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POLITICS FEDERAL

Data storage could be used to fight 'general crime', Tony Abbott says

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Prime Minister Tony Abbott has moved to clarify details of his government's contentious plans to store the phone and internet logs of everyday Australians after his suggestion on national television that people's web browsing history would be included caused confusion and concern.

On Wednesday, Mr Abbott said the government's plan to make telecommunications companies store users' metadata for two years could be used to fight "general" crimes and not just in terror cases.



Prime Minister Tony Abbott with Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Attorney-General Senator George Brandis says data storage could be used to fight general crime not just terrorism. ANDREW MEARES

Mr Abbott likened the information to that included on the "front of an envelope" and appeared to indicate a person's web browser history could be included in the metadata saved.

"It's not what you're doing on the internet, it's the sites you're visiting, it's not the content, it's the sites [where] you've been," he told the Nine Network on Wednesday.

His comments suggesting web browsing history be included in the data retention plan caused widespread confusion.

"The PM thinks browsing history is metadata, in scope for data retention. We know his law & order agenda better than he knows the Interwebs," tweeted security expert Steve Lockstep.

In a subsequent interview on Wednesday, Mr Abbott stressed that the government was not seeking to view content but only metadata.

"What you generate is content, what the service providers generate is metadata. We do think the metadata should be kept because all of the best security advice is that without this, counter-terrorism work becomes difficult, crime fighting work becomes very difficult," he said. His office further clarified that internet users' web browsing history was not metadata - and the government required a warrant to look at browsing history.

Metadata is defined by government as information produced by a communications system and includes details such as time sent and received, duration and location.

"I stress, we are not asking for new information, we are simply asking the telecommunications providers to continue to keep information that they currently keep," Mr Abbott said.

When describing technical matters in the past such as the NBN, Mr Abbott once said [he was "no Bill Gates"](#).

Some Twitter users jumped on the confusion to mock Mr Abbott and his plan.

"Ya put the browsing history in. Ya put the browsing history out. Ya put the metadata in and ya change it all about," said one [Twitter user](#).

ASIO boss David Irvine has described metadata retention as "absolutely crucial" in monitoring and disrupting local terror cells.

A senior intelligence official said on Tuesday the government's plan for metadata retention had "nothing to do with content, it's simply identifying information".

The official stressed that agencies could not look at web-surfing history or ask a telephone company for the data unless a warrant to do so was provided.

Mr Abbott has said that the proposals were "absolutely critical" for agencies fighting terrorism but also said the data would be used "in crime fighting more generally".

He rejected industry claims the cost of retaining, storing and protecting the data could see consumer's bills rise by \$10 to \$20.

"I don't know why they would say that they would be saying that because this is information which is already kept," Mr Abbott said.

Labor leader Bill Shorten has attacked speculation of increased costs as an "internet tax", which has said would constitute a "liefecta" of broken promises, which includes the debt levy and higher fuel tax.

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