

Tony Abbott abandons push to alter race-hate legislation

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TONY Abbott has abandoned the government's incendiary changes to race hate laws, conceding they had become a "complication" that was hurting the Coalition and risked undermining national unity. The Prime Minister made the decision to cut the government's losses yesterday after a co-ordinated and sustained campaign against the free speech amendments to the Racial Discrimination Act had left the Coalition battered in ethnically diverse communities, particularly in western Sydney.

The backlash from ethnic, indigenous, Jewish and other religious groups intensified when Attorney-General George Brandis said in March that people had a "right to be bigots", and the senator had also faced internal opposition from Liberal moderates.

As Bill Shorten yesterday claimed Senator Brandis had been humiliated and rolled by his colleagues and the Coalition had given a green light to racism, the Institute of Public Affairs accused the government of breaking an election promise and turning its back on a fundamental freedom.

Mr Abbott dumped the changes to 18C as he unveiled new counter-terrorism measures, stressing the government was determined to engage in closer consultation with communities, particularly with the Muslim community.

"When it comes to counter-terrorism, everyone needs to be part of Team Australia," Mr Abbott said. "And I have to say that the government's proposals to change 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act have become a complication in that respect.

"I don't want to do anything that puts our national unity at risk at this time and so those proposals are now off the table."

Mr Abbott said it was a "leadership call" he had made after discussions with cabinet. It is understood he had been considering shelving the changes for some time.

“In the end, leadership is about preserving national unity on the essentials and that is why I have taken this decision,” he said.

Senator Brandis released the draft changes in March to scrap the 18C provision to make it unlawful to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate other people or groups of people because of their race, colour or national or ethnic origin.

The government proposed replacing section 18C with provisions making it unlawful to vilify or intimidate others on similar grounds, but there were broad exemptions.

The government pledged at the election to repeal section 18C “in its current form” after it was used against News Corp Australia columnist Andrew Bolt in 2011.

Bolt, who campaigned for changes to the act, said last night it was “a great pity the country has so few defenders of free speech”.

“It says something about the failure of assimilation policies that so-called ethnic leaders defeated an attempt to restore our traditional free speech and were credited with the victory by the Prime Minister,” Bolt said.

Western Sydney Liberal backbencher Craig Laundy, who was one of the first backbenchers to speak out against the changes and warned he would cross the floor, said he always had a personal issue with scrapping 18C.

“My daughter Sophie, my middle daughter who is 14, her best friend is Islamic and I have had to explain to her when they’ve come home from places out and she’s seen first-hand what racial vilification looks like,” he said.

“It started as a personal issue for me. I had a problem with it right from the get go.” His seat of Reid in NSW is one of the nation’s most ethnically diverse electorates.

Mr Laundy applauded Senator Brandis for the way he had handled community concerns, and listened to feedback. “It was obvious to me after four weeks of consultation that my personal view was mirrored absolutely by my electorate,” Mr Laundy said.

The government was flooded with more than 5000 submissions on the changes, with most calling on the Coalition to retain the protections.

Mr Laundry said 18C was a safety net against racial vilification, adding “as much as the Prime Minister is right and we should be Team Australia, we need safety nets because there are some lunatics in any minority”.

The Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia senior deputy chairwoman Eugenia Grammatikakis also welcomed the government’s decision to drop the changes.

“It is important to acknowledge that the government did engage in a consultation process and it did listen and consider those views,” she said.

Mr Abbott defended his backdown, saying he was a passionate supporter of free speech and if they were starting from scratch then the 18C section and words such as “offend and insult” would not be included in the legislation.

“We are dealing with a situation that we find ourselves in and I want the communities of our country to be our friend, not our critic,” Mr Abbott said, describing the changes as a “complication that we just don’t need”.

Queenslander George Christensen, an outspoken defender of freedom of expression, broke ranks to criticise the decision. “I understand there’s bigger fish to fry right now but I’m disappointed we’re not following through on such a key issue as defending the right to freedom of speech,” he told *The Australian*.

Additional reporting: Christian Kerr