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## Oxford University to start consultation process on controversial statue of Cecil Rhodes

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Ntokozo Qwabe pictured outside Oxford. Picture: Facebook.

By Victoria Crow

IT'S a thoroughly modern scandal for the world's oldest and most elite university — Oxford is under fire from a social media campaign to remove a historic statue, driven by a student there on a scholarship bearing his name. Despite Oriel College's decision to remove a plaque to Cecil Rhodes and consult on the offending monument, activist and student Ntokozo Qwabe has vowed to fight on for its removal.

Writing on Facebook, the 24-year-old slammed the media for “feeding the racist myth” that a mass gathering of people “can be compared to terrorist groups” and vowed to fight for the statue to be eradicated.

“We refuse to be condemned and silenced for daring to want to root out injustice. They may misquote us, mock us, go on scathing ad hominem campaigns — but we remain absolutely resolute in our message!” he said.

“Rhodes WILL fall, and the cause of decolonisation will continue gaining traction not only at Oxford but globally. Oh what a time to be alive!”



*The statue of British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes was removed from the University of Cape Town as a result of a month long protest by students citing the statue “great symbolic power” which glorified someone “who exploited black labour and stole land from indigenous people”. Picture: Charlie Shoemaker/Getty Images.*

## **WHAT’S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?**

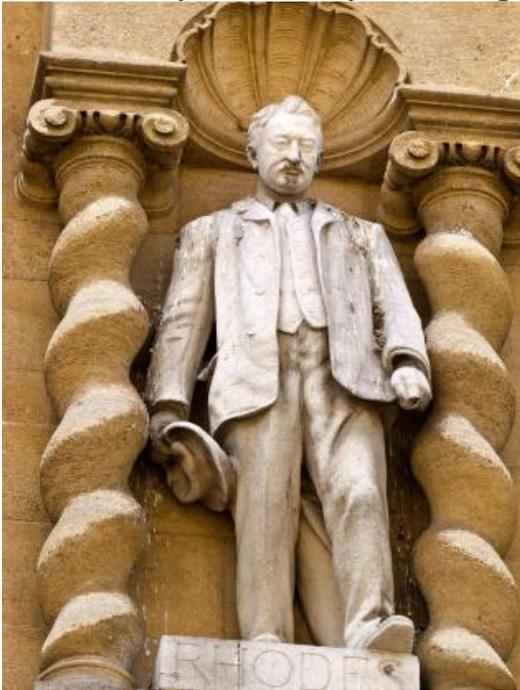
The furore comes in the wake of a high-profile campaign to have a plaque and statue dedicated to Cecil Rhodes, removed from outside Oxford University’s Oriel College.

The imperialist and diamond magnate, born in the UK in 1853, made a controversial name for himself in South Africa where he founded De Beers and went on to lead the Cape Colony from 1890.

Under his rule, the colonial leaders took control of large swathes of land from locals and northern and Southern Rhodesia, now Zambia and Zimbabwe, were named after him. Rhodes also restricted right of Africans to vote and backed a raid that led to the Second Boer War in which tens of thousands of people died.

Upon his death in 1902, he left two per cent of his fortune to his former university to fund a building and scholarship named after him. So far, more than 8000 people from around the world have been granted Rhodes Scholarships, including Tony Abbott and Bill Clinton.

However his legacy has come into sharp focus recently after students succeeded in removing a statue of him from the University of Cape Town earlier this year, as a symbol of perceived white superiority.



*Oxford's statue of Cecil Rhodes. Source: Alamy*



*The man who bequeathed the Rhodes scholarship. Source: News Corp Australia*

Rhodes scholar Ntokozo Qwabe has been the public face of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign in the UK, where a Change.org petition has gained more than 2500 signatures against the “open glorification of the racist and bloody project of British colonialism”.

“We believe that the colonialism, racism and patriarchy this statue is steeped in has no place in our university — which for many of us is also our home,” it states.

The high-profile campaign has seen Oriel College start the process to have the plaque removed, however it’s less sure about the “complex” statue.

A six-month consultation process will begin in February to determine what should be done. In the meantime, a note clarifying historical context will be added to the site.

The decision comes amid wider debate around the creation of “safe spaces” and freedom of speech at universities around the world. Oriel said it supports the right for students to feel comfortable where they study and live, however others have likened it to the obliteration of historical sites the Islamic State is carrying out in Iraq and Syria.

The role of Oxford in using Rhodes’ money and Mr Qwabe in criticising the man while accepting the scholarship has also been called into question. Others say historical cities are littered with statues of dubious provenance and monuments are designed to provoke thought rather than unreservedly pay tribute to those they depict.



*Students in South Africa pull at the statue of the man who once governed the area. Picture: Charlie Shoemaker/*

## **ABBOTT WEIGHS IN**

Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott made headlines recently when he said the university risks “damaging its standing” if the statue is destroyed.

The former Rhodes scholar graduated from Oxford in 1983 and told *The Independent* students should be “clear-eyed about Rhodes’ faults and failings but proud of his achievements.”

“The university should remember that its mission is not to reflect fashion but to seek truth and that means striving to understand before rushing to judge,” he said.

“Oxford would damage its standing as a great university if it were to substitute moral vanity for fair-minded inquiry. The university and its students should prefer improving today’s orthodoxies to imposing them on our forebears.”

Others say while Rhodes was controversial, tolerance and historical context are more important values to uphold.

“Rhodes wasn’t great but wiping out history is stupid, irresponsible,” wrote Alex Brakspear online.

Another Facebook user Roland Chandler said “intolerance will get your nowhere”.

“These people like Rhodes — that did what they did — are a reminder to all of us of what we should never allow to happen again.”

Mr Qwabe did not respond to news.com.au’s request for comment in time for publication.