

Federal election 2016: PM struggles with homophobic sheik fallout

David Crowe, The Australian, June 18, 2016



Sheik Shady Alsuleiman arrives at the Kirribilli House. Picture: James Croucher

Malcolm Turnbull is battling to contain the political damage over the homophobic views of Islamic leader Shady Alsuleiman, as he warns against defining the views of 500,000 Muslim Australians by the opinions of a single cleric.

The Prime Minister has asked his department to explain how Sheik Alsuleiman was added to the guest list for an exclusive Kirribilli House dinner on Thursday, given that he had called homosexuality “evil” and blamed it for spreading disease.

Mr Turnbull “strongly condemned” the sheik’s remarks and Bill Shorten also repudiated them, while Greens leader Richard Di Natale said the homophobic remarks were “incredibly disappointing” but that was not confined to any particular religion.

The response drew an accusation of double standards when Family First senator Bob Day rebuked the Greens for accusing him of homophobia — a claim he strongly denies — but being reluctant to call out the homophobia of an Islamic cleric.

“What the sheik said is utterly abhorrent,” Senator Day said. “This just shows the double standards of the Greens.”

The major parties responded warily to the storm over Sheik Alsuleiman’s remarks and avoided any comment on whether the cleric’s views reflected a wider problem with Islam.

Asked by radio host Neil Mitchell on Melbourne's 3AW yesterday if there was a "fundamental clash of values" at stake, Mr Turnbull said he did not want to "buy into a theological debate" and that the sheik's views were "completely and utterly unacceptable".

The Prime Minister later warned that Islamic State sought to divide the community by telling Australian Muslims they were "not really part of Australia" and should go to Syria. "Part of my job is to reach out to every community and re-emphasise again and again that mutual respect is the foundation upon which our success is built," he said.

The Opposition Leader said he had no plans to meet the sheik and added, "if I do so in the future, being aware of his views now, I will tell him that his views are out of line with mainstream Australian thinking, full stop".

Turnbull supporters argued that it would have been difficult to snub Sheik Alsuleiman, as he is the elected president of the Australian National Imams Council and an important supporter of deradicalisation programs.

In the same way, Grand Mufti of Australia Ibrahim Abu Mohamed has been criticised for remarks on overseas terrorist attacks but is an elected Islamic leader and central to the government's efforts to build community support against terrorism. "We have to work with the people we get," said one - government source.

Mr Shorten was invited to the iftar (fast-breaking dinner) at Kirribilli House on Thursday night — the first event of its kind — where Muslim Australians were invited to the Prime Minister's official residence to mark the holy month of Ramadan. However, he withdrew on Tuesday because of a schedule clash. Labor did not know the guest list for the event.