



The Principles of Cabinet

Includes information and commentary by Honorary Research Fellow Dr Paul Reynolds.

The Role Of Cabinet

The *Constitution of Queensland Act 2001* provides for a Cabinet consisting of the Premier and a number of other Ministers, to a maximum total of 19 Ministers. Currently, the Queensland Cabinet consists of the Premier, who is Chief Minister, and 18 other Ministers. The persons comprising the Ministry and Cabinet are also members of Executive Council. Cabinet meets weekly, with the Premier (or the Deputy Premier in the Premier's absence) chairing the meetings and setting the agenda. When appropriate, the Premier may establish Cabinet committees for closer examination of specific matters.

In the Westminster system of government, Cabinet is one of the major centres of political power. It is the supreme decision-making body of the Government in matters such as initiating or refining new Government policies, making senior appointments, approving Government expenditure and assenting to important contracts. Cabinet's decisions are given formal effect through Acts of the Parliament, actions of the Executive Council or the executive powers held by Ministers for the administration of their portfolios.

The Queensland Cabinet usually meets in the Executive Building in Brisbane but it has been the practice for many years to also hold meetings in selected regional centres. After 1998, a practice termed 'Community Cabinet' was developed whereby the Cabinet and senior public servants regularly spend a weekend in regional locations. Prior to a Community Cabinet meeting, individual Ministers and their officials meet with community leaders and members of the public to answer questions and discuss matters to do with their portfolios. When points are made that require following up by a department, a note is taken and those concerned are notified later as to what action, if any, is proposed.

An effective and efficient Cabinet system is based on particular procedures and conventions. It is essential that those procedures incorporate the processes of consultation, allow for a detailed examination of all submissions placed by Ministers before Cabinet and that all Cabinet deliberations are conducted in a confidential environment. In Queensland, these procedures are outlined in the *Queensland Cabinet Handbook*. Those procedures and conventions are designed to bind Cabinet and its associated processes to the following fundamental principles¹:

- Cabinet is responsible for the development and coordination of the policies of the government;
- the collective responsibility of Ministers for Government decisions requires collective adherence to all Government decisions made in Cabinet. Cabinet decisions reflect collective

deliberation and are binding on Cabinet Ministers as government policy;

- consultation is an essential element of the Cabinet process;
- the deliberations of Cabinet and Cabinet Committees shall be conducted in a secure and confidential environment, and that ongoing confidentiality of Cabinet and related records shall be maintained;
- preparation of business to be considered by Cabinet is of the highest standard reflecting the information needs of Ministers, to ensure informed decision-making can occur in accordance with the public interest;
- Cabinet proposals reflect a rigorous examination of issues, whole of government coordination and accord with Government policy;
- Cabinet processes are established by the Premier to ensure all Ministers are bound by the same rules and by high standards of probity; and
- Cabinet collectively, and Ministers individually, are responsible and accountable to the Crown, the Parliament, and ultimately the electorate.

By convention, two fundamental principles of the Westminster system are observed in the operation of Cabinet: collective ministerial responsibility and individual ministerial responsibility.

Collective Ministerial Responsibility

Collective responsibility means that all Ministers are bound by the collective decisions made by Cabinet. Accordingly Ministers act with and on behalf of their Cabinet colleagues. Ministers must seek Cabinet approval for all their proposals before making any public announcements.

Disapproval of any Cabinet decisions may be voiced only within Cabinet. It is also important that the most powerful decision-making body of Government displays a united front for political reasons and all Ministers are required to give their support in public debate to collective decisions of the Cabinet and the government. If a Minister is unable publicly to support a Cabinet decision, the proper course is for that Minister to resign from Cabinet.

Such practices reinforce Cabinet solidarity and also recognise the power and authority of Cabinet before that of any individual member of Cabinet. Such solidarity of Cabinet portrays a sense of strength and stability of the Government to the electorate.

Queensland Parliament Tertiary Factsheet

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Individual Ministerial Responsibility

Ministers of the Crown are appointed by the Governor on the advice of the Premier. Their role is influenced by the rules, conventions and expectations of the Westminster system of government. One of the fundamental concepts of responsible government is ministerial responsibility.

Not only are Ministers responsible for their own individual conduct but as Ministers of the Crown they are also responsible to Parliament for the actions of their respective Government departments. Ministers direct the implementation of Government policy and carry out the tasks of Government administration through those departments. They are responsible to Parliament, Cabinet, the electorate and their political party for the conduct of their ministerial affairs.

Under Westminster convention, the government must have the Confidence of the Parliament. If a motion of No Confidence in the Government is passed by the Parliament, all Ministers should resign. Similarly, an individual Minister should resign if he/she is the subject of a successful No Confidence motion.

Information about the matters that should be brought by Ministers for the consideration of Cabinet and further information about Cabinet committees can be found in the *Queensland Cabinet Handbook*.

¹ The Queensland Cabinet Handbook,
<https://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/publications/categories/policies-and-codes/handbooks/cabinet-handbook.aspx>