

ASIO chief Duncan Lewis 'is playing politics' on Islam

Greg Sheridan, The Australian, December 17, 2015



ASIO director-general Duncan Lewis is said to have told MPs that their more robust comments risked becoming a danger to national security. Picture: Kym Smith

ASIO director-general Duncan Lewis has phoned Coalition politicians to urge them to use the soothing language favoured by Malcolm Turnbull in their public discussion of Islam. In what is thought to be an unprecedented intervention in politics by a head of the spy agency, Mr Lewis is said to have told the MPs that their more robust comments risked becoming a danger to national security. It is believed the Office of the Prime Minister has been involved in arranging for these phone calls to take place.

A number of Liberals are angry at what they see as an improper intervention by the ASIO head into legitimate political issues.

The Australian submitted a series of questions to Mr Lewis through the ASIO media office, including whether he had made the phone calls to the politicians. The ASIO spokesman declined to answer questions regarding the phone calls.

These phone calls are part of a broadbased effort by ASIO to influence how politicians speak about Islam.

A newspaper interview with Mr Lewis that appeared in News Corp newspapers on Sunday was widely seen as a slap down of former prime minister Tony Abbott. The interview took place on Thursday last week, a day after an opinion piece by Mr Abbott appeared in The Daily Telegraph, in which he argued that Islam as a religion was in need of reform.

Mr Abbott, although warning against the demonisation of Islam, said: “We can’t remain in denial about the massive problem within Islam.”

He said Islam had never had its own Reformation or Enlightenment and had not as a consequence developed a natural acceptance of pluralism and the separation of church and state.

In The Sunday Telegraph interview, Mr Lewis said that Muslim-baiting rhetoric could fuel a dangerous backlash against Muslims that would make it harder for ASIO to do its work. He did not say who was guilty of the rhetoric. “I think it behoves Australians to recognise the backlash is something very, very dangerous ... we need to be very temperate,” Mr Lewis said. Mr Lewis also said: “I don’t buy the notion the issue of Islamic extremism is in some way fostered or sponsored or supported by the Muslim religion. I think it’s blasphemous to the extent I can comment on someone else’s religion.”

Mr Lewis is a distinguished former general who once headed the SAS. He served as Julia Gillard’s national security adviser and held senior national security positions under John Howard.

Mr Lewis’s phone calls to Liberal politicians, the background briefings by the security agencies discrediting the language Mr Abbott used and the interview with The Sunday Telegraph have angered Coalition figures on the backbench and the frontbench.

They do not see the issue through any prism of leadership battles or affection for Mr Abbott, but as one of free speech and the need to deal openly and effectively with issues of extremism.

Some Liberals believe their comments have been falsely conflated with those of Mr Abbott, and that Mr Abbott’s comments have been falsely conflated with overseas politicians who are much more extreme, such as Donald Trump, but the overall result has been to dampen free speech.

Some Liberals were also annoyed by the opinion piece by Concetta Fierravanti-Wells that appeared in The Australian yesterday, in which she denounced “megaphone politics” and specifically rejected some of Mr Abbott’s language.

Dennis Jensen, the Liberal member for Tangney, in response to Mr Lewis’s newspaper interview, last night told The Australian: “I understand what he (Mr Lewis) is saying on it, but I fundamentally don’t agree. I understand the majority of tips ASIO gets come from the Muslim community. “But to say something is off limits and should not be discussed is extremely anti-democratic. It’s really a slippery slope. Free speech was not won easily. People paid for it with blood. To meekly roll over and give it away is very mistaken.”

Andrew Nikolic, the member for the Tasmanian seat of Bass and former government whip, who served for 31 years in the Australian Army, does not believe Coalition politicians who spoke out about the need for an open debate deserved to be censured.

In response to Mr Lewis’s newspaper interview, Mr Nikolic told The Australian: “I can understand why he (Mr Lewis) and the security agencies want to make sure of their ability to do their job, but the comments of myself and others that I have seen have not criticised Islam but those who seek to hijack and misrepresent Islam.”

Several Liberals told The Australian they believed the Prime Minister’s Office was involved in the timing and content of Mr Lewis’s interview with The Sunday Telegraph. The Prime Minister’s office emphatically denied this to The Australian.

In recent days, The Australian has canvassed Mr Lewis’s comments with a wide range of former senior national security figures. All regarded Mr Lewis’s comments as a mistake. Several said they risked injecting ASIO into partisan politics.

Beyond Mr Abbott, a wide range of Liberals made comments critical of the initial response of the Australian Grand Mufti, Ibrahim Abu Mohammed, to the Paris terror attacks or calling for an honest discussion of the issues. These include Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, Treasurer Scott Morrison, Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg and backbenchers Andrew Hastie, Mr Nikolic, Luke Simkins, Eric Hutchinson, George Christensen and Angus Taylor.

There is no suggestion all of these people are critical of Mr Lewis.