

Malcolm Turnbull backs spy chief Duncan Lewis's right to speak out

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Malcolm Turnbull says ASIO head Duncan Lewis should engage with politicians and journalists and “speak out” to community groups whenever possible, as he defended the spy chief’s right to call and advise Liberal MPs on national security matters.

The Prime Minister yesterday denied he had directed Mr Lewis to talk to “anybody in particular” after The Australian revealed the former SAS commander had phoned Coalition MPs to urge them to use soothing language when publicly discussing violent extremism.

While he declared that “Nobody tells MPs or senators what to say”, Mr Turnbull said they should be well-informed and Mr Lewis’s advice should be “heeded” because he had the best understanding of Australia’s security challenges.

“I talk to Duncan Lewis all the time,” Mr Turnbull said. “I take an enormous amount of advice from Duncan, and I would encourage him, I do encourage him, to speak to as many people as he can, as many members of parliament (and) not just on my side of the chamber, either.”

He said he understood Mr Lewis had spoken to two MPs, Andrew Hastie and Dan Tehan, but neither had complained about being approached.

Mr Hastie, a newly elected West Australian Liberal and former SAS captain who has called for - reform of extremist Islamic theology, confirmed to The Weekend Australian that he was phoned by Mr Lewis.

“He passed on his views on the matter, which are on the public record, and he asked me to convey that to the backbenchers. I took that as his professional advice and I’m grateful that he called me - directly,” he said. Mr Lewis was not trying to dampen free speech, he said, but simply “convey his professional judgment”.

“I hold him in the highest regard but on the question of Islamic terrorism we don’t see eye-to-eye.

“I will never, ever discount Duncan or any intelligence agency representative.”

Victorian Liberal Mr Tehan, chairman of the parliamentary committee on intelligence and security, is understood to speak regularly to Mr Lewis and said the ASIO head was a “person of utmost integrity”.

Mr Turnbull said he encouraged Mr Lewis to “speak to as many people as he can. There are some people who like to write about terrorism. There are some people who like to express theories about terrorism, theories about religions and so forth. That’s fine, they’re entitled to do that,” Mr Turnbull said.

“Duncan Lewis has actually fought against terrorism ... and his advice should be heeded.”

Tasmanian Liberal senator Eric Abetz said he was uncomfortable with Mr Lewis making calls to MPs and was “not necessarily sure it is the wisest thing for a public official” to do even though it was - “absolutely well-intentioned”.

WA backbencher Dennis Jensen described the phone calls as “utterly improper”.

NSW Solicitor-General Michael Sexton said Mr Lewis’s actions were odd.

“Of course, members of parliament, people express their views to them all the time, and I don’t think any of them are going to be intimidated,” he said.

“My personal observation would be it’s an odd thing for a federal official, not a member of the cabinet but essentially a senior public servant, to be calling members of parliament and suggesting to them what they might say.

“Would the secretary of Treasury be ringing up members of parliament and say ‘Well, if you are talking about economics, this is what you should say?’ It’s rather peculiar.”

Additional reporting: Leo Shanahan