



## Tim Soutphommasane and the Exacerbation of Race Politics

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In his [final speech as Race Discrimination Commissioner](#), Tim Soutphommasane declared that “race politics is back” and asserted that the “biggest threats to racial harmony ... come from within our parliaments and from sections of our media.”

But I would argue that Soutphommasane has overlooked his own contribution to racial discord. The political left’s obsession with identity politics undermines the critical social norm of treating people as individuals, triggers an angry reaction which feeds white identity politics and increases divisions in our society.

Soutphommasane has previously [responded to critics by arguing](#) that, “Division is caused not by our response to racism; the real division is caused by racism itself.” Racism is divisive, true, but Soutphommasane has also played a part in fuelling identity politics.

*Identity politics* is the idea that society is defined by the power dynamics between groups primarily based on race, gender and sexuality. It asserts that institutions are inevitably shaped by the

hierarchies of these groups that persist over time. White nationalists claim that these hierarchies – especially that of race – are legitimate sources of political authority. The identarian left claim that these hierarchies must be dismantled through state action.

While their goals are very different, the underlying analysis is the same: politics is a game of power played between groups whose identities can be constructed, understood and analysed. What gets lost in this analysis is the fact that individual identity is irreducibly complex. Individuals are much more than just their skin colour, sexuality, or gender. This is what makes thinking and judging at the individual level so valuable.

The role formally held by Soutphommasane is legally mandated to highlight racial issues in Australian society – that is, it exists to promote a form of identity politics.

During his time in the job Soutphommasane encouraged complaints to the Human Rights Commission against the cartoonist Bill Leak, supported a proposal which would reverse the onus of proof in complaints of racial discrimination, and campaigned against the abolition or amendment of section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act*. Soutphommasane has repeatedly asserted that racism drives debates about China, immigration, integration, crime and free speech. He has called for “ramping up our efforts to fight racism.”

Soutphommasane’s focus on race, I would argue, does not make people less bigoted; rather, it keeps the focus on group characteristics. This approach has counterproductive implications.

In the first instance, while it is important to create a strong societal norm against racism, it does not achieve much to simply label people “racist.” *New York Times* columnist Margaret Renkl [recently wrote](#) that the best way to combat racism is to build understanding with conversations: “Being called a racist almost never causes a racist to say, ‘Oh, wow, you’re right’.” Renkl’s theory is [supported by research](#) which has found that the most effective and long lasting method to reduce prejudice is deep interpersonal conversations. These dialogues force people to think about their views, builds empathy and reduces the likelihood of a combative response.

Furthermore, it is unhelpful to insert race into and presume racist motivations behind policy debates. Soutphommasane said that concerns about Chinese Communist Party influence in Australia [“smacks of The Yellow Peril revisited”](#) – which is effectively to say, if you are concerned about Chinese state influence, racism must motivate you. This claim is despite evidence of substantial Communist Party operations [outlined by Clive Hamilton](#). This policy debate does not need to be about racial divides – after all, many Chinese Australians express concern about Communist Party. Hamilton himself [criticised](#) those who see everything “through the lens of race, gender and sexual orientation” in “a kind of competitive piety, verging on the sanctimonious.”

Inserting racial elements into policy debates unnecessarily increases racialisation in Australian society. And the more you focus on racial difference, the less tolerant and more tribal people become. In this case, it pits Australians of Chinese background against the rest, rather than addressing the question of foreign influence operations.

The focus on race also triggers a defensive response that unites the alleged bigots against the very people the anti-racists are trying to protect. When people feel like their family, community and nation are under threat they become more intolerant. Perceived threats against the dominant group – including calling them a bunch of “racists” and “bigots” – [triggers a defensive response](#) which increases racial prejudice, dislike of minorities and anti-immigrant sentiment.

In other words, the politics of identity on the left fuels white identity politics on the right. American political scientist Mark Lilla, who comes from the progressive left, [wrote](#) in the *New York Times* shortly after the election of Donald Trump that the left’s “own obsession with diversity has encouraged white, rural, religious Americans to think of themselves as a disadvantaged group whose identity is being threatened or ignored.” Identity politics was key to Trump’s victory. “Those who play the identity game should be prepared to lose it,” Lilla concludes.

Since Lilla wrote those words, the identity politics has continued to fester on both sides. Last weekend marked [one year since the “Unite the Right” rally](#) in Charlottesville, Virginia, during which a car driven into the crowd murdered counter-protestor Heather Heyer. This week, Katter’s Australia Party Senator Fraser Anning’s [maiden speech](#) expressed nostalgia for an ethnically discriminatory immigration system, called for immigration that reflects Australia’s historic “European Christian composition” and an end of Muslim immigration.

Meanwhile, last week it emerged that newly hired *New York Times* editorial board member, Sarah Jeong, had written a series of tweets critical of white people. Jeong wrote that “white people are bullshit,” that “The world could get by just fine with zero white people” and “#CancelWhitePeople.” Jeong’s defenders asserted racism reflects [“institutional power”](#) – and because white people have “power” her comments were not racist.

This convenient redefinition contradicts the [plain understanding of racism](#): “Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior.” It is also unhelpful – Jeong’s behaviour feeds the white supremacist narrative that there is a conspiracy against them, endangering more tribal white racism in response.

Jeong has unintentionally shown the symmetry between the far right and the identarian left, who both relentlessly focus on defining and dividing people by their group membership. British Conservative Dan Hannan [wrote](#):

“The alt-right and the woke Left are not opposites when it comes to race. They both define people by ethnic identity. The real anti-racists are the classical liberals who see everyone as an individual.”

### **Treating people as individuals**

The University of Western Australia’s [“Courageous conversations about race”](#) seminar, which was presented to hundreds of academics and students, declares the need to “Keep the spotlight on



Race.” The handout associated with the seminar calls for “racial consciousness” which means accepting that, “Race permeates everything in modern Australian society 100%.” The handout also rejects the notion that, “Everyone should be treated equally and judged solely on the basis of merit and their accomplishments. Race/cultural background are irrelevant.”

This seminar reflects a historic shift on the political left. In the post-war era, liberals sought to protect the oppressed by securing rights at the individual level. This is the approach of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which outlines rights held by all individuals not special rights held by some groups. Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka [points out](#):

“Rather than protecting vulnerable groups directly, through special rights for the members of designated groups, minorities would be protected indirectly, by guaranteeing basic civil and political rights to all individuals regardless of their group membership. Basic human rights such as freedom of speech, association and conscience, while attributed to individuals, are exercised in community with others, and so provide protection for a minority’s group life. Where these individual human rights are firmly protected, it was felt, no further minority-specific rights are needed.”

In recent decades the identarian left has rejected colour blindness and treating people as individuals because they claim it allows for the continuation of structural inequality. Harvard University academic Amy Chua [notes](#):

“A shift in tone, rhetoric, and logic has moved identity politics away from inclusion – which had always been the Left’s watchword – toward exclusion and division. For much of the Left today, anyone who speaks in favor of group blindness is on the other side, indifferent to or even guilty of oppression.”

Chua argues that this approach pits groups against each other, increasing tribal tensions.

Downplaying the importance of race was precisely the strategy of U.S. civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King, Jr. King promoted a constrained forms of identity politics that demands equal treatment as an individual no matter what group you are a part. King’s [“I Have a Dream” speech](#) appealed to America’s creed “that all men are created equal.” He dreamed of a nation where people “will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” King strategically used America’s unifying national symbols – in this case, quoting from the *Declaration of Independence* – to call for everyone to be treated equally. He sought not a rejection of the past, but a full realisation of America’s founding principles in a way that transcended race.

King understood that the best way to protect members of oppressed groups is to treat people as *individuals*, and aspire towards a future where none of this matters. This is practically impossible when you just focus on race. As Harvard political theorist Yascha Mounk [writes](#), the logic of identity politics on the left “would ensure that all members of society are forever defined by the colour of their skin or the province of their ancestors.” While it may be difficult to achieve, we should not simply give up on a society that judges people as individuals and does not focus group membership.

When we stop respecting people as individuals, the result is ugly politics. Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, an Alice Springs councillor and Country Liberal candidate for Lingiari, has faced dehumanising identity politics. Price has attracted substantial hatred for [speaking against](#) changing the date of Australia Day. Bill Nicholson, of the Wurundjeri Tribe Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council, [called for](#) her to “die a painful death” and described her as a “sell out coconut.” This is a form of prejudice – prejudging Price’s views on the basis of her skin colour, not on the basis of the value of her argument. This reduction of Price’s experience to an arbitrary category is precisely what undermines our individual humanity and reasoned argument.

### **Not doing the racists’ work for them**

The identity politics mantra is most commonly observed during “culture war” debates about history, symbols such as the flag and southern cross, and national practices such as Australia Day and Anzac Day. These debates are both extremely divisive, and stroke tribalism on both sides.

Political psychologist Karen Stenner [has found](#) a latent authoritarian switch in some people’s brains that is triggered by criticism of the nation, encouragement of diversity over unity and allowing immigration without limits and integration. Stenner argues that the most effective response is to build group solidarity around common themes:

“Ultimately, nothing inspires greater tolerance from the intolerant than an abundance of common and unifying beliefs, practices, rituals, institutions, and processes. And regrettably, nothing is more certain to provoke increased expression of their latent predispositions [towards authoritarianism] than the likes of ‘multicultural education’, bilingual policies, and nonassimilation.”

In Australia’s case, there has been unhelpful efforts to link certain rituals and practices exclusively to “white Australia.” Filmmaker [Warwick Thornton](#) said that the Southern Cross has become “very racist nationalistic emblem” and compared it to the swastika. Singer-songwriter Dan Sultan said on Q&A that Australia Day is [“racist.”](#) The Greens now [support changing the date](#) of Australia Day, and some local councils are [refusing to hold citizen ceremonies](#) on 26 January. Earlier this year comedian [Catherine Deveny](#) dismissively labelled Anzac Day “Bogan Halloween.”

Soutphommasane himself has asserted that discussion of “middle Australian values” and concerns that “cultural Marxism” is “undermining Western civilization” are signs of white identity politics.

These claims, which exclusively link key national symbols to white Australia, create an “us versus them” mentality that pits white Australia against the rest. Ironically, the ends of the identarian left and the goals of white nationalists are identical: making the symbols of Australian nationhood, middle Australian values and Western civilization exclusively associated with white Australians.

In fact, most Australians have an inclusive idea of what it means to be Australian. The [Pew Research Centre](#) found that relatively few think that to be truly Australian you must be born in Australia (13%) and few think that you must be Christian (also 13%), the religion traditionally



associated with European heritage. Australians do believe that speaking English (69%) and sharing Australia's customs and tradition (50%) are important – however, these can be learned by someone of any race.

It is essential to emphasise the inclusivity of Australian values, symbols and institutions – not to unnecessarily racialise them. It is doing the racists' work by linking middle Australian values and Western civilisation to a single race. The core ideas of the West, from respect for individual rights to the rational scientific method, are universal not racial. Furthermore, we should be associating middle Australian values with tolerance and giving people a fair go, not white supremacy.

### **Safeguarding Australia's success**

Australia is an economic, social and cultural success story. We have achieved this as a nation of immigrants from across the world. Demographer Bernard Salt [points out](#) that a very high proportion of our communities are migrants. In Sydney, 42% of urban residents were born overseas, substantially higher than New York (29%), Paris (22%), Berlin (13%), or Tokyo (2%). Immigrants contribute to Australia's economy and social fabric.

Meanwhile, racist attitudes are relatively uncommon. The [World Values Survey](#) found just that 5% of Australians say that they would feel uncomfortable being neighbours with someone of a different race. In comparison to our region, 11% of Chinese, 22% of Japanese, 26% of Indians and 40% of Thais, do not want to live next to someone of a different race.

Although Australia is an inclusive society, we must do all we can to not exacerbate racial tensions with counterproductive rhetoric or policies. We must strive to treat people as individuals and reject group-based identity politics on all sides.

***[Matthew Lesh](#) is a research fellow at the [Institute of Public Affairs](#), and author of the forthcoming book "Democracy in a Divided Australia: The Inners-Outers Divide Ripping Us Apart."***

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