

## Peter Dutton becomes national security ministerial tsar in portfolio shake-up

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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The reorganisation is a major win for Peter Dutton, a key conservative supporter of Malcolm Turnbull. Mick Tsikas/AAP

Peter Dutton will take charge of a new mega Home Affairs portfolio in a sweeping overhaul of national security agencies and responsibilities announced by Malcolm Turnbull on Tuesday.

The reorganisation is a major win for Dutton, a key conservative supporter of Turnbull, and comes despite scepticism from many experts and several ministers about the need for – or desirability of – the change.

Turnbull said the new Home Affairs portfolio would be similar to the United Kingdom's Home Office, which he discussed while in London last week. It will include the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the Australian Border Force, and the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission.

Turnbull stressed the restructuring was his call, after extensive consultation with colleagues. The changes were the most significant security and oversight reforms in four decades, he said.

Following a just-completed review of the Australian Intelligence Community by two former federal officials, Michael L'Estrange and Stephen Merchant, the government will set up an Office of National Intelligence, headed by a Director of National Intelligence. The Australian Signals Directorate will become a statutory authority within the defence portfolio.

The report did not recommend a mega portfolio.

The broad reorganisation will take months to implement, and Dutton will be home affairs minister-designate until it is completed and he is sworn in as the new minister. This points the way to a summer reshuffle, with Attorney-General George Brandis widely tipped to exit

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parliament then.

In an apparent concession to Brandis and to head off criticism about civil liberties, the attorney-general will continue to be the issuer of warrants under the ASIO Act. The home affairs minister will also issue these warrants. Exceptions will be made to the need for double approval when the circumstances are time-sensitive.

The attorney-general's portfolio will also include the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security and the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor. Both are now in the prime minister's portfolio.

"I always have believed strongly in the role of the government's first law officer. It will only become more critical as threats continue to evolve," Turnbull told a news conference, flanked by Brandis, Dutton and Justice Minister Michael Keenan.

"So, I am determined to ensure effective oversight," he said, insisting it would be stronger under the changes.

The first law officer was the minister for oversight and integrity, he said.

Turnbull said that, given the challenges, "we need more enduring and better integrated arrangements for our domestic and border security – arrangements that will preserve the operational strengths and independence of our front line agencies but improve the strategic policy planning behind them".

"We are taking the best elements of our intelligence and national security community and making them better. As terrorists evolve their methods, we have to evolve our responses."

But recently retired secretary of the defence department Dennis Richardson, speaking at the Lowy Institute, played down the significance of the changes, saying they were not some great

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advance. There was a reasonable argument for immigration merging with other areas but beyond that it was presentational.

Turnbull said that Dutton would have two ministers working to him one on the security side and the other on the immigration side. Justice Minister Michael Keenan would be on the security side but Turnbull did not say who would be the junior on immigration.

The changes, expected to become operational early next year, will require some legislative amendment, especially in relation to ASIO. A taskforce will work on the complicated reorganisation; in the meantime the agencies will continue to report to their current ministers.

While critics have suggested a reorganisation would risk diverting the agencies' attention while it was happening, Turnbull said: "There will be no reduction in frontline capacity, focus or operational tempo".

Brandis, previously a known opponent of moving ASIO from the attorney-general's portfolio, told the news conference: "These are historic reforms and they have my strong support".

Dutton said: "Having made the promise to stop the boats and to make sure that we can keep our borders secure, we make this announcement today with this promise: the home affairs portfolio is dedicated to keeping Australians safe, to doing everything that we can to defeat the surge of terrorism, but beyond that, to work with our agencies in relation to transnational crime, in relation to organised crime, in relation to many other aspects of criminal activity within our country".

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said: "I don't think this is a captain's call, I think it's Peter Dutton's call".

He said he was "very concerned that these proposals aren't being pushed by our security agencies, they're being pushed by Peter Dutton as the price of him continuing to support Malcolm Turnbull in his job".

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*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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