles and handwriting, some of which are almost illegible. Cabinet notebooks contain detail that is not recorded in the formal Cabinet decision. By comparing a Cabinet decision with the corresponding Cabinet notebook, it is sometimes possible to obtain a fuller picture of Cabinet's deliberations on a particular issue.

A detailed history of the operations of the Cabinet since 1901 is contained in the 1983–84 annual report of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet – *The Development of Cabinet Procedures in Australia*.

The confidentiality of Cabinet discussions

By convention, discussions by ministers in the Cabinet room have been regarded as absolutely confidential. The convention of Cabinet confidentiality is seen as making possible complete frankness in Cabinet discussions, including the free expression by ministers of differing opinions and views. Whatever the private views of ministers, Cabinet solidarity requires that once a decision has been reached, it will be publicly supported by all ministers.

Until 1994 it was argued that Cabinet notebooks should not be publicly released because if ministers knew that details of the private views they expressed in the Cabinet room were to be released, this would inhibit the traditional frankness and freedom of expression in Cabinet meetings. These concerns were set aside in 1994 when the Archives Act was amended to make Cabinet notebooks available for public access for the first time.

Changes to the public access provisions of the [Archives Act 1983](#), approved by Parliament in May 2010, saw the open period shortened from 50 years to 30 years. The change was phased in over 10 years, with the closed period reducing by three years on 1 January each year until 2020.

Access to Cabinet notebooks

Cabinet notebooks that are in the [open access period](#) are publicly available. These comprise:

- **War Cabinet notebooks and Advisory War Council notebooks from 1941–46.** These are available as microfilm in all National Archives research centres except the Melbourne research centre; and
- **Cabinet notebooks from 1950 to 1965.** These notebooks are available to view in our Canberra research centre. Digital copies of some notebooks are also available on [RecordSearch](#). Records that are in the open period are listed at item level on [RecordSearch](#). Transcripts are available for notebooks from 1950 to 1953.

Cabinet notebooks held by the National Archives

The table below describes the War Cabinet and Advisory War Council notebooks held in the collection.

War Cabinet and Advisory War Council

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>War Cabinet and Advisory War Council notebooks</u>	1941–46	A9240
<u>War Cabinet notes – Volume 1</u>	1940–41	A5954, 729/1
<u>War Cabinet notes – Volume 2</u>	1940–41	A5954, 729/2
<u>War Cabinet notes – Volume 3</u>	1941	A5954, 730/1
<u>War Cabinet notes – Volume 4</u>	1941	A5954, 730/2
<u>War Cabinet notes – Volume 5</u>	1941–42	A5954, 731/1
<u>War Cabinet notes – Volume 6</u>	1941–42	A5954, 731/2
<u>War Cabinet notes – Volume 7</u>	1943	A5954, 732/1
<u>War Cabinet notes – Volume 8</u>	1944–45	A5954, 733/1
<u>War Cabinet notes – Volume 9</u>	1945–46	A5954, 733/2
<u>War Cabinet Notebook [This volume contains blank pages only – one with a 1945 calendar attached.]</u>	circa 1945–46	A5954, 733/3
<u>War Cabinet meetings – notes 27/09/39 to 25/01/40</u>	1939–40	A5954, 734/1
<u>Advisory War Council notes – Volume 1 – 29/10/40 to 5/02/41</u>	1940–41	A5954, 212/1
<u>Advisory War Council notes – Volume 2 – 5/02/41 to 6/06/41</u>	1941	A5954, 212/2

The table below describes the Cabinet Office notebooks.

Cabinet Office

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Cabinet notebooks</u>	1950–96	A11099

For more information

Further information about records of Cabinet held by the National Archives is available in the following fact sheets:

- *Fact sheet 34 - Cabinet records*
- *Fact sheet 127 - War Cabinet records*
- *Fact sheet 246 - Cabinet records of the Fraser government, 1975–83*