

Press Conference

PRIME MINISTER:

Good morning.

We've just seen a demonstration there from all of those seized firearms and the very tight cooperation between the Australian Federal Police and the Victorian Police.

As the Victorian police officer observed, the ECHO Operation would not be able to do its work, that's to say the Victorian Anti-Gang Centre would not be able to do its work without the close cooperation of the AFP in its nationally anti-gang strategy.

So the reality is, we are very fortunate in Australia to have the best police, law enforcement, security and intelligence services in the world, working closely together.

The key to keeping Australians safe from organised crime, from terrorism, from street gangs of the kind that have been so prevalent in Victoria, is close cooperation between our agencies and very strong intelligence.

So, I am delighted to be here this morning with the Minister for Justice, Michael Keenan and the member for La Trobe, Jason Wood, who has been using his experience as an officer in the Victoria Police in the Federal Parliament to provide real leadership and guidance to us, to the Government as we strengthen – all the time – the capabilities of our law-enforcement agencies and the way in which they work with state agencies.

Of course, thank you, Acting Commissioner Michael Phelan for welcoming us here to the AFP headquarters in Melbourne.

Now, the crime and terror outlook is complex and it continues to develop. We see headlines in Australia and around the world about terrorism, gang crimes, cybercrime, fraud, corruption, large-scale drug importations. It has never been more important to invest in the Australian Federal Police and give them the resources they need to keep us safe. Always to be one step ahead, in disrupting and preventing crime.

We should not forget that since 2014, since the terrorism threat for example was raised to probable, there have been 12 terrorist plots unearthed, discovered, disrupted, thwarted and those involved, brought to justice. Now, that is an example. All of those involved cooperation between federal agencies, ASIO, AFP and their state counter parts.

Now, with the Justice Minister Michael Keenan, I was proud to announce that as part of the budget we are investing an additional \$321 million to ensure the AFP has the specialist capabilities it needs, the 21st century technological capabilities it needs to address these threats. It is the single biggest boost in funding to the AFP for many years.

Now, what we are providing to the AFP with that additional support, will fund an extra 100 intelligence experts, over 100 tactical response and covert surveillance operators and almost 100 forensic specialists to strengthen our fight against crime.

We will have more police negotiators, more online investigators and undercover officers.

It will deliver more physical surveillance teams and canine resources, specialising in drugs, cash and explosive detention, as well as digital forensic specialists and crime scene investigators.

Importantly as we are announcing today, this support includes bringing additional federal expertise to work with our partners in the Victoria Police. So what we are going to be doing, is introducing an additional outposted AFP intelligence officer to work with the state intelligence unit as part of Victoria Police, to ensure the cooperation is closer than ever. We're also going to ensure that the Victoria Police have immediate access to the national forensic rapid lab. The Minister and the Acting Commissioner will explain more of the detail around that. That will make an already close cooperation, even closer and more seamless.

Thirdly, we are going to make available, again, as part of the effort to deal with these street gangs or these violent youth gangs here in Victoria, we are going to make available the technical tools we have in the Federal Police, which are being used to deal with organised crime, to deal with the threat of terrorism. Make those tools, including very sophisticated digital and surveillance tools, immediately available to the Victoria Police.

All of these tools and cooperation are already used, but we want to make the cooperation more seamless, closer than ever. That is critically important because of course, we are dealing with threats in real time.

I want to say a little bit now about the problem of gangs and the way in which we are dealing with them, in addition, from an immigration point of view. We have increased the number of cancelled visas for reasons of character – bad character, obviously – since 2014, 12 times. By 12-fold. This has been used when we identify members of outlaw motorcycle gangs or other gangs or criminal activity, who are then brought to justice and convicted, their visa can then be cancelled. If they are not Australians, they can be sent back to their country of origin. This has resulted in, for example, the cancellation or refusal of over 140 outlaw motorcycle gang members, associates or organised crime figures. It gives you an indication of the way in which every Department, every agency of the Federal Government is collaborating, working relentlessly to keep Australians safe.

This collaboration between the federal and the state is absolutely vital. As both VicPol and the AFP acknowledge, they can keep us safe working together. They cannot achieve the great outcomes that they do, unless they are working together.

So we are determined to ensure that that cooperation is seamless, intense,

engaged, and always being improved. I apologise for repeating myself, but this is not an area which you can set and forget. There is no room for complacency in matters of national security.

We are constantly improving the legislation that we give to our law-enforcement agencies.

We are constantly improving the resources we give them.

We are determined to always be one step ahead of those who seek to do us harm.

I will now invite the Minister for Justice to say a few words followed by the Acting Commissioner.

MINISTER FOR JUSTICE:

Well, thank you, Prime Minister. It's good to be here at Australian Federal Police headquarters in Melbourne with you, with member for La Trobe Jason Wood, and the Acting Commissioner Mike Phelan.

As the Prime Minister has noted, we police Australia jointly between the Commonwealth and the states. Since we arrived in office, we've been determined to do everything we can to enhance that cooperation. For the first time, we sent the Australian Federal Police out to work side by side with their state and territory colleagues in the National Anti-Gang Squad. We've been doing it across other teams as well: the Joint Counterterrorism Teams, specific squads to deal with online child sex exploitation. We find this type of cooperation works incredibly well.

As part of the largest investment in the AFP's domestic capabilities in this year's budget, \$321 million, we further enhanced that cooperation but particularly for the benefit of people here in Victoria who are dealing with an unprecedented crime wave with youth criminal gangs.

So we are deploying all of the resources at Commonwealth law enforcement to assist the Victorian police's efforts. We are going to be placing one of our officers within the state intelligence area of Victoria Police and they will be able to feedback to all the intelligence capability available to Commonwealth law enforcement. The holdings contained within the AFP, the holdings contained in the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, holdings contained outside Federal Law Enforcement agencies, particularly DIBP and the Australian Border Force.

The Prime Minister has noted how effectively we are using those visa provisions to rid Australia of criminals.

We are also making sure this office will give the Victorian police priority access to the intelligence and forensics capabilities of AFP. The Prime Minister and I were pleased to recently open the new forensics laboratory based in Canberra, which is a state-of-the-art, world leading forensics laboratory based out of Majura near Canberra airport. We, through this initiative, are going to make sure these investigations into youth crime and

youth gangs in Victoria, will have priority access to those forensics capabilities and also to the high-end intelligence capability the AFP can bring.

Through this initiative, we are making sure the Commonwealth is working side-by-side with Victoria Police to assist in dealing with what is a difficult situation here and to make sure that we're doing everything we can to help Victoria Police to identify, to arrest and to prosecute these people who have been terrorising the Melbourne community.

ACTING COMMISSIONER – AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE:

Thank you, Prime Minister. The AFP obviously welcomes the injection of \$321 million into our organisation over the next four years. It seriously is about building capability for our organisation.

That capability, as the Prime Minister says, around extra forensics officers, extra intelligence officers, covert and other tactical resources. Whilst it's an injection into the AFP, it's also a national capability with the AFP in all our major investigations – whether it be serious or organised crime, cyber, transnational crime or counter terrorism – we do nothing on our own. Most of the work, the vast majority of that work, is done in taskforces with our state and territory police colleagues. This is where that capability comes to the fore, for all of Australia.

So in particular in this case, we look forward to working with the Victoria Police, because some of the enhanced analytics in particular will enhance their ability to work on specific targets and the secondment of an officer creates that two-way street. It's important that intelligence flows two ways. So for example, information that's picked up locally in Victoria Police environment, now can be pulled into the AFP through all the resources of the Commonwealth and go back.

So specifically the border, narcotics and also target firearms importations as they relate to individuals that come out of this project and therefore give all of our investigators, whether it is state or Federal Police, more opportunities to exploit that, greater leads and hopefully lead to more prosecutions.

PRIME MINISTER:

Jason, do you want to add to that?

JASON WOOD MP:

Yes, thanks very much Prime Minister. The number one responsibility of government and police is the same; it is the protection of our people. Safety comes first.

We have seen how effectively the AFP and the state police here in Victoria have worked so well together when it comes to the NAGS, the National Anti-Gangs Taskforce, which were put together a number of years ago and I congratulate Minister Keenan for the manner in which it's been conducted

right across the country.

You look at these firearms today and that's because of that.

You look how effectively both the state and Federal Police work together when it comes to counter terrorism. I congratulate the state police and AFP for what they have done to make Victoria safe, much safer than we would have had with these awful situations with these potential terrorists attacks which have been prevented.

Internationally, this is best practice. When you look at the federal agencies working with the states, that's where this concept came from. You find the AFP in this case have the resources, sometimes legislation which the states would not use, or the analytical or technical know-how the states don't have. When it comes to violent youth gangs here in Victoria, the state police have the knowledge on the ground and other resources. That's why this package is so important to have, that combined force taking on violent youth gangs which are terrorising the people of Victoria.

Can I finally thank Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. The only reason we are here today, I had a number of conversations with him about the safety concerns of Victorians. He picked up the phone and spoke to the AFP Chief and the Victorian Police chief and that why we are here today.

So, Prime Minister, thank you very much for your support here in Victoria.

PRIME MINISTER:

Thank you, Jason. So, any questions?

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, what do you think is unique about Victoria with its rapid rising in crime, when it's actually decreasing in other states such as New South Wales?

PRIME MINISTER:

Let me defer to the acting commissioner on that. That is a policing matter.

ACTING COMMISSIONER – AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE:

Certainly. Look, as far as we're concerned it's about bringing capability right across the country. But at the moment the acute need, I suppose, is what has developed over the last couple of years.

We all see with youth gangs in particular how that moves into other serious and organised crime later on. So like any preventative measure, we'd like to take the first step here and work with Victoria Police.

JOURNALIST:

What do the Victoria Police have to say about it? They're not here today, so

how-

ACTING COMMISSIONER – AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE:

Well they are here.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well they are here, no they are. There are Victorian Police officers, three I think, in total. Is that right?

ACTING COMMISSIONER – AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE:

Superintendent Peter De Santo is here today.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, Superintendent, good to see you.

JOURNALIST:

Well that's great. So how did it come about then, that this increased cooperation? You know I'd just like to hear about Victoria and what they have to say about it, that's all.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I will let the commissioner or do you want to speak about it Michael?

MINISTER FOR JUSTICE:

Well, this is a Commonwealth government announcement. But we have done this announcement in conjunction with Victoria Police, so we have been talking to them about what they need from the Commonwealth to assist them with their efforts. The Victorian government, I discussed it with Lisa Neville the Police Minister yesterday. She is well aware of what we're doing here and this is about supporting the efforts of Victoria Police to deal with a difficult situation in Victoria that we're determined to assist with.

PRIME MINISTER:

I might just say, you saw at the recent COAG, the way in which the jurisdictions, regardless – putting aside party political differences – are determined to work more closely together as we coordinate and integrate our agencies that are there to keep us safe. So it is a very strong commitment.

JOURNALIST:

Also with the specialist teams stationed at the airport, are there any other announcements we can expect in the coming months of what was actually asked for at COAG?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, that was not asked for at COAG, just to be quite clear about that. That was certainly, it was certainly discussed.

Perhaps, as far as the airport is concerned, the arrangement at Melbourne Airport – if you are talking about the number of other airports and again I will ask the Acting Commissioner to enlarge on this – but the arrangement is that the Federal Police provide what can be described as the community policing effort. There is an agreement, memorandum of understanding, with Victoria Police that if an incident occurs that requires a response of a Tactical Response Group, that is provided by the Victoria Police.

Now, Acting Commissioner, do you want to say more about that?

ACTING COMMISSIONER – AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE:

Thank you Prime Minister. Particularly governing the airports, we have had MOUs with each of the states and territories for the best of ten years now. They are consistent right across the board. At the end of the day, it just makes sense. You can't have a high-end capability stationed in singular locations waiting for something to occur, because the opportunity cost of having those somewhere else and other resources could be devoted to something else, is far more important in terms of what we are able to deliver.

So that's why we have the arrangements with them. It's not only tactical police it's also homicide investigations, it's also serious sexual assaults. So for example, you don't want to station a homicide squad out at each of the airports waiting for a homicide to occur and of course those that have the expertise are the state and territory police in those particular areas.

So that's the way with the MOUs work. We provide that first response and if it gets to a critical incident, which has been defined as most likely a security incident or something beyond the resources of the AFP at a particular airport, then the state police come in and assist. We've had that arrangement now for the best part of ten years. When it comes to tactical response, so police team tactical group, I could probably count on one hand the number of times that a police tactical group has been called to airports around the country in the last five to ten years.

JOURNALIST:

So you don't see something like what Daniel Andrews was suggesting earlier this month, you don't see that practically happening?

ACTING COMMISSIONER – AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE:

It simply makes sense that if we can draw upon the state police in that capacity, because to put it in a tactical unit sitting at the airport and then I couldn't take them off the airport to do something else because then they wouldn't be able to respond to the airport.

So, it just makes fiscal, and any way you look at it, it just makes commonsense that we would draw upon the resources that exist in particular regions. That's how the MOUs have been discovered. Senior police over ten

years have worked on this issue and we've all worked out that that is the optimum response for the best outcome that each of the jurisdictions can get.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, just on same-sex marriage, do you agree with Christopher Pyne that it is something that we can expect to see "sooner rather than later"?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I have seen those comments. I just want to be very clear about this. We took a very straightforward policy to the election, which was that there would be a vote on gay marriage in the Parliament after the Australian people had voted to support it in a plebiscite.

Now, the reason there is not gay marriage lawful in Australia at the moment, is because no plebiscite has been held. I believe if a plebiscite had been held, it would have been carried. But the reason the plebiscite has not been held, is because Bill Shorten blocked it.

So let's be very, very clear about this. Look, I can understand the disappointment of those who are frustrated that the gay marriage issue has not been resolved. But the reason it has not been resolved is because of Bill Shorten.

Now there is no point mincing words about this at all. I mean Bill Shorten in 2013 went to the Australian Christian Lobby and said that he supported a plebiscite on this issue. He said it, not so long ago.

At the election, we went to the election and we said we will have a plebiscite, everyone will get a say. We know there is very strong support for a plebiscite in the community. Australians welcome that opportunity. That opportunity is being denied them because of the Labor Party and Bill Shorten.

So I want to be very clear about that. Our policy is clear, we have no plans to change it full stop.

JOURNALIST:

Given you can't get a plebiscite up with Bill Shorten's opposition, are you willing to rule out a free vote in this term of Parliament?

PRIME MINISTER:

Our policy is very clear and we have no plans to change it.

Now we are focused on the issues that are of pressing concern, vital concern to Australians. We are talking about national security, the most important responsibility of government, keeping the citizens safe.

We are talking about getting schools funding right and we have achieved the biggest reform to schools funding at the Commonwealth level, in a generation. In fact, there has never been a national, consistent, needs-based funding

model for Australian schools from the Commonwealth. We have achieved that.

We are working hard to put downward pressure on energy prices, taking strong and decisive action with respect to gas exports in order to deliver that.

We are working to, as you know, we're moving to abolish the right of energy companies to continue to appeal against decisions of the regulator about the cost, the price they can charge for their infrastructure.

We are bringing down taxes on businesses, more small businesses will get a cut from 1 July.

You know we've reformed childcare – it's a long list – restoring the rule of law to the building sector. Heaven's sake, here in Victoria you know all about that. You've had that extraordinary threat from John Setka to pursue official officers of the Australian Building and Construction Commission, to pursue them and menace them and threaten them. That's the CFMEU. They're the people that control the Labor Party nowadays and they are certainly the people that control Bill Shorten.

We're dealing with all those issues, those vital issues that are pressing Australian families, we are dealing with them. As far as the same-sex marriage issue, our policy is very clear, it has not changed. We have no plans to change it. The ball is in Bill Shorten's court. If he wants Australians to agree to gay marriage then he should agree to the plebiscite and let everyone have their say.

JOURNALIST:

What will the government do if a private member's bill is introduced? Will the government [inaudible] Parliament?

PRIME MINISTER:

Our position, our policy is very clear. I don't know how often I have to repeat this, we have made it very clear that we will allow or support a vote, which would be a free vote obviously, on same-sex marriage after the Australian people have voted in a plebiscite.

Now, that is the policy that we took to the election and we are sticking to it. We have no plans to change it. I want to be very clear about that. We have no plans to change it.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister on 18C, you have repeatedly said you had no plans to change that and then you announced plans to change that. Is same sex marriage essentially the same thing?

PRIME MINISTER:

You can argue the toss as much as you like, and you know, you're entitled to your view about the issue, the substantive issue.

The Coalition took a very clear policy to the election, a plebiscite, right? Totally democratic. Who can argue with that? Everybody gets a vote. It was actually supported by Shorten himself in 2013.

For purely political reasons – can I tell you? Bill Shorten does not care about same sex marriage. He does not care whether gay people can get married or not. He has no interest in that. He is only interested in politics. If he was interested in the issue, he would support the plebiscite as he had before. But as on so many other things, he has backflipped and twisted and turned.

He has no consistency, no integrity.

If he supported it, if he was genuine about supporting gay marriage, he would say: “Right, have the plebiscite, the people will vote all the indications are a majority will support it”. Then it will pass through the Parliament. So the only reason it has not happened, is because of his opposition. That is a fact and the ball is in his court, as I say.

You can’t blame it on the crossbench. You can’t blame it on this independent member of the Senate or not. Shorten has the responsibility for this.

He has failed Australians. He has failed to be consistent. He has failed to show integrity. It’s all politics and no policy, as usual.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister what are you hoping the outcome is in terms of discussions with [inaudible]?

PRIME MINISTER:

Thank you. So this is a huge issue. The issue of the big, social media messaging and web platforms hosting propaganda from terrorists. Even videos, showing how, instructional videos of how to make bombs. Of course in terms of the messaging platforms, not allowing security agencies to get access to the messages of terrorists and other criminals.

So this has become a major problem for our law enforcement and security agencies, not just in Australia but right around the world.

I have discussed this with other leaders. I know it was a matter that has been raised by Angela Merkel who has hosted, the Chancellor of Germany, is hosting the G20 and it will be a priority issue at the G20.

But it is one of those problems that requires concerted international action. Because of course in the world of the internet – the internet, one of its great achievements is essentially to transcend borders – but equally, just because it transcends borders and to some extent abolishes the tyranny of distance, it cannot be an ungoverned space. The law must prevail and security must prevail on the internet as it does everywhere else.

So this is a big challenge for leaders at the G20 and I look forward to

arguing that case strongly in order to protect our citizens and citizens of every other nation. You have seen very strong words on this from myself obviously, also from the Chancellor of Germany and also from the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom among others.

Perhaps just one more and then we'll wrap up.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, Christopher Pyne was described this morning as disloyal by Tony Abbott-

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh look I'm not going to engage in that sort of commentary. Can I just say to you – I don't have to repeat myself on the marriage issue – our policy is for there to be a national plebiscite and we have no plans to change it full stop.

Thank you all very much.

[ENDS]