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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

TUESDAY, 15 DECEMBER 1981

REVIEW OF CABINET PROCEDURES

Cabinet procedures will be further streamlined as a result of the recent review. In general, the Cabinet system is working well although Ministers in Australia, as in other countries, are under intense and increasing pressures.

But the Cabinet system of government serves Australia well and suits Australian principles of Parliamentary responsibility. Fundamental changes have not been shown to be necessary. Changes made following the last review of Cabinet procedures in 1978/79 in general have been shown to be working effectively.

There is now to be greater emphasis on individual Ministerial responsibility within the Cabinet framework. Because of the increasing number of Cabinet papers, Ministers will be asked to settle more matters on their own responsibility or in consultation with other interested Ministers without Cabinet time being taken up.

A number of procedural changes will be made - in particular some tightening of guidelines for Departments to ensure adequate notice of matters coming forward and improved Cabinet papers and handling arrangements.

There will be a streamlining of the preliminary handling of Budget issues. At appropriate points Cabinet will give guidance on parameters and priorities. There will be a greater emphasis on the role of the Minister for Finance in the Budget process. Against the background of the Cabinet guidance, the Minister for Finance will discuss and settle individual expenditure items with the responsible Minister in advance of the final Budget Cabinet meetings. Any matters outstanding relating to on-going expenditure, together with new policy proposals, will be examined in mid-year by the Budget Committee which will make recommendations to Budget Cabinet.

Expenditure restraint in Commonwealth administration remains a priority of the Government. All expenditure proposals will receive the closest examination and every effort will be made to realise savings and to absorb cost increases. The Minister for Finance will be scrutinising rigorously any case put for additional appropriations in the current year. Such requests will not normally be supported unless additional estimates are essential to meet approved salary and wage adjustments.

The Cabinet Committee changes proposed come as a result of practical experience. It has been shown that the dividing line between the present General Policy Committee and the Industry Policy Committee is blurred and amalgamation of these two Committees into a General Administrative Committee will give a more even workload and a more predictable program to those Ministers involved. Major industry policy decisions, as usual, will be taken in Cabinet. The membership of the General Administrative Committee will be:

Sir Phillip Lynch
Mr Nixon
Senator Guilfoyle
Mr Viner
Senator Durack
Mr Fife
Mr Hunt
Mr MacKellar
Mr Macphee
Mr Thomson
Mr Newman
Mr Brown
Mr Moore
Mr Hodgman
Senator Messner
Senator Baume
Mr McVeigh
Mr Wilson

The public presentation of Government policies has been handled by the Public Information Committee. Experience shows that public presentation issues are best handled when the main policy issues are being considered. In future, discussion of public presentation questions will be taken in the relevant Cabinet or Cabinet Committee meeting and the Public Information Committee will be abolished.

The workload on Federal Ministers is considerable, especially when their parliamentary, electorate and community responsibilities are taken into account. The changes that are now being made should help Ministers in handling the substantial burden of ministerial office.