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Granting visa bad politics: expert says

Jo McKenna in Rome, 9 mar. 2009

A TOP former United Nations organised crime fighter says the granting of a visa to an alleged mafia crime figure by the former immigration minister Amanda Vanstone was "bad politics" that had damaged Australia's reputation.

Pino Arlacchi, a former UN under-secretary for drug control, said it was inexcusable for Ms Vanstone - now Australia's ambassador to Italy - to have stopped the deportation of Francesco Madafferi in 2005.

"It can only be explained as bad politics and low ethical standards," Mr Arlacchi said. "You just have to push a button to access international archives. These are known [alleged] criminals; criminal activities [have been investigated] for decades."

The circumstances behind the decision to grant Mr Madafferi a visa are being investigated by federal police. The Liberal Party is alleged to have received \$100,000 in donations from mafia-linked businessmen in return for help from several Liberal MPs in getting a deportation order revoked.

Ms Vanstone, who strongly denies any link between donations and her decision to allow Mr Madafferi to remain despite a string of convictions in Italy, has said she granted the visa on humanitarian grounds that took into account his mental state and the impact of his detention on his family.

"Any inference made vis-a-vis any donation being related in any way to seeking influence is to me highly offensive, scurrilous and defamatory," she said.

Mr Madafferi was arrested last year in connection with the world's biggest ecstasy bust by Australian police. He is soon to face drug trafficking charges.

Mr Arlacchi said the Madafferi affair had damaged Australia's ethical standards and cast doubt on its immigration procedures.

He said the handling of Mr Madafferi's visa could encourage other mafia figures to try to gain entry to Australia.

"If the same criteria is applied as it was to Madafferi, it means that anyone can arrive from Italy with a criminal record with impunity," he said. "I hope the Australian public and the government will wake up and seriously scrutinise people with criminal records who come there . . . You cannot fight organised crime if you allow them to move from country to country so easily."

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