
LAWYERS: INDEPENDENCE OF JUDICIARY AT RISK

A peak Australian legal body has slammed the Howard Government's treatment of Dr Mohamed Haneef's barrister, Stephen Keim SC, saying threats to lawyers will only damage the independence of the legal profession.

Australian Lawyers Alliance President, Ian Brown, said the Government's investigation of whether Mr Keim's release of an Australian Federal Police transcript was in contempt of court was little more than an attempt to intimidate the respected barrister.

"From the advice I have received, Mr Keim has not acted illegally when he released the transcript to the media and I have not heard anything from the government which challenges that view," Mr Brown said.

"However, the threat of an investigation made to a member of the legal profession is nothing new. We have in the past had other members threatened with contempt of court.

"They had criticised the authorities for concealing evidence but both times charges were not laid. Our concern is this behavior by the government shows a pattern of intimidation and that should concern all Australians," he said.

Australian Lawyers Alliance national director and Perth barrister, Tom Percy QC, said there was a public interest in lawyers being able to defend their clients and in some instances comment on cases.

"The government was able to speak on Dr Haneef's matter earlier this week after he had been granted bail and released allegations that not been presented in court," said Mr Percy.

"If the Attorney General is genuinely interested in stopping leaks to the media he should be investigating what appears to be a leak from the Australian Federal Police to the press earlier this week.

"The only person able to represent Dr Haneef and speak for him publicly is his lawyer and the government would rather he did not speak at all. Stephen Keim is a highly respected Senior Counsel who has shown great courage and integrity on this issue. Rather than being attacked by the Attorney General over his comments, he should be commended," Mr Percy said.

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Further comment is available. Contact: Seth Tenkate on 0404 235 185 or (02) 9258 7700 or Tom Percy QC on 0413 836 606 or Ian Brown on 0422 444 673.