

Local lessons from Norway

We are at opposite ends of the world, but Australia and Norway have more in common than is immediately apparent. Both enjoy an abundance of natural resources that provide a rich source of wealth: Norway from oil and gas and Australia from iron ore and coal. In the debate about how to secure a long-term benefit from this natural good fortune, Australian policymakers have looked at Norway's sovereign wealth fund as a world's best practice model.

Like Australia, Norway has contributed troops to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and punches above its weight as a global citizen in peacekeeping operations and refugee resettlement, issues that have divided public opinion there as much as here.

When the bomb went off in the centre of Oslo last Friday, followed by the mass killing of young people at a holiday camp, the first assumption was — as would be the case if such events were to occur here — that Norway had been targeted by Islamic extremists over its involvement in the wars.

It soon became clear that these crimes were committed by one of Norway's own. It also began to emerge that the young man who was captured by police and has now been charged had been giving hints for some time in internet postings, which should have been detected by the police and security services, that he had extreme views that made him a potential danger to society.

Norway will no doubt reflect profoundly on how this young man's madness manifested itself without detection. But there is also much for others to contemplate about what happened in far-away Norway and about the lessons that should be learned. The most obvious and immediate is that the source of all terrorism is not Islamic extremism.

The Norway atrocity is the latest of many attacks for which people with other extreme views have been found to be responsible. A vigilant society requires all extremism to be viewed as a potential threat.

Against this background, we note with some unease the response of the Australian Federal Police to a recent internet posting calling for someone to assassinate Prime Minister Julia Gillard, which Brian Toohey documented in the *Weekend Financial Review*.

The AFP appeared rather too sanguine and defensive in describing the posting as "an online comment" of a kind that "occur regularly online", that may be "inappropriate or offensive" but not a "specific threat on a person's life". Only

Extreme language or behaviour should not be dismissed as harmless Australian vernacular.

after prompting did the AFP say it would evaluate whether the posting might have amounted to incitement to commit a crime.

The internet has changed the nature of public debate but the police response raises

obvious questions. If urging the assassination of the Prime Minister is not incitement to commit a crime, what is? What does the AFP consider to be an extreme view worth investigating? If Norwegian authorities had made appropriate checks on the extremist postings of Anders Behring Breivik they might have uncovered his plot.

The AFP has had a budget increase of nearly 170 per cent over the past decade. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's budget is up 471 per cent. Both agencies have foiled serious security threats in that time, and judgments on extremism are undoubtedly difficult. But with increased resourcing comes a commensurate increase in the obligation to be more diligent than is apparent in the AFP's response to such a threat to the Prime Minister.

Australia's steady intake of a range of migrants over half a century, to our great economic benefit, has arguably made us more resilient in the face of the integration challenges involved than appears to be the case in some otherwise liberal European countries. We should celebrate that, although this week's latest asylum-seeker deal is a reminder of how the once bipartisan immigration consensus has come under strain.

But there is also a lesson in the Norwegian tragedy and the AFP position for those involved in what is an increasingly angry national political debate. Robust debate is an essential part of public discourse. But robustness can easily become incitement. Stirring anger, as some commentators — especially in commercial radio — are doing over the carbon tax cannot be without limit. Political and business leaders have a responsibility to object when that limit is exceeded.

Extreme language or behaviour should not be blithely dismissed as harmless Australian vernacular. Calls such as the one for Ms Gillard and independent MP Rob Oakeshott to be put in bags and taken out to sea should not be regarded as acceptable in modern Australia. This is something senior opposition front bencher Eric Abetz conspicuously failed to acknowledge on the ABC's *Q&A* program on Monday night.

British Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday recognised that the Norwegian tragedy raised the need to review the rise of right-wing extremist groups, after Britain's recent focus on Islamic groups. The recent tone of some so-called political debate in Australia suggests our security authorities, including the AFP, should be doing the same thing.