

Press Conference with Director-General of Security, Duncan Lewis AO DSC CSC and the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Tony Sheehan

PRIME MINISTER:

Good morning. I am here with the Director-General of Security and the Commonwealth Counter-Terrorism Coordinator.

The Australian Government and the Australian people condemn the terrorist attack, the Islamist terrorist attack in Barcelona overnight.

Our love and our prayers are with the victims and their families.

At this stage, we understand 16 people have been killed – but of course, that death toll could rise – and many injured.

At this stage, we understand three Australians have been injured – one seriously. Our consular officials are on their way to Barcelona from Madrid. We have an Honorary Consul in Barcelona.

We stand in absolute resolute solidarity with the people of Spain in the fight against Islamist terrorism.

Spain is a partner in the Anti-Daesh Coalition in the Middle East, and of course, our intelligence agencies work closely with Spanish authorities as we do with many, many other nations. This is a global battle against terrorism.

Now, following the truck attack in Nice last year, as you know, I asked Tony's predecessor as Commonwealth Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Greg Moriarty, to undertake a work on protecting crowded places in Australia. And that's been continued by Tony.

That work has been completed now, and it will be released shortly.

It's the product of very careful work with state and territory police, agencies, with local government, with the private sector, with the owners of venues and crowded places, shopping centres, sporting arenas and so forth.

So we have seen, of course, how deadly vehicle attacks can be. We've seen it recently in London, of course, in the Borough Market attack and of course, tragically in Australia in the attack on the Bourke Street Mall.

We'll have more to say about that when the documents and the plan to protect and harden crowded places both immediately and in the future is released.

We are tirelessly, all of us in the government – ministers, heads of agencies, like the gentlemen beside me today – constantly focused on keeping Australians safe.

There is no place for set and forget on national security.

Every time there is an incident, whether it is abroad or at home, we learn from it and we continue to refine and advance and improve our ability to keep Australians safe.

Our agencies are the best in the world. There are no guarantees, of course, but our agencies are the best in the world. And the remarkable work the teams these two gentlemen lead, and the AFP and the NSW Police and other agencies did, in disrupting and containing the terrorist plot in Sydney recently to destroy an aeroplane is an example of the professionalism and the commitment our agencies have in keeping Australians safe.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister or Mr Lewis, do either of you or any of you consider what Pauline Hanson yesterday did to be counter-productive to the national security effort?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, Phil, what I'd like to do is firstly take questions on this issue.

JOURNALIST:

It's terrorism related.

PRIME MINISTER:

I'll take questions on this issue and then when we deal with other issues, Duncan and Tony will leave and I'll deal with a few other political matters.

JOURNALIST:

We are heading into football finals time.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

JOURNALIST:

Obviously, two big events in Sydney and Melbourne. So are special precautions being taken?

PRIME MINISTER:

The answer is, yes, there is heightened awareness to the vulnerability of all crowded places. Do you want to say more about that, Tony?

TONY SHEEHAN, COUNTER-TERRORISM COORDINATOR:

Thank you, Prime Minister. When we come into periods where we have major events like football finals, you'll see very close cooperation between state police, the football codes and the owners and operators of the venue in respect of security of those crowded places.

JOURNALIST:

I'm assuming our alert level been discussed again? No movement or consideration?

MR DUNCAN LEWIS AO DSC CSC, DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY:

No, our alert level is under constant re-evaluation. We've had a look at it through the lens of the tragic events in Spain last night and at this stage, there is no change.

JOURNALIST:

If you could clarify for us – you said that you're going to be releasing the report?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, it will be released very shortly.

JOURNALIST:

And is that going to contain, I mean, is the whole document going to be released and is there going to be specific advice for citizens about how they should behave?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, it's a comprehensive analysis and it will provide advice and tools for owners of venues, for operators of venues. Obviously, it will be of interest to the public but it is – protecting crowded places is a very complex issue.

It's also both a short-term issue and a long-term issue because you've got short-term measures that can be – and you've already seen them being put in place.

Again, we are constantly working to refine and improve the way we keep Australians safe. So this is not, there is no complacency, no set and forget in my government, I can assure you. We are relentless.

But there are also long-term issues. So when you're planning, what we seek to ensure is that when a new venue is being built, a new centre or shopping centre or football stadium, or some new public space is being constructed, resilience is built into that. And again, that's very important.

But what we've been able to do here, and it's a great credit to Tony who has provided the leadership for this, is bring a lot of experience from all of

the Australian and, indeed, New Zealand jurisdictions, and, indeed learn from international jurisdictions, including the UK and others, so that we can pool that expertise and that enables us again, constantly, to be seeking to improve and refine and advance the measures to keep Australians safe.

JOURNALIST:

So, PM will that work involve new construction work around existing venues? Is that something where Canberra will have to cooperate with the states and will there have to be funding from several different levels of government-

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, we'll have more to say when it is released, but it is obviously, David, the responsibility of everyone to pay attention to the vulnerability of the crowded places that for which they're responsible, and to bear that in mind.

JOURNALIST:

It's long been hypothesised that as ISIL loses territory in the Middle East they will shift tactics and reach out more to countries like Europe and including Australia. Are we now seeing evidence of that trend do you think?

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY:

Yes, I mean I think that's been going on for some time. There's been reach back from local forces in the Middle East back into Western Europe and back into our own country for some time.

Quite obviously, as the squeeze comes on in the Middle East, we do expect that there will be an outflow, if you like, almost an atomisation of the elements that are there.

Some of those will try to go to Western Europe. Some of those will try to go to other places but we would expect there would be a small trickle back here to Australia.

So we're very alert to that and as you know, there are frameworks in place here in this country to ensure that we are properly poised and ready to address that issue as it arises.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, since 2001, since the attacks on New York and Washington, there is the reaction or response of governments has been we're not going to allow terrorists to change the way we go about our lives. But that's manifestly happening now. We've got fences going up around Parliament and we've got changes in public places. How do you strike that balance between individual freedoms and the responsibility for collective security?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it's a fair question, Mark, and getting the balance right is the key.

We need to make sure that we provide protection and security for all Australians. But equally, we have to go about our lives in our Australian way. And so, you know, finding the right balance is clearly the key. But again, you know, you can see, I mean, if you take public places – I'll give you an example – if you have in public places, say a mall, if you have bollards which would prevent a vehicle from entering but not prevent pedestrians, that doesn't impose any real restriction on the public, particularly if it is an area that's meant to be for pedestrians. So you can, there are measures that you can undertake that will provide really no impediment to the public doing what they're seeking to do in a pedestrian area, but obviously prevent somebody driving a vehicle into it.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, just about one specific area that's been identified as vulnerable is airports. And I was just wondering if you could update us at all about where the government's position is on domestic security screening?

PRIME MINISTER:

Tony may wish to add to this, but we have made additional, we've enhanced the security measures at airports following the disruption of the plot in Sydney just a few weeks ago. And we are continuing to review airport security.

We do have very strong airport security measures but again, we don't sit back and say: 'We've got great measures there, they can't be improved'. We are constantly seeking to refine and improve them both at an operational level and also, frankly, with technology. Tony, do you want to add to that?

COUNTER-TERRORISM COORDINATOR:

Those matters are always under consideration by our agencies, Office of Transport Security and other relevant agencies.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Lewis with the death of Khaled Sharrouf this week are you comfortable that his children were killed in an airstrike as well, I mean is this sort of a – are we getting into a threshold there? I don't think that anyone mourns him but I mean the children have essentially died because of the sins of the father, haven't they?

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY:

Look I have never commented on individual cases, it's not appropriate for me to talk about individuals. I'm aware of the Khaled Sharrouf issue but I'm not prepared to discuss the detail of that.

JOURNALIST:

Preventative detention orders have been called on to be approved, they were introduced to interview terrorists in situations but have been rarely used. Will this be brought up at COAG and is it something you think needs to be

worked on with all of the states?

PRIME MINISTER:

We will looking at a full range of counter-terrorism measures. Again, the states have more ability, have more constitutional ability in this area, in many of these areas than the Federal Government does, so that's why it's very important that we work closely together.

But I'd just remind you that in terms of the operation in Sydney recently, and again, Duncan or Tony may wish to comment on this, the police were able to do the brilliant work they did in very, very short order – received some intelligence, quickly moved to investigate, identify, contain and then, of course, to move to a resolution with the search warrants and arrests and so forth.

They were able to do that because of the laws we have given them. You see, we have to give our law enforcement agencies the financial resources so that they've got the men and women and the technology and the tools to do their job, but we also have to give them the legal support.

We have to do that with the Australian Defence Force too. I mean, we recently – my Government – changed the law to ensure that our forces in the Middle East were able to target and kill terrorists regardless of whether they were active combatants. You know, where there was a problem with the law here, which was brought to my attention by the CDF after I became Prime Minister and which basically could have meant that we, our forces, were only able to target terrorists if they had a gun in their hand, essentially, or had a knife in their hand and were about to engage in combat.

So we now have a broader range of operation, which is very important. It's completely consistent with international law, I might add, but again, it's an example of never being complacent. There is no place for set and forget. Australians should be reassured, all of us are constantly seeking to improve and enhance our ability to keep them safe.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, my next question you've spoken in the past about the importance of intelligence-gathering as a preemptive way of making sure that these events don't occur. Can you tell us how important good relationships with the Muslim community are in doing that?

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY:

Yes Chris, I made this comment a number of times publicly. Our association, our engagement our relationship with the Islamic and Muslim community here in Australia is absolutely critical. It's central to us conducting our business.

We have very good ties with Muslim leaders across the country and those ties, the association we have with the broader Muslim community is central to our business.

JOURNALIST:

When you see the burka used in what looks like a political stunt-

PRIME MINISTER:

Hang on, I think we've probably come to the end of – we're going to move on to the more political questions? So Duncan and Tony – unless you want to comment on it?

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible) comment on it.

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY:

I don't think it's appropriate.

PRIME MINISTER:

OK, thank you. Thanks gentlemen, thanks very much.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, the burka being used, it was obviously a political stunt?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, it was a stunt. I want to say that George Brandis spoke with eloquence and with wisdom in the Senate last night as Leader of the Government.

I also want to reinforce what Duncan just said, and I have said on many occasions. That our best allies, our indispensable allies in the battle against Islamist extremism, against Islamist terrorism, is the Muslim community. Most of the victims of these terrorists are other Muslims. So let's be quite clear about that. They are our best allies in every respect. And that is why the foundation of the success of ours, the greatest, most successful multicultural society in the world, is mutual respect. Mutual respect is critical. Mutual respect is not just the foundation of our success as a multicultural society, it's the foundation of our national security, because that enables us to live together, work together, in harmony and from Duncan's point of view, obviously from an intelligence-gathering point of view, good relations with the Muslim community, the vast majority of whom, the overwhelming majority of whom are as appalled and abhor terrorism as much as everyone else does. So that's fundamental. And again, you've heard me say this many times.

JOURNALIST:

How much damage could Pauline Hanson have done with that stunt?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, it was a stunt. And I'm not going to dignify stunts in the Senate with

much more commentary other than to say that George spoke with, as I said, with great eloquence and wisdom.

JOURNALIST:

Are you disappointed with the Nationals? You've got three Cabinet ministers now under a cloud. This doesn't seem to be a problem that's affected the Liberal Party or the Labor Party?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well look Phil, let me make this point. We have a situation where our legal advice is very, very strong. I'm very confident that the court will find that Nash – Fiona Nash, Barnaby Joyce and Matt Canavan are not disqualified from sitting in the Parliament.

You see, Section 44 was designed – as the court has said – to prevent politicians having conflicts of loyalties. You know, split allegiances was the quote from one of the judges. And plainly, in circumstances where somebody is born in Australia and is a citizen of Australia by reason of that birth, but then by the law of another country is deemed by that foreign law to be a citizen of that country, and they have not acknowledged it or accepted it or even been aware of it, how can they have a conflicted loyalty? And so the consistent – and that is why consistent with the decisions of the court in the past, and the observations of the justices of the past, the Solicitor-General has advised the government that Ministers who have this – who have had this issue will be found to be eligible to sit in the Parliament. That's the explanation.

JOURNALIST:

But it is a distraction to the government, are you-

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I'm not distracted by it, I can assure you. I'll tell you I'm not distracted by it. Bill Shorten – I'll tell you who's distracted by it, Bill Shorten's distracted by it because he doesn't want Australians to focus on his inconsistency, they don't want Australians to focus on the fact that he, he opposed legislation to prevent businesses paying secret backhanders to unions.

Now when you think about it, it beggars belief – it beggars beliefs that a former head of the AWU, who's union was found in the Heydon Royal Commission to have accepted all of these payments from business in return for trading away workers conditions, you would think you would be filled with shame and would say oh gosh lets just change the law and make sure it could never happen again. He opposed that change in the law, presumably because he wants it to keep happening. Well we don't and the Australian people don't.

JOURNALIST:

Questions have been raised about Barry O'Sullivan yesterday by Hugh Riminton,

that perhaps he might be under suspicion over his own pecuniary interests. Have you spoke to Barry personally and are you concerned this may further delegitimise the government?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I mean if Mr Riminton wants to commence proceedings against Senator O' Sullivan he's free to do so.

JOURNALIST:

Have you spoken to him?

PRIME MINISTER:

Mr Riminton? No – thanks very much.

[ENDS]