

Honest discussion on Islam's role in terror is needed

The Australian, December 2, 2015 12:00AM, Paul Kelly

There is a growing mood within the Coalition parties that a more honest and realistic language is essential in discussing the problem of Islamist terrorism and that this is a necessary precondition for effectively addressing the threat.

This is squarely in line with public opinion. In last week's Newspoll 76 per cent felt a terror attack on Australia was "likely to inevitable" and only 16 per cent rated the prospect as "unlikely to never". The public feels under threat. It has every reason for this sentiment.

The political class needs to honour this sentiment yet ensure the search for new language does not inflame tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims, an objective of the Islamists. There is one certainty: any trace of apologist rhetoric will incur greater scorn and anger.

In his recent security statement Malcolm Turnbull warned that a terrorist attack was likely. The Minister assisting on Counter-Terrorism, Michael Keenan, says six terrorist attacks have been foiled since September last year — in addition to those that have been launched. Senior ministers report in private that more attacks must be expected and are influenced by this in their language.

The securities agencies are stretched to the limit. While there is ongoing criticism of Tony Abbott over his lack of meaningful engagement with Muslim communities, the mood in the government and public is shifting again.

In its essence, this is not an Abbott-Turnbull issue. The risk, however, is that it may end this way. Turnbull's own position reflects the complexity of the task — he reaches out to Muslim communities yet says "the root cause of the current threat we face is a perverted strain of Islamist extremist ideology".

After Paris, Turnbull said: "We should grieve and we should be angry." That's true. But he also called for a response that was "calm, clinical, professional, effective". That's true too. So, how should these two attitudes — anger and calm — be reconciled? Frankly, it is not easy.

Turnbull recognises "governments cannot win this battle alone" and that community support is indispensable. But the public (as distinct from the pundits) is beyond the stage where pretences that Islam is not central to the problem or that religion is not the issue are credible any longer.

The most powerful demonstration of changing sentiment within the government was the interview last Sunday on Sky News' Australian Agenda program with Resources Minister Josh Frydenberg, a key figure in the next generation of Liberal leadership prospects. "I do not accept that terrorism in our cities is the new norm," Frydenberg said. "I will not accept that as a member of the Australian Parliament. Daniel Andrews, the Premier of Victoria, said we have to accept that violent extremism is part of contemporary Australia. Well, I say no. That's rubbish. I will not accept that. "I went to school in Melbourne, there are now armed guards outside the front, where primary-school kids are going to school. In my own electorate at a Jewish school there are armed guards. Is this acceptable in modern-day Australia? It's not to me. Regardless of whether he's Liberal or Labor, anybody who says we have to accept violent extremism as part of contemporary Australia, I believe, is wrong."

This is a personal comment but in political terms, it is a sanctioning remark — it says we need to confront what is happening in our society and openly declare that it is unacceptable. Frydenberg's point is that Australians cannot accept the status quo: that equates to a deteriorating domestic security situation. He has touched a nerve. He is calling out politicians

who imply this is a new norm. In short, if our society is changing in ways we cannot accept then politicians need to take a stand.

Such a sanctioning comment — allowing people to talk in this way — is essential yet risky. The tone and tenor of the discussion is vital and the sensitivities are acute because of profound divisions, fears and a victim mentality within Muslim communities, some under huge pressures, where among the young respect for their leaders is at a low ebb.

Frydenberg made an argument heard too rarely: that multiculturalism is about mutual obligation. That means the core requirement for migrants is acceptance of Australian core values and laws. Ultimately, this is non-negotiable. Yet groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir flaunt their defiance.

The point, however, is that single-dimensional responses to this problem won't work. As Turnbull seems to recognise, engagement with Islam and a non-apologetic honesty about the religious problem are both needed.

After the Parramatta attack that killed Curtis Cheng, the Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, called the murder “a crossroads moment”. The message she put on the table was that “our Muslim communities now need to own the problem and own the solution”. Precisely.

There is no better way to describe the task. But is this happening? Doubts about this are feeding a dangerous trust problem in Australia — there is insufficient trust between the wider community and the Muslim community. Fierravanti-Wells, who has had an extensive dialogue with Muslim communities, says this “will only occur” with close co-operation of government and communities. That's correct, but such dialogue needs a shared foundation of values and norms.

The recognition is growing that while engagement is essential, denialism doesn't work; witness the unflinching analysis and language adopted by British Prime Minister David Cameron, and what may be his influence on Turnbull.

In his startling September speech at the UN, Cameron said the task was to focus on the extremist ideology that lies beneath acts of violence.

“We have to stop this process at the start, not at the end,” Cameron said, hammering the “battle of ideas” theme. “It means that we have to root out the extremist preachers that are poisoning the minds of young Muslims in our country.”

That meant getting the ideology “out of our schools, get it out of our prisons, get it out of our universities”. Cameron said there was “nothing more powerful” than when Muslim leaders and Muslim countries “reclaim their religion”.

It is the same point again: the need for Muslim communities to be seen to own the problem and solution — obviously with the help of the wider public. This is why the worst mistake Muslim leaders can make is to talk and act as though the problem is not theirs but belongs to everybody else.