



The Cabinet Room, Parliament House, Canberra. Photo: AUSPIC

# Question Time

## Question

What are the origins of the Cabinet?

## Answer

The Cabinet is a parliamentary tradition adopted from the United Kingdom. Early English monarchs were assisted by a group of advisers known as the Privy Council. From the fifteenth century, the Privy Council often delegated certain tasks to smaller committees. Any committee attended by the monarch was known as a 'cabinet'. This became the usual name for the group comprised of the sovereign and his or her closest advisers.

The Cabinet came into its own during the reign of King George I (1714–1727). As well as being King of Great Britain, George I was the Elector of Hanover, a German territory inherited from his father. Having grown up in Germany, George was unfamiliar with English language and customs. During his reign, he spent much of his time attending to matters in Hanover. He showed little interest in the government of Great Britain and rarely attended meetings of the Cabinet or Parliament.

In George's absence, the power of his ministers increased. Acting as a collective, the Cabinet was able to formulate its own policies. If the Cabinet's bills were passed by the Commons, the King had little choice but to accept them. The Cabinet's role as the chief policy-making body of the Government became an enduring feature of the Westminster Parliament.

In Australia at Federation, the Constitution provided for seven Ministers of State who were to make up the Cabinet.

The first Cabinet was appointed by the Governor-General, on the advice of Prime Minister Edmund Barton, in December 1900, before the first federal election. It comprised Edmund Barton (Hunter, NSW), Alfred Deakin (Ballarat\*, Vic), James Dickson (Queensland), John Forrest (Swan, WA), Charles Kingston (South Australia), Neil Lewis (Tasmania), William Lyne (Hume, NSW), Senator Richard O'Connor (NSW), and George Turner (Balaclava, Vic). With the exception of O'Connor, Deakin and Barton, all were former colonial Premiers.

As there were nine members instead of the seven prescribed by the Constitution, O'Connor and Lewis were Ministers without Portfolio and, therefore, without ministerial salary. Before the first general election, Dickson died and was replaced by Queensland Senator James Drake. Lewis decided to remain in State politics and was replaced by former Tasmanian Premier Philip Fysh.

Recognising that the Parliament would grow, the Constitution provided for the number of Ministers to be changed by law; that is, without a referendum. Seven Ministers soon proved to be too few to administer all the Government's departments. In 1915, the

number of Ministers rose to eight, and after several further increases, reached a maximum of 30 in 2001.

As the number of Ministers grew, it was not practical to include them all in the Cabinet. In 1956, Prime Minister Robert Menzies divided his Ministry into an 'inner' group, consisting of the Prime Minister and senior Ministers, and an outer Ministry made up of junior Ministers. The inner Ministry formed the Cabinet. This practice was adopted by all subsequent Governments, except that of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, whose 1972–75 Cabinet contained all Ministers.

Since 1956, Ministries have consisted of 22 to 30 Ministers, while the Cabinet has contained between 11 and 17 members.

\* The electorate of Ballarat, centred around the Victorian city of the same name, was originally spelt as Ballaarat. The name changed in 1977.

## Have you got a question?

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