

Lesson in how not to run security policy

[Greg Sheridan](#), The Australian, 12:00AM June 1, 2017

ASIO director-general Duncan Lewis should learn to shut up occasionally. It is extremely unhelpful to have the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation boss so often at the heart of partisan controversy.

Public interventions by the ASIO boss should be rare, telling, and concerned narrowly with operational matters.

Playing a dead bat at Senate estimates is surely one of the most elementary skills of a senior public servant. The first objective for every bureaucrat is always the same: don't create a story.

Lewis's further comments yesterday — that it is not being a refugee but embracing a radical perversion of Sunni Islam that leads people to become terrorists — is at least an advance on his weird position in 2015 that it was incorrect and damaging to security to mention Islam and terrorism in the same sentence.

Of course the overwhelming majority of refugees are good Australians. Of course being a refugee does not incline you towards terrorism. But the people want their leaders to talk honestly about this, and in Australia and other countries some refugees or their children have carried out, or attempted, terrorism. Last week Lewis seemed so keen to repudiate Pauline Hanson's line of questioning that he gave a declaratory answer that was open to misinterpretation. At the very least, that's dumb.

But the Turnbull government is at fault too. Apart from the narrow issue of border security, it seems too often incapable of managing the politics of security, which ought to be second nature for a conservative government. What on earth is Attorney-General George Brandis doing arranging for Lewis to brief the partyroom on a controversial matter?

Minister, here is how our democracy works: the minister gets the briefings from specialist agencies, takes those briefings into account along with other factors in making policy and political judgments, and explains those judgments to colleagues and the public.

This government publicly leans on ASIO advice in a way that is creepy and embroils ASIO in needless controversy. But by far the single weirdest thing the government did this week was announce an additional troop deployment to Afghanistan in an answer by Defence Minister Marise Payne at a Senate estimates committee. Good grief!

The government apparently thinks this so trivial it uses its most anonymous minister in the most inappropriate setting to sneak the announcement out as quietly as possible.