



Architectural racism?

by Mark Iddon

The legacy of Rhodes should be debated and contested not erased. The campaign '**Rhodes Must Fall**

' (RMF), was launched in March 2015 to remove a Statue of Cecil Rhodes from Oriel College in Oxford. Astoundingly, the campaign is led by a Rhodes Scholarship beneficiary Ntokozo Quabe and was inspired by a similar campaign to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town, South Africa.

Cecil Rhodes supported the advancement of the British Empire and no doubt held views that although common at the time would now be considered racist. Rhodes was the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, named after him, Rhodesia (1890-1896), now known as Zimbabwe and Zambia. He died in 1902, aged 48, and left some money to Oriel College to set up a scholarship fund which has enabled some 8000 overseas students to gain a University education at one of the most distinguished educational establishments.

Rhodes was born in England, but was sent to South Africa when he was 17 by his parents who thought his health would benefit from the climate and to join his brother on his Cotton farm in Natal. Cecil became successful in acquiring some small diamond mines and also developed a fruit farming business. He returned to England a couple of times, to attend Oxford Oriel College, but went back to Africa with his course uncompleted.

Fortunately, reason has prevailed - at least for the moment, and Oriel College have finally dismissed the campaign to remove the statue although they have said that they would consider adding a plaque to provide some historical context. Some might say that they have made this decision due to pressure from financial supporters who have said they would withdraw their support if the College acceded to remove the statue. The campaign could be dismissed as the work of a few misguided attention seeking students playing the victim card and attempting to be radical. However, it should be of great concern that the campaign should gain such momentum, within a year, by the student bodies and that the claims were taken seriously by the University establishment rather than dismissed at the outset and the students told to get a grip on reality.

Most people understand that you can't be oppressed by an inanimate object such as a statue but an RFM campaigner recently said on Sky News 'There's a violence to having to walk past the statue everyday on the way to lectures. There's a violence to having to sit with paintings of former slave holders while writing exams – that's really problematic'.

It is quite disturbing that this discussion is taking place at all but especially at such a prestigious

University and we should ask the question as to why the campaign has caught on at this time when the statue has probably been there for around a 100 years. The background to this issue is that over the last 30 years or so, there have been campaigns to close down debate by University Student Unions declaring 'No platform' for speakers who may have offensive or extreme views.

Initially the call to 'No platform' was for racist or extremist organisations by left leaning organisations to prevent right wing groups from speaking. I was in Oxford in the early 1990's, although at Oxford Brookes University, and remember first hearing the phrase 'you can't say that as it isn't politically correct'. Political Correctness was challenged by some on the grounds of defending free speech, arguing that the only way of challenging racism, or other contentious ideas, was by allowing ideas to be aired freely and having the courage to debate and win the argument by reason.

Over the last 20-30 years we have seen an increasing prominence in the ideas of multiculturalism, diversity and identity politics. Although these ideas are championed by many who would see themselves as anti-racist, it has backfired as these ideas have celebrated the differences between people and therefore had a divisive effect. The clash of identities is actually the logical conclusion of identity appropriation. We should rather really consider what we have in common as human beings and consider universal values of freedom and equality.

Perhaps just as problematic is the notion that there are students in need of protection because they may not be able to cope with contentious issues or ideas. These campaigns are always promoted by people who want to act to protect others from harm by the creation of 'safe spaces'. The cultivation of vulnerability and victimhood are patronising, and actually based on the same premise as racist ideology - suggesting that some groups are superior alongside others that are weaker. The notion of 'safe spaces' should be rebutted in the strongest possible terms as an affront to free speech which helps create a more infantile environment.

The legacy of the British Empire should be debated and the racial aspect should be open for discussion in order to have a better understanding of history and the development of human civilisation. Students should be encouraged to flex some intellectual muscle and take on challenging ideas to become stronger in their own viewpoint and argue for the things that they believe in - as that is what University is for! The fact that University establishments are wavering in their defense of reason and universal values reveals an insecurity in defending Western universal values. Students should be learning to develop their understanding and outlook to be strong minded individuals, enabling them to go on and achieve great things and make their mark on the world.