

Cabinet records

The role of the Cabinet

Each portfolio of agencies of the Australian Government is presided over by a Minister who is an elected Member of the House of Representatives or of the Senate of the Government of the day. Senior Ministers of the Government form the Federal Cabinet. Meetings of the Cabinet make the major decisions affecting the government of Australia.

Development of the Cabinet Secretariat and the Cabinet Office

The development of a Cabinet Secretariat to provide all Cabinet and Cabinet Committee secretarial services took almost 50 years after Federation to evolve.

For the first two decades of the Commonwealth there was no regular procedure for recording the decisions of Cabinet. It was usual for ministers to take their own notes, and several prime ministers kept diaries. Records of Cabinet meetings were often pieced together from handwritten notes on the Prime Minister's copy of the Cabinet agenda.

In 1923, under Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, an 'honorary minister' (known as the Cabinet secretary from 1925) was appointed to take minutes. In 1928 this position was joined by the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, and the two secretaries prepared the agenda in consultation. This was dropped by the Scullin Government (1929–31), but from 1932 under Prime Minister Joseph Lyons a secretarial system was re-introduced. With modifications and variations this system was continued until the World War II period where the decisions of Cabinet (along with those of the War Cabinet, Production Executive and other Cabinet bodies) were recorded by permanent officers of the Commonwealth Public Service appointed for that purpose. The Cabinet Secretariat structure now in use was put in place by Prime Minister Ben Chifley in 1949 and completed during the first term of the Menzies Government (1949–66).

An article on the development and workings of Cabinet was featured in the Annual Report of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for 1983–84.

Record holdings

Cabinet submissions and decisions

The main Cabinet records after 1919 are submissions (also referred to as agenda) and decisions (minutes). Submissions are proposals prepared by government departments that require a response from Cabinet. The resulting decision is filed with the submission it relates to, as well as being filed in a separate series of decisions. There is usually a separate series for each ministry. These are listed in the table below.

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Because there was no Cabinet secretariat structure before 1919 no separate Cabinet recordkeeping system existed. Submissions considered by Cabinet were generally returned to the department by the responsible minister annotated to show Cabinet's decision. As these papers have been located in the correspondence files of key government departments and agencies, the National Archives has placed copies into a separate series registered as A6006. This series also contains papers later than 1919 that are not included in the series of submissions.

Cabinet files

From 1958 the Cabinet Office introduced the practice of creating a file as each Cabinet submission was received. These files contain background information on decisions Cabinet took on each submission.

Cabinet records from 1901

Ministry		Submissions and Decisions		Files	
	Date	Submissions	Decisions	Date	Series no.
Ministries to 1960	1901–	<u>A6006</u>			
Hughes (1915–23)	1919–22	<u>A2717</u>			
Bruce (1923–29)	1923–29	<u>A2718</u>			
Scullin (1929–32)	1929–31	<u>A3264</u>			
Lyons (1932–39) Page (1939)	1932–39 1932–34	<u>A2694</u> <u>A3259</u>			
Menzies (1939–41) Fadden (1941)	1939–41	<u>A2697</u>			
Curtin (1941–45) Forde (1945) Chifley (1945–49)	1941–49	<u>A2700</u>			
Menzies (1949–66)	1949–51	<u>A4639</u>	<u>A4931</u>	1949–66	<u>A4940</u>
	1951–54	<u>A4905</u>	<u>A4909</u>		
	1954–55	<u>A4906</u>			
	1954–58		<u>A4910</u>		
	1956–58	<u>A4926</u>			

	1958–63		A4943		
	1958–61	A5818			
	1961–63	A5819			
	1963–66	A5827	A5828		
Holt (1966–67) McEwen (1967–68)	1966 1966–68	A5841 A5842	A5839 A5840	1966–68	A4940
Gorton (1968–71)	1968	A5867	A5871	1968–71	A5882
	1968–69	A5868	A5872		
	1969–71	A5869	A5873		
McMahon (1971–72)	1971–72	A5908	A5909	1971–72	A5882
Whitlam (1972–75)	1972–75	A5915	A5925	1972–75	A5931
Fraser (1975–83)	1975	A12908	A13050		
	1975–83	A12909	A13075	1975–83	A10756
Hawke (1983–91)	1983–84	A13977			
	1983–91		A13979	1983–91	A11116
	1984–91	A14039			
Keating (1991 – 96)	1991-96	A14217	A14218	1991-96	A11117
Howard (1996 – 2007)	1996-99	A14370	A14370	1996-99	A14371

Further information

You can [search the collection](#) database using the series numbers listed above. Digital copies of all Cabinet records from 1971–80 are available via our collection database, with selected records available from 1981.

See also the following fact sheets:

- *Fact sheet 127 - War Cabinet records*
- *Fact sheet 128 - Cabinet notebooks*