

## Turnbull flying solo on home affairs super-ministry



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at the Economic and Social Outlook conference in Melbourne.  
Picture: David Geraghty

[Paul Maley](#), The Australian, 12:00AM July 22, 2017

The decision to proceed with Malcolm Turnbull's home affairs super-ministry was never formally evaluated by the national security committee of cabinet, the government's highest national security body, despite the NSC having met the morning the announcement was made.

Less than a week after the Prime Minister announced the changes, a picture is emerging of a rushed, shambolic process that critics across the government believe was driven by political expediency rather than good policy.

The Weekend Australian has been told some of the key ministers affected by the changes were not told of the Prime Minister's decision to go with the idea, which had been under consideration for some time, until just a few days before Tuesday's announcement.

The Weekend Australian also understands that at the time of the announcement there was not one operative document circulated among ministers explaining how the arrangements would work.

The failure to formally put the idea to the NSC, the government's main national security policymaking body, threatens to inflame internal tensions within the government, particularly given Mr Turnbull's criticisms of Tony Abbott's handling of cabinet processes when he was PM. In 2015, when Mr Abbott pushed for the immigration minister to be given the authority to strip suspected terrorists of their citizenship, Mr Turnbull, then communications minister, was reportedly scathing of the manner in which Mr Abbott had propagated the idea.

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“Here we go again,” Mr Turnbull reportedly said, according to a 2015 story in Fairfax Media. “Talking about something as momentous as this and there is nothing in front of us. There’s a discussion paper that only a few of us have seen. This is a shambles.”

On Tuesday, the Prime Minister argued strenuously for the change to create a home affairs super-portfolio, saying it made sense to have a single minister focused on security. “We need these reforms, not because the system is broken, but because the security environment is evolving quickly,” he said. “It’s becoming more complex. It’s likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. “We need a better structure to meet the challenge of the times.”

While the arguments for and against a home office have been widely discussed within the government for years, and the views of the key ministers are well known, Mr Turnbull appears to have bypassed the NSC and cabinet in finalising the changes.

Under the new plan, ASIO, the Australian Federal Police, Australian Border Force, Australian Crime Commission, AUSTRAC and the Office of Transport Security will be bundled into a single home affairs portfolio with Mr Dutton as the minister.

The Attorney-General will lose his national security responsibilities, although he will still sign off on ASIO’s interception warrants.

A new government department will also be created, as well as an office of national intelligence.

Before the announcement, the NSC was convened; however, it was not asked to formally evaluate the proposal. The NSC is composed of the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, Attorney-General George Brandis, Defence Minister Marise Payne, Scott Morrison and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton.

No member of the NSC responded to The Weekend Australian’s requests for information about Tuesday’s meeting.

A spokesman for Mr Dutton said he would not discuss NSC business, citing longstanding practice. However, he said machinery-of-government changes were at the discretion of the Prime Minister. “They do not require approval of either cabinet or the NSC,” the spokesman said.

A spokeswoman for Mr Keenan said the Justice Minister was on leave, but added it was “not accurate” to say he learnt of the changes days before the announcement.

When asked if the home affairs proposal was put to Tuesday’s meeting, a spokesman for Mr Turnbull would say only that the reforms would “help keep Australians safe”. “While machinery-of-government changes are at the discretion of the Prime Minister and do not require cabinet approval, the PM sought the views of a range of relevant parties over many months,” he said. “Any claim that these reforms did not involve careful consideration is patently false.”

The spokesman declined to say whether the idea had been discussed during previous meetings, nor did he respond to questions about the lack of documentation or the apparent reservations of AFP boss Andrew Colvin and ASIO’s director-general Duncan Lewis.

Speaking after Tuesday’s announcement, Mr Dutton said Mr Colvin and Mr Lewis were “excited” about the home affairs portfolio. “I had my first conversation with Duncan Lewis, the head of ASIO, and with Andrew Colvin, the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, in the last 24 hours or so,” he told Sky News. “I can tell you that both of them are excited about what the government has announced (and) they are looking forward very much to the new arrangement.”

But sources close to the process have challenged Mr Turnbull’s claims that the two operational agencies most affected by the changes had no objections to the new arrangements, saying Mr Colvin and Mr Lewis had aired concerns about the plan at senior levels of the government. Both men are said to be worried about the lack of clarity around the arrangements. A spokeswoman for ASIO said Mr Lewis would not comment. Mr Colvin was on leave.