

Abbott set to ramp up national security armoury

Written by The Conversation

Embattled on most fronts, Tony Abbott is switching attention to national security, with a statement on Monday week foreshadowing tougher measures.

In [Sunday's weekly video](#), the prime minister stepped up the rhetoric, declaring that "it's clear to me that for too long we have given those who might be a threat to our country the benefit of the doubt.

"There's been the benefit of the doubt at our borders, the benefit of the doubt for residency, the benefit of the doubt for citizenship and the benefit of the doubt at Centrelink," Abbott said. "And in the courts, there has been bail, when clearly there should have been jail."

Australia was a free and fair nation but "that doesn't mean we should let bad people play us for mugs, and all too often they have. Well, that's going to stop."

The government has two reports. After the Lindt cafe siege, Abbott ordered an inquiry; previously, he commissioned a review of the governance and co-ordination of security agencies.

The idea of an over-arching homeland security department has long disappeared; the co-ordination review is believed to reaffirm the existing structures with fairly minor tinkering.

Changes following the siege are expected to be in the areas of immigration, social security and the legal system.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said the government had been looking at tightening procedures and processes and how stories presented to authorities could be better checked out.

The gunman in the Martin Place siege, Man Haron Monis, slipped through various nets,

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including being on bail despite having been charged with serious offences.

Last week, Abbott highlighted the security issue after two men were arrested for allegedly plotting a terrorist attack. Abbott quoted from a video recording about the plan, in which one of the men said: “I swear to almighty Allah, we will carry out the first operation for the soldiers of the caliphate in Australia”.

While the security issue is regarded as strong ground for him, more generally Abbott still seems to be going backwards after heading off last week’s backbench attempt to get a spill.

Abbott’s [decision to sack party veteran](#) Philip Ruddock from the position of chief government whip has shocked many Liberals.

On the Bolt Report, Abbott blamed the whip’s office under Ruddock for not flagging the backbench revolt to him.

Abbott said that last year he was so focused on economic and national security issues he didn’t have enough time to talk to his colleagues. This had been “a terrible mistake”; “a terrible failing”.

“It’s not something that I’m ever going to repeat. And one of the reasons why I’ve made some changes to the whip’s office is because I do want a much stronger relationship with the backbench in the future than I’ve had in the recent past,” Abbott said.

“Plainly, I wasn’t as aware as I should have been of all of this. I never want to find myself in this position ever again.”

Abbott said that with the revamped whips’ team – including new chief whip Scott Buchholz, who was promoted, and Abbott loyalist Andrew Nikolic, appointed to the team – he was confident “I will be very much aware of what’s going on inside the party”.

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But critics point out it hardly needed Ruddock to tell Abbott there was discontent on the backbench. And anyway, even if he was unhappy with Ruddock, why would Abbott go out of his way to publicly humiliate the veteran “Father of the House” at a time when his prime ministership is hanging by a thread?

Ruddock made Abbott look worse when he said on Sunday that the whip’s position “is the prime minister’s choice and if he had any concerns I would expect him to raise them with me”.

Bishop told Sky that Abbott “has many avenues to engage with the backbench”, of which the whip’s office was one.

There is some division on the backbench about Abbott’s move on Ruddock.

West Australian Liberal MP Ken Wyatt said he was disappointed at the decision and it was “strange” that it came so soon after the spill motion. “Philip is straight down the line. Everybody I know had confidence in going to him.”

Queenslander Andrew Laming said that “it looked more like recrimination than renewal because of the timing”.

But Warren Entsch, who was whip in opposition, said it was a very good move on Abbott’s part. Ruddock had been a square peg in a round hole, he said. “[The whip] has to be very pastoral and bring the team together – Philip didn’t do that.”

Now “you will find the [whip’s] office will come alive again. People need to be comfortable to go in there and share their confidences,” Entsch said, noting in passing that Ruddock is a teetotaler. The whip “has got to be able to encourage people to come in and chat”.

Meanwhile, Abbott’s lashing out at the Human Rights Commission after its critical report on children in detention has received a sharp reaction from lawyers.

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An open letter signed by more than 50 academic lawyers in support of commission president Gillian Triggs says that a well-functioning democracy requires that the executive respect the work of independent public institutions established by parliament even if it does not agree with the specific positions adopted by them.

“Where this independence is threatened by politicised attacks on the office holder, our democratic system is jeopardised.”

Triggs, who has resisted pressure from the government to quit, received backing from independent senator Jacqui Lambie, who said “the good that the Liberals did for Australia’s border protection and national security is about to be overshadowed by the vindictive, personal attacks” launched on Triggs.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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