

## ASIO boss seeks refuge as he recants on terror claim

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We don't often see the nation's top spy turn up for a chat on morning radio, as ASIO director-general Duncan Lewis did yesterday. When Mr Lewis joined ABC's RN Breakfast program it was a clear concession he needed to straighten out the mess created by his extraordinary and unequivocal statement to a Senate committee last week: "I have absolutely no evidence to suggest there is a connection between refugees and terrorism."

These words rankled with many because of the unambiguous fact the nation's three most recent fatal terror attacks were perpetrated by terrorists who were in this country under our refugee program: Lindt cafe gunman Man Haron Monis arrived on a business visa from Iran and claimed asylum while here; Melbourne teenager Numan Haider came to Australia from Afghanistan with his refugee parents; and teenage Parramatta assassin Farhad Jabar arrived with his Iranian refugee parents. The ASIO chief put his political masters in a difficult position as they tried to stand by Mr Lewis, his statement and the facts; an impossible trifecta.

So the ASIO chief spoke on national radio. "I want to put some context around that," he said. "The refugee program is not the source of terrorism in Australia, we have had tens of thousands of refugees come to Australia over the last decade or so and a very few of them have become subjects of interest for ASIO and have been involved in terrorist planning, I'm not denying that — I've not said that there are no terrorists who have not been refugees or not been the sons and daughters of refugees born in this country, but the context is very important." It was quite the contrast to last week's certitude. As The Australian said yesterday, probing links between terrorism and refugees is not callous but "vital to security" as we battle the Islamist extremist scourge. The absolutist response from Mr Lewis last week was aimed at slapping down extreme positions promoted by his questioner, Pauline Hanson, but it was a mistake because it was simply untrue and therefore could only undermine public faith in security agencies.

"The reason they are terrorists is not because they are refugees," Mr Lewis went on yesterday, "but because of the violent extremist interpretation of Sunni Islam that they have adopted." This, again, clarified the nature of the threat. But no one had been suggesting terrorists were violent "because" they were refugees. The public understands the overwhelming majority of Muslims in this country, indeed the vast majority of refugees, abhor Islamist extremism. They don't need officialdom to shelter them from reality. We need also to be mindful of recent experience in Europe where refugees or their children have committed terrorist atrocities. Mr Lewis and other intelligence and security leaders need to be frank with the public rather than second-guess community reactions. We expect they would be pleasantly surprised by how sensible, tolerant and perceptive the public usually proves to be.

The reluctance of Mr Lewis's political masters to correct him publicly (although his radio spot suggests conversations may have occurred behind the scenes) is also concerning. Islamic terrorism has been front of mind for Australians since at least September 2001 and it

has seen our citizens killed in New York, Indonesia, the Middle East, Europe and at home. We expect to be engaged in a struggle against this threat for decades to come. Authorities, rightly, will rely on public co-operation and the public is entitled to expect, in return, frankness from those authorities and their politicians. The Prime Minister and other political leaders often prefer nondescript terms such as violent extremism rather than calling out Islamist extremism. This represents a timidity that is hard to fathom.

We understand the reluctance to amplify the extreme policies promoted by Senator Hanson's One Nation — such as a Muslim immigration ban and royal commission into Islam — but these should be countered by rational arguments, not by pretending the facts away. Voters seem to be demanding leadership on issues related to national values and the major parties are not providing it, which is reflected in a drift to minor parties. Malcolm Turnbull should fill this void. Mainstream voters don't take too kindly to condescension.