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Rights or plain old politics?

There are two high-profile Tims working for Australia's Human Rights Commission. The first is Tim Southphommasane. He is Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner. The second is Tim Wilson. He is Australia's Human Rights Commissioner.

Both Tims are paid to protect our rights. Both Tims are intelligent. As far as I can tell they are both honourable men. Even though each Tim is considered an expert in human rights, one Tim thinks our human rights are threatened by section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act (which makes it unlawful to offend or insult people on the grounds of race) and the other thinks that our human rights would be threatened if we got rid of it.

Both Tims jumped into print this week when the government shelved its plan to repeal section 18C. Tim S went first on Thursday. The decision, he said, had united Australians. There was "widespread concern" about change, and, people have said "unambiguously that the Act should stay just as it is".

Two days later, in a different media outlet, Tim W told us: "One of the great myths was that there was not broad-based support for change." He said the single most important reason for getting rid of the current law "is a uniting one, not a dividing one".

Two Tims: one believes the public has united around section 18C, the other sees us uniting around its repeal. Two Tims, who work for the one body, have diametrically opposed views of where public opinion sits, of how to unite so-



A tale of two Tims: Race Discrimination Commissioner Dr Tim Southphommasane (left), and Australia's Human Rights Commissioner Tim Wilson (right). Pictures: Colin Murty, Stuart McEvoy

ciety, and of what constitutes an infringement of human rights. There are two Tims but only one reality. They can't both be right.

I know another sphere of life where diametrically opposed views are held about the same reality. It is called politics. Different views in politics are so ingrained they are to be expected. In fact we entrench them. We call them right v left, progressive v conservative, government v opposition. In this sphere, where there are claims and counter-claims about public opinion, we resolve it with an election.

We can dress up the argument between the two Tims in the language of human rights

or we can dress it up in the language of politics. The argument is essentially whether the rights of a racial group not to be offended or insulted outweighs the right of an individual freely to speak his or her mind. Tim S is of the left, which generally prefers group rights. Tim W is of the right which generally tends towards individual rights.

Each of the Tims will think this is an outrageous simplification of their respective positions. But I think the language of politics sheds as much light on their arguments as the language of "rights". That is because, in my opinion, much of the argument about "rights" in our modern democratic ad-

vanced society is just politics by another name.

There are real human rights abuses going on in the world today, like beheadings being carried out by the Islamic State, and mass executions, and the closure of churches that have endured for thousands of years, and the attempted extermination of the Yazidi people in northern Iraq.

There are Australians participating in these atrocities. But fortunately they have not yet been able to engage in such activity here.

Last Tuesday the government announced proposals which, it said, would help to charge and prosecute such people and stop them going

ing. That's a real human right — the right not to be murdered in the name of someone else's political cause or twisted version of religion. Protecting innocents against terrorism is not an opt-in or opt-out activity. It is the irrevocable obligation of every citizen in a civilized country.

Some argued that leaving section 18C will make it easier for some people to join "Team Australia" in the fight against terrorism. Really? The counter-terrorism laws being proposed might be right or they may be wrong. They should be judged on their merits. But to suggest that somebody, anybody, would decline to co-operate in the fight against terrorism because they didn't like the repeal of a section like this in the Racial Discrimination Act is truly frightening.

Does the government believe there are leaders in our community whose commitment to their fellow citizens and the values of a civilised society is so weak they will not co-operate in preventing terror and murder if section 18C is repealed? If that is the case we really do have a problem.

The government ought to be clear about this. Loyalty to this country and to the safety of its law-abiding citizens does not turn on views about the wording of the Racial Discrimination Act.

It doesn't turn on what you think of the welfare system or the carbon tax. Loyalty comes as an obligation of living in this country. If you enjoy its peaceable way of life you have a duty to protect it.

That is beyond politics. There's a joint ticket for the two Tims to agree on.

Peter Costello is a former federal treasurer