

## Turnbull and Abbott in conflict over deal on sunset clause

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Malcolm Turnbull and Tony Abbott are sharply at odds over Abbott's denial of knowledge about a 2015 deal with crossbencher David Leyonhjelm to insert a sunset clause on the import ban of the Adler seven-shot lever-action shotgun.

Turnbull told parliament he was satisfied the then-prime minister's office had been kept abreast of the ministerial discussions around the deal.

Abbott on Wednesday's ABC's 7.30 said there might have been an email from a staffer in a minister's office but "no deals from me, no deals from my office. No deal."

The August 2015 email from the office of Justice Minister Michael Keenan to Leyonhjelm's office confirmed Keenan and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton had agreed to insert a sunset clause into the ban. The email said that in return, Leyonhjelm would vote against Labor amendments on a migration bill.

Turnbull said he had inquired of his ministers "and can say to the House as a result of those inquiries I'm satisfied that the minister for justice acted in the full knowledge of the prime minister's office at that time".

The gun issue has not just dominated parliament for the third consecutive day and drowned out the government's message-of-the-week on industrial relations, but has also fuelled the always-present tension between Turnbull and Abbott.

Under questioning in the House, Dutton confirmed that last year he had had discussions with Keenan and had met Leyonhjelm. While he had found no correspondence with the then prime minister's office, "there's no question that at an advisor's level, there would have been discussions around this issue".

Keenan, pressed by the opposition, said: "On the question about my interaction with the prime minister's office ... we interacted in the usual way ... keeping them apprised of what was going

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on”.

After Question Time Abbott made a personal explanation to the House outlining the background to the imposition of the ban. He quoted from an adviser’s note in July 2015 containing a warning from security sources that thousands of the guns were set to be imported.

But while he denied he had been involved in a deal over the sunset clause, the facts cited in his account did not preclude one being done.

Earlier Leyonhjelm told the ABC the regulation for the sunset clause had gone to the executive council and was signed off by the governor-general.

If it occurred without Abbott’s personal knowledge, “that would be understandable. There’s an awful lot of regulations that are done. But it’s inconceivable that his office wouldn’t have known about it,” Leyonhjelm said.

He said he had had no direct contact with Abbott or his office on the matter.

He dismissed Abbott’s argument that sunset clauses were a usual feature of regulations.

“He’s wrong about that. There are no sunset clauses in most regulations,” he said.

“I’ve moved to disallow a few of them. There’s no such thing as an automatic sunset clause in regulations. That’s just false,” he said.

“In order to implement the deal that I had with the minister that we negotiated, they had to actually bring in a specific regulation which they did.”

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Leyonhjelm said that when the sunset clause was about to come into effect in August he had had a phone call from Keenan “who said, we are reimposing the import ban on the seven-shot lever action.

"I said, 'You can't do that. The sunset clause is about to kick in.'

"It was a week before the 12 months were up and it was about to kick in so the ban would be lifted. I said, 'You've got a deal. We've got a deal. We did a deal. I mean, you're renegeing on a deal.'

"His answer was, 'We never intended to allow it in anyway.'

"So in other words they were intending to do me over," Leyonhjelm said.

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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