

It's time for a monumental shift

As calls grow to topple statues, Indigenous Australians have already shown us the way forward.

Bruce Scates



The monument to James Cook in Sydney's Hyde Park belongs to what the historian Graeme Davison called "the heroic age" of colonial statuary. It was built at a time when white Australians claimed they occupied a land without history, while overlooking the oldest continuous civilisation in the world. It lionised the Yorkshire seaman as a discoverer, denying the fact that Indigenous people had explored, named and occupied their country millennia before.

Viewed from every angle the statue proclaims dominion: a hand raised triumphantly, one foot reaching forward, a telescope symbolising the white technology that opened "new" continents to the European gaze. And there is a subtext to this monument; one so obvious there was no need to state it in bronze or stone. In 1770, without the knowledge or consent of Aboriginal people, this junior naval officer claimed possession of all of Eastern Australia for the British crown. Cook thus set in train a tragic collision of cultures we still live with today.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has claimed Cook was an "enlightened person" and - by the standards of the day - he isn't wrong. James Cook was raised with the moral fortitude of Quakers: he embraced the Enlightenment ideals of science and reason over blind tradition and treated with compassion the men under his command. None would dispute

his bravery, his enterprise, or the skill that guided a tiny vessel across the oceans of the globe.

The Prime Minister invites us to see Cook still as a hero, cast in the same image as that statue over a century ago. But history should be wary of heroes.

What our country needs now is a courage of our own, a willingness to grapple with and move beyond our troubled past.

For over a century statues to Cook, Macquarie and others have reduced complex and often contradictory historical actors to simplistic, one-dimensional caricatures. Heroic statuary bleb the past of its complexity and rendered it lifeless in stone. By occupying civic space, tributes to white heroes (and there are many) serve to legitimise narratives of conquest and colonisation; they sanitise the violence that marked the forcible occupation of Aboriginal lands. Calls to topple such monuments vent the

anger of generations: they repudiate past wrongs and remind the Prime Minister that the values - and heroes - of past generations need not be our own.

What might be the way

forward? Indigenous Australians have shown us the way. The Constitutional Convention at Uluru called for a process of "truth telling and reconciliation".

Colonial monuments that have long stood unchallenged in the hearts of our communities might well be a focus for that dialogue and debate. This will remove those Great White Men from the pedestal they have long occupied - figuratively, if not literally. They were placed there as statements of power and privilege, but in a democratic and inclusive society, they should be (as the precedent set by the London City Council suggests) subject to review and critique. And there are other precedents we might

look to. The Explorer's Monument in Fremantle was raised in the first decade of the Commonwealth. Built to commemorate three white men killed by Aboriginal people, it enshrined another pioneer myth written deep in our history.

A series of plaques circling the monument claimed these explorers were attacked at night and "killed in their sleep" by "treacherous natives". The land where they died is portrayed as empty: a "terra incognita". Aboriginal people are described as savages, the whites as "intrepid pioneers". An equally imposing bust pays tribute to Maitland Brown, "leader of the government search and punitive expedition" who carried the explorers' remains to Fremantle. Brown's expedition ended in the massacre of about 20 Aboriginal people.

In 1994, the United Nations' Year of Indigenous Peoples, elders from Bidadanga set a new plaque at the monument's base. It outlined the history of provocation that led to the explorers' deaths, acknowledged the right of Indigenous people to defend their lands and solemnly commemorated "all those Aboriginal people who died during the invasion of their country".

It was a striking case of what scholars call "dialogical memorialisation", where one view of the past takes issue with another and history is seen not as some final statement, but a contingent and contested narrative. The dedication service ended as Aboriginal people scattered dust from the site of the massacre and white children laid wreaths decked in Aboriginal colours. It was one act of truth telling and reconciliation. It suggests monuments that once narrowed and distorted our view of the past can open hearts and minds.

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Heroic statuary bleb the past of its complexity.

Safe way to protest in social isolation

Rosalind Dixon, Richard Holden

NSW again faces a dilemma over the balance between racial justice and public health - and whether to allow a second planned Black Lives Matter protest to go ahead tomorrow. The NSW Police Commissioner is asking the courts to stop it; the Prime Minister has warned it could jeopardise our success in containing COVID-19.

Just yesterday, a Melbourne protester from last weekend's rallies was reported to have tested positive to COVID, and it is not clear that protesters have been effectively self-isolating since.

The public health threat is therefore clear: large protests, involving thousands of people in close contact, go against key protocols we have observed for several months surrounding social distancing. And they do so in ways that make contact-tracing and self-isolation especially challenging.

Yet the case for allowing the protest to go ahead is equally powerful: hundreds of thousands of people around the world have come out to protest against the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Their message is clear and persuasive: black Americans have faced a long history of economic and political injustice, and far too little in the way of response and redress.

Australian Black Lives Matter protesters are also making this argument. Indigenous Australians continue to be incarcerated at much higher rates, are more likely to die in police custody and have a shorter average life-expectancy than non-Indigenous Australians.

How, then, can we resolve this dilemma? How to balance two such compelling concerns? The solution, we suggest, lies in applying the same creativity we have shown in managing our daily lives during COVID to the challenges of protest. Birthdays, deaths and marriages have all been celebrated online, and via drive-by celebrations. How do we do that for a second set of protests?

One good place to start would be a voluntary eight-minute blackout - this Saturday at 8pm - to show all Sydneysiders believe black lives matter. Turning our lights out for this time - the 8 minutes and 46 seconds it took George Floyd to die under the knee of policeman Derek Chauvin - would show our support for the movement while maintaining strict social distancing.

We might use that time to reflect on the need to listen to our First Nations via a Voice to Parliament and a process of "truth telling" or Makarrata. As we sit in the dark together, we might reflect on lending our voices to a truly national road map for how we move forward together as a nation.

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THESEAT AGES

J.K. Rowling, let me spell it out for you

J.K. Rowling, the world's most well-known teller of tales of magic and wizardry, is once again using her not inconsiderable public platform to question whether transwomen are, indeed, women. I'm not a fan of the Harry Potter series. I lost faith in spells when my own body failed to magically transform from boy to girl despite endless nights of prayers and wishes. But my heart goes out to the many in the trans community who were fans. I, too, have known the pain you feel when someone you idolised dismisses and invalidates your very being.

Some consider Rowling's latest comments, and actor Daniel Radcliffe's intervention in support of transwomen, to be part of an ongoing "debate" about trans and gender diverse rights. I'm going to call it out for what it really is - a privileged assumption of entitlement on the part of Rowling and her ilk to "debate" my very existence and validity.

In between jumping through hoops to access healthcare, play sport, correct my identity documents and stay safe while using public toilets, I'm also expected to engage in a debate about whether I'm woman enough to meet an unreasonable standard of womanhood construed from

Dale Sheridan



physiology and life experience. This is the restrictive definition J.K. Rowling advocates.

My own challenges as a transgender woman aside, I really struggle to understand why those who are so quick and willing to judge others are so surprised at the reaction to their words. Why, they cry, we denied you, your existence and your worth in a civil and measured way. There's certainly no need to get angry or "cancel" anyone when we're being so damn polite and expressing our deeply held beliefs.

I honestly don't know how some folks have come to the conclusion that my desire for basic fundamental rights as a transgender woman is at odds with the fight for women's rights more broadly. We're all seeking respect, dignity and equality. It's not a fight over the last Tim Tam.

Alongside gender, there are many factors that shape human experience, such as place of birth, health, religion, disability, biology, race, sexuality and wealth. Does a woman living in poverty in a

developing country have the same experience of womanhood as a woman in Australia? Is the woman who can't or chooses not to have children less of a woman than those who have children? When did humanity, let alone womanhood, become so narrow?

I took the scenic route to womanhood. I first came out as transgender when I was 19 in 2001. A psychologist I saw told me I'd be unlovable, face a hard life and that I'd be an ugly woman if I transitioned. That forced 19-year-old me back into the closet for another 10 years to white-knuckle through the crippling impact of gender dysphoria before eventually reaching the junction of suicide or transition.

The 19-year-old me could have never imagined the immediacy with which I was welcomed into womanhood with open arms by my fellow sisters. The first such occasion was being included in casual conversations about menstruation. I felt a little awkward and sad because it's not an experience I will ever be privy to, but the significance of inclusion was profound.

However, the biggest shock came while lining up to use a public toilet one day when a woman asked me if I had a spare tampon. She seemed

slightly annoyed when I apologised that I couldn't help. I only wish I had the courage to say why.

I knew I'd well and truly made it through the pearly gates of womanhood the day my white middle-aged male mechanic called me "love" and mansplained my car engine to me. I couldn't decide whether I was more outraged at the misogyny or happy that my womanhood was so overwhelmingly affirmed. He probably overcharged me, too.

While Rowling and others continue the toxic "debate" about my womanhood, it couldn't be more at odds with my daily existence. I'm already a woman. It's not a matter that requires debate.

But we do need to improve the representation of the trans and gender diverse community in popular culture. We are often defined by the prejudice and discrimination we face, a dehumanising process which fuels ongoing "debate". Now, if only there was a series of books and movies about a young transgender person who thought they were normal only to find out they were, actually, a wizard.

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