



## Tony Abbott's Culture Challenge

### **Publish Date:**

May 2014

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*This article from the [May 2014](#) edition of the [IPA Review](#) is by Policy Director at the IPA, Chris Berg.*

Tim Wilson, formerly of the Institute of Public Affairs, will make an excellent human rights commissioner on the Australian Human Rights Commission.

But let's hope he is the *last* human rights commissioner.

As the Attorney General George Brandis pointed out when he announced Tim Wilson's appointment in December 2013, the commission has "become increasingly narrow and selective in its view of human rights."

This seems to be understating the problem. As the Institute of Public Affairs has documented over many years, the commission is isn't just narrowly left-focused on human rights. It is actively hostile to basic liberties like freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of association.

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So Wilson's appointment is excellent. But the government is kidding itself if it thinks it has fixed AHRC by doing so. Under John Howard the Coalition appointed conservative and liberal supporters to significant government roles – like, for instance, the board of the ABC. Despite this, you'd be hard pressed to identify any long term institutional change these appointments brought about.

The new Abbott government has been characterised by two things. First is its surprising and extremely welcome antipathy to corporate welfare. It refused to bail out SPC Ardmona. It refused demands from the car industry for further subsidies. And it refused to guarantee Qantas' debt.

But second and much more significant is its enthusiasm to hop unashamedly into the culture wars.

It began early with criticism of the ABC. The topic was the reporting of the Edward Snowden leaks and claims of asylum seeker mistreatment, but more important was the particular way in which the argument was framed: Abbott told 2GB's Ray Hadley that "A lot of people feel at the moment that the ABC instinctively takes everyone's side but Australia's".

Wilson was appointed to the AHRC in December. In January, the education minister Christopher Pyne announced a review into the National Curriculum because 'the benefits of Western civilisation should be taught in our curriculum'.

This was met with predictable outrage.

But the idea that Pyne's suggestion could be at all controversial – that it would be controversial to squeeze Western Civilisation into a curriculum whose themes already include sustainability, Asia, and indigenous cultures – just shows how deeply the left have captured not just the National Curriculum, but the broader public debate over our history as well.

It certainly wasn't the 'right' that started the culture wars.

If Tony Abbott wants to affect the long term cultural change in Australia – as all the evidence suggests he does – then he needs to come to terms with how the left harnessed the power of the state to push its cultural vision.

Few terms more are frivolously used in Australian politics than 'culture war'.

Literally one week after the Coalition won government in September 2013, the Conversation was heralding the start of 'Culture Wars II' because it dared to criticise the content of the previous government's national curriculum.

An article published in the left-wing online publication New Matilda claimed, a fortnight later, that Tony Abbott had 'reignited the culture wars' by abolishing the Climate Commission – a body which was specifically formed by Julia Gillard in order to sell her government's climate change policy.

In November, Renew Economy, a specialist climate change website, claimed Tony Abbott saw



climate change policy as a 'culture war'. Never-mind that the Coalition had committed itself to the same emissions reductions targets as Labor, and its own elaborate, expensive mechanism to suit.

Describing an opponent's policy preference as a 'culture war' is to give it an air of unreality – as if it is motivated solely by partisanship and fantasy. Only ideologues fight culture wars. Everybody else just tries to 'do what works'.

Alternatively, culture wars are seen as a distraction from more important, material concerns. In the words of the *Guardian's* Lenore Taylor, 'A good culture war full of shouty generalisations can provide a government with very handy cover.'

Both these claims are fundamentally mistaken.

The term 'culture war' originated with Otto von Bismark. His *kulturkampf* ('cultural struggle') pitted German Protestants against the Roman Catholic church in Prussia. It took the form of aggressive state controls on Catholic institutions: state inspection of religious schools, a ban on political commentary at the pulpit, and a wide range of heavy regulation on Catholic participation. Thousands of the clergy were fined or jailed for resisting the *kulturkampf* dictates.

The Protestant majority believed the Catholic Church was a force holding back Bismark's modernising force, and, with the Church's relationship to the Papacy, a threat to German unity.

That drive for national unification is the key to understanding what a culture war is about.

The left has long seen the state as a vehicle through which society can express itself. In this idea, institutions such as the law and bureaucratic organisations are not solely mechanistic tools to achieve public policy goals but are also demonstrate the values held by the social collective. Take, for instance, the emphasis on what a repeal of section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act would 'symbolise', or the proposal to recognise indigenous Australians in the preamble of the Constitution.

The culture wars describe not just an ideological back and forth – politics is, as it should be, a contest of ideas – but one in which the state has wrapped itself in, sought to influence and subsidised.

The culture wars aren't about culture *per se*. They're about the way the state seeks to control the culture.

Its tools are the network of grants, subsidies , programs and initiatives doled out almost exclusively to one side of politics to prosecute their vision of what Australia ought to be.

The complaints that the Abbott government wants to restart the culture wars are more complaints about the left's privileged position in the institutions of state are being challenged.

But the Abbott government must not imagine that a victory in the culture war will be found by placing conservatives and liberals in government roles custom-built for their ideological opponents.

Neither will institutions be repaired by reorientating them towards conservative ends. As the IPA's James Paterson argued in Quadrant in 2011:

the Right should be highly wary of using the power of the state to advance their side of the cultural wars. Often, it was unsuccessful. Worse, it sometimes backfired and made the job of their ideological opponents much easier.

It may be possible to repair the National Curriculum's hostility towards Western Civilisation. The cross-curriculum priorities – Indigenous and Asian perspectives and sustainability – could be replaced to reflect our Western heritage: the legacy of British institutions, the Western tradition, and economic development.

But doing so would be no guarantee a future government would not simply reverse those changes, subjecting the education system to a constant political and ideological back and forth.

The National Curriculum is exactly – explicitly – a culture war high ground. It is a project to impose some degree of cultural unity on the Australian nation. In 2009 the National Curriculum was branded the 'Australian curriculum' – one curriculum to rule them.

The curriculum is in the words of one analyst of the national curriculum project, a "major means by which the citizenry, collectively and individually, can develop the capabilities to play a part in the democratic project of nation-(re)building."

It is tempting for the Abbott government to reclaim the ground; to take the institutions created by the left and use them for conservative ends.

But why should we have a national curriculum at all? A liberal, pluralistic society that offers the maximum space for individuals to pursue their own goals and live the lives they choice would reject these grand schemes for national cultural unity.

This is why the IPA has called for the Abbott government to abolish the National Curriculum, rather than tinker with it. Only by devolving the curriculum down to the school level and granting parent's choice about what their children are taught can we stop the curriculum being a political plaything.

The Australian Human Rights Commission should be abolished, rather than reformed.

Governments come and go. The Abbott government should not try to win the culture war. It should try to end it.