

One would think the last thing Malcolm Turnbull needs is a new round of the culture wars - this one over whether extra protections are needed for religion - just as he's coming up to next year's election.

But that seems likely when the government finally releases the Ruddock [report on religious freedom](#).

The review was set up essentially to salve the hurt of those in Coalition ranks on the losing side of the same-sex marriage debate. Unfortunately in politics, short-term gestures can come back as longer-term distractions.

The government won't be putting out the report before the July 28 byelections, and that tells us something. There are concerns about how this issue – the detailed carriage of which is with Attorney-General Christian Porter - will play in the public domain.

We don't know what former Howard government minister Philip Ruddock and his panel have found – in particular what they've recommended about legislation to protect religious freedom.

But cabinet minister Dan Tehan has fired an early shot in the battle with his St Thomas More lecture, delivered in late June and run in the Australian last Saturday.

Tehan targeted two fronts: what he called “the creeping encroachment from the state on religious belief” and the “the use of political correctness to marginalise and silence the religious perspective”. A modern problem, he said, is “where religious freedom rubs against laws written to protect other rights”.

He's concerned about what he sees as inadequacies in the present state and federal legal framework; he urges a Religious Discrimination Act to protect against discrimination on religious grounds and ensure other laws, such as state sex-discrimination acts, don't restrict religious freedom more than is required.

In this debate, the onus is surely on the advocates of change to establish that present protections aren't adequate. Tehan's evidence (such as a complaint against Catholic anti same-sex marriage literature that was withdrawn) seems slight. Liberal senator James Paterson, who supports legislation, also was light on convincing examples when interviewed this week.

But it is the second part of Tehan's argument that is more disturbing.

"The reality for Australians today is that there is another threat to religious freedom and it does not come from the application of various laws," he said. "Rather, it comes from what former prime minister John Howard describes as 'minority fundamentalism' – which he calls, 'the assumption that long-held custom, practices and beliefs represent or implies an attack on those who do not support it'".

Tehan said: "We have woken up in a nightmare where the value of your contribution to a debate depends on what you claim to be a victim of.

"When the forces of political correctness continually marginalise and dismiss contributions to debate informed by a reasonable religious belief it sends a very clear message: you are not welcome here, your views are not welcome here, and your religion is not welcome here".

He gives the examples of the boycott of Coopers Brewery after its involvement with the Bible Society in the same-sex marriage debate, and the backlash against rugby union's Israel Folau after he denounced homosexuality.

"There is more disrespect directed at people who share their faith publicly," Tehan maintains.

But what are we looking at here? We can condemn retaliation against a business that has engaged in some well-motivated political act, but we'd surely not want to curb the right of people to protest in this way (provided it's done peacefully).

And in talking about “political correctness” let us remember this can come in very different stripes, from the right as well as the left, and can be subjective.

When young Muslim activist Yassmin Abdel-Magied posted her “LEST. WE. FORGET. (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine ...)” she was pilloried - not just criticised robustly - for expressing a provocative and disrespectful view. Her most ferocious attackers, including high-profile Liberals, approached her post from what some might characterise as their own school of “political correctness”.

Tehan fears the decline in the proportion of Australians who profess themselves Christians. Citing census figures, he said that while “Christianity remains the most common religion, practiced by 52% of the population”, the proportion is falling, especially among the young. The trend will lead to the day when “the Australians who are part of any religion will become a minority.

"In preparation for that day, we need to consider how we will defend religious rights in this country from political correctness". He exhorts people of faith to stand up for their views, but this is not enough. “Given the changing nature of the law in Australia, and including the flow towards increasing secularism, we need a Religious Discrimination Act”.

Of course believers should fight for their causes. But a fall in Christian adherence does not make a case for a new law to protect a religious minority – who often might have split opinions anyway.

The legalisation of same-sex marriage was an exercise in democracy in our secular society; the plebiscite’s result reflected how views had changed over a few years. Church voices in opposition were not suppressed - they just lost the argument and so failed to garner the numbers.

There is no credible reason to believe the opportunity for religious views to be put on various issues will be stifled in the future. It may be that they will be rejected, but that is completely different.

From the government's point of view, there is little upside in the coming debate.

Talk of a Religious Discrimination Act would trigger calls for a wider bill of rights – somewhere the government won't be going.

And there is always a risk with such legislation of unintended consequences – witness the fallout around some terms in the Racial Discrimination Act's section 18C.

The strong proponents within the Coalition of this new protection are coming from a Christian point of view. But protection for religion would extend across faiths, potentially raising issues about practices of some non-Christian religions that, while not contravening Australian law, mightn't fit so well with Australian values. Do we want to get into that mire?

It's hard to see the religion issue being a vote-changer for Turnbull. The Liberals might hope to wedge Labor, but the ALP has proved skillful at dodging wedges. There could be a greater danger of it dividing Coalition MPs.

The most sensible course would be to put the issue on pause. But that's not how these things go.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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