

Beefing up security at Australia's borders

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Today sees the delivery of the next set piece in the Abbott government's take-no-prisoners approach to national security. The formation of the Australian Border Force is the most significant change to border security since the establishment of the Department of Police and Customs in 1975.

The changes are justified given the diverse and complex threats at Australia's borders — including serious and organised crime and the new challenge of identifying those travelling to fight in foreign conflicts and returnees from Iraq and Syria. The sad reality is we're no longer solely victims of crime and terrorism; our citizens are also perpetrators of such crimes.

From today, the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service will cease to exist. The operational staff from immigration and customs will be fused together to form a single border security agency, the ABF.

The casual observer will notice some changes, among these a new dark blue uniform. But the formation of the ABF is the latest stage in the Abbott government's approach to securitising the Australian border.

The ABF will operationalise fundamental shifts in both what constitutes the border and the strategies by which it's secured.

The border will now be defined as more than a line on a map. The ABF will operate in a continuum that stretches ahead of and behind the traditional border to control who and what enters or exits.

Until now the operational staff at Australia's borders were for the most part public servants. From today we'll see the creation of a new category of public sector worker, the Border Force Officer.

They'll be able to access a range of police powers including the use of force, which make them more akin to police. Over the past 18 months the balance between the department's roles in facilitating trade and travel and undertaking enforcement operations have been recast in favour of border security.

The burden of proof at the border is shifting against the benefit of doubt. "If immigration and border protection faces a choice to let in or keep out people with security questions over them — we should choose to keep them out," Prime Minister Tony Abbott said in February.

The impacts of this strategy change are already evident with a 50 per cent increase in the number of travellers denied entry to Australia over the past two years.

In 2008, Britain implemented a similar unified strategy with the creation of a Border Agency and, four years later, a dedicated Border Force. The ABF should pay close attention to the British - experience of a single border agency. Cultural resistance, poor planning and outdated IT systems can contribute to poor performance. And the ABF won't be immune from these risks.

The ABF's security focus may have negative impacts on the performance of its facilitation roles, which will have time and resource costs for members of the private sector and the public. This creates an opportunity for business to play a more proactive role in border security: it'll be in the interest of shareholders to facilitate quick transitions across the border.

Managing border security won't be smooth sailing. Over the next three years there'll be a 20 per cent increase in freight, travellers and postage crossing our borders.

The ABF strategy will realise savings through efficiencies. But operational areas will continue to be stretched thin without further government investment. Without continued real growth in border

security funding for technological capabilities the initial gains in border security could well be lost quickly.

If the ABF model proves successful consideration should be given to the centralisation of other border security functions such as quarantine and biosecurity to ensure a unified approach.

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