

## Andrews decries 'evil act', refuses to call it motivated by religion



Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews calls foiled plot 'an evil, criminal act' but declines to comment on whether it was religiously motivated. Picture: Kym Smith

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Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews has declined to label the alleged terror plot as religiously motivated, saying it was an evil, criminal act and "nothing more and nothing less". "What was planned here, what it will be alleged was going to occur if not for the professionalism and hard work of our police, were not acts of faith," Mr Andrews said at a press conference announcing the raids that foiled the alleged plot yesterday.

"They were in their planning acts of evil. It will be alleged (they were) criminal acts, crimes ... nothing more, nothing less. "All of us, particularly at this special time of the year, should remember that and understand that. Our values, our multiculturalism, our diversity is a great strength, perhaps our greatest strength. "We should always remember that, even when confronted by these sorts of challenges."

Mr Andrews convened a meeting of the counter-terrorism subcommittee of cabinet yesterday morning to discuss the government's response to the alleged plot to detonate explosives and injure civilians in the heart of Melbourne's CBD.

The Premier came under fire from One Nation leader and anti-Islam campaigner Pauline Hanson, who attacked him for failing to reference the alleged offenders' faith. "I was disgusted by Premier Andrews. After the terrorists were foiled he should have said what this truly was, an act of evil faith," she said.

Opposition Leader Matthew Guy also avoided making a religious link to the alleged plot in a statement that condemned "extremism". "We as a community need to always be aware that there are people who aim to attack our way of life, particularly on days of national and religious significance," he said. "Extremism simply has no place in our society." He said the police operation

showed “we need to be constantly vigilant about public safety”. “I congratulate the hard-working women and men of Victoria Police and federal law enforcement on their actions to intercept a probable terrorist attack.”

Conservative Liberal senator Eric Abetz pointed to the Lebanese ethnicity of four of the five men arrested over the foiled attack, saying the nation had to deal with the “preponderance” of that community in terror-related activity.

His comments echoed those of Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, who last month caused uproar in the Lebanese community and the political Left after suggesting former prime minister Malcolm Fraser had made a mistake in allowing Lebanese Muslims to migrate to Australia in the 1970s. “It is a sad matter of fact that out of the 38 arrests in Australia, 26 are of a particular ethnic background and, as I understand it, of the latest five, four are of a particular ethnic background,” Senator Abetz said. “This is a difficult conversation but nevertheless a conversation we need to have to ensure that we can protect Australian society and people of every ethnic origin. There is this preponderance of the Lebanese community that we do need to deal with and of course we seek the support of the Lebanese community in dealing with that.”

Former Liberal minister and speaker of the house Bronwyn Bishop also slammed the “socialist state of Victoria saying that it’s nothing to do with belief or religion”. “(To say) it’s just evil — what rubbish. You have to say what is evil and it’s clearly an Islamist attack,” she told Sky News.

Federal Justice Minister Michael Keenan warned that the nation was living through “the most difficult security environment in our history” but insisted there was no country more prepared and able to deal with the global terror threat than Australia. He pointed to \$1.5 billion spent on security agencies, lowering the arrest threshold and toughening control orders, saying the measures had been “instrumental” in allowing police to stop terrorism.

Bill Shorten said Australians should have “a lot of confidence in our police and security agencies”.