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1. Julian Assange

Undoubtedly the people's choice for most powerful Australian on the world stage, Assange's release of the Wikileaks material has sparked a global debate and embarrassed governments everywhere. It is Australia's small contribution to the shift in global information power from state propaganda and the mass media to the confusing, viral world of internet-based campaigning. Of course, his power and celebrity has come at a cost. It may explain why Assange is facing a rape trial in Sweden.

2. John Laker

The head of the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority scored a crucial victory convincing the rest of the world to write an exemption into global banking rules that was tailor-made for Australia. Thanks to his efforts as a member of the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, Australian banks will be given special consideration because of our low levels of government debt. It is a tough game to have a voice in a body of 60 regulators from the US, Europe and Asia. The soft-spoken Laker cut a deal that could save Australia's banks billions.

3. Sharan Burrows

The former ACTU president has metamorphosed into the world's top unionist. Her new job as secretary-general of Brussels-based International Trade Union Confederation is a big change for the former schoolteacher from Bathurst. The job includes supporting trade union political protests across the Middle East and North Africa and lobbying to force multinational companies to lift labour standards in Third World countries. As the global voice of trade unionism, Burrows also has a seat at the table when the G20 meets to discuss economic policy. Her determination is recognised, and perhaps deplored, by employer groups worldwide. A tough gig, sure, but could it be as nasty as running the ACTU?

4. Geoff Raby

Stepping down after 4½ years as Australian ambassador to China, the economist and fluent Mandarin speaker will continue pulling the strings in a new job as co-head of law firm Corr Chambers Westgarth's Beijing office. He is not a lawyer but he will be trading on the connections he has developed in 30 years that coincided with the Chinese economic boom. The end of his tenure as ambassador has underlined his position as the doyen of Australian sinologists. He has slammed Australian business for "illiteracy" on China and even made an ambiguous jibe at his former boss, Kevin Rudd, saying not everyone who speaks Mandarin understands China. Raby clearly believes he does.

5. Chris Bowen

He is only Immigration Minister but the MP from Sydney's western suburbs with no diplomatic background is probably running the foreign issue with the most political significance. The rejection by the High Court of Bowen's plan to ship asylum seekers to Malaysia has dealt his prestige a big blow. He cut the deal with Malaysia behind the back of Foreign Minister Rudd, who opposes any offshore refugee solution. Now he has to work out plan B.

DEFENSIVE MOVES

A little more than a year after taking over the reins as Defence Minister, Stephen Smith has overseen dramatic changes in the big-spending portfolio. The veteran West Australian politician's biggest challenge has been managing the unpopular war in Afghanistan and the rising death toll among diggers. Smith has had to argue the merits of staying the course.

He has trimmed the defence budget and pressed reform of management and financing in a bid to meet the government's drive to balance the budget by 2012-13. But he has also pressed ahead with wider reforms, including a \$20 billion savings program and an ambitious defence white paper weapons wish-list. He has faced continuing issues about sexual harassment aboard navy ships, concerns over the seaworthiness of the transport ship fleet and furores over delays on projects such as the \$8 billion air warfare destroyer project.

Respected long-serving defence force chief, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston retired in July after six years in the post where he commanded Australian forces in difficult conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, to be replaced by his capable deputy, Lieutenant-General David Hurley. Stephen Gumley, the head of the government weapons purchaser, Defence Materiel Organisation, which oversees some \$130 billion worth of defence projects at any one time, also departed in July. He quit over government plans to bring it firmly back into the public service fold, reversing moves to make it more commercial.

Tough-minded defence secretary Ian Watt was poached by Prime Minister Julia Gillard to head up Prime Minister and Cabinet and replaced by Ms Gillard's national security adviser and former commander of Australian special forces, Duncan Lewis. Defence industry, which has complained about a slowdown in defence tenders and the government abandoning its commitment to weapons projects, has also gone through a transformation after Paul Johnson retired as chief executive of Lockheed Martin Australia (replaced by former navy commander Raydon Gates) and former Austal and DMO executive Kim Gillis became vice-president and managing director of Boeing Defence Australia.

John Kerin

3. Duncan Lewis

Julia Gillard's national security adviser will have his work cut out in taking on the role of defence secretary from one of the government's chief number crunchers, Ian Watt, who has gone on to bigger and better things as head of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Lewis knows defence well, having served as commander of Australian special forces and commanded troops in East Timor. He will have to keep reforming the department's at times unresponsive bureaucracy, improve economic management and instill more discipline and control in spending.

4. Warren King

The navy and defence industry veteran has taken over as acting chief executive of the Defence Materiel Organisation after the departure of Stephen Gumley. King needs to keep up the pressure on defence and the defence industry to reduce cost blowouts and delays on projects.

5. Mark Thomson

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute's budget program director makes the list after his annual review of the defence budget—*The Cost of Defence*—was once again compulsory reading, its release is even more anticipated than the budget itself. Thomson's findings this year triggered an inquiry into why defence is so bad at being able to accurately predict what it will spend from year to year.



1. Stephen Smith

Touted as a potential future Labor leader, Smith has taken to the Defence job with customary thoroughness and has pushed much needed reforms to the big-spending and unwieldy portfolio. He has been criticised over a tending slowdown as the government seeks to put its budget back into surplus. There are big decisions ahead on new submarines and the implementation of the long anticipated review of defence management.

2. General David Hurley

The Defence Force Chief, who has held most senior roles within the defence hierarchy, was a logical successor to the distinguished Angus Houston. Hurley takes over at a difficult juncture in Afghanistan as the casualty count rises. He has a good knowledge of all three services within the force, as well as the challenges facing defence weapons purchasing from his time in the military's capability development group.