theguardian

The University of Cape Town is right to remove its Cecil Rhodes statue

David Priestland

Memorials to fallen 'heroes' such as Rhodes have no place on public plinths, but rehoming them in monument parks ensures we remember lessons from the past

Students surround the statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes as it is removed from the campus at the University of Cape Town. Photograph: Schalk Van Zuydam/AP

Monday 13 April 2015

Last week the University of Cape Town bowed to student protests and removed a prominent memorial to arch British imperialist Cecil Rhodes. South African campaigners have targeted other statues too, vandalising one of Queen Victoria in Port Elizabeth. "Rhodes rage" has even spread to this country: students have been demonstrating outside Oriel College, Oxford, demanding that its limestone Rhodes, sitting in a niche overlooking the high street, be toppled.

ut such campaigns often divide opinion. Last year a poll of Bristolians revealed that 44% wanted to see the memorial to slave-trader Edward Colston mothballed, while 56% disagreed. Meanwhile in the Scottish highlands a huge statue of the Duke

of Sutherland, a key figure in the notorious 19th-century clearances, or forced resettlements of tenant farmers, has been repeatedly vandalised – a protest denounced by some locals as the work of “political fanatics”.

Bristol's controversial memorial to slave-trader Edward Colston. Photograph: Alamy

So what should happen to the statues of fallen “heroes” – once respected, now reviled? We’d be looking at a lot of empty plinths if every offender against modern morality were to be removed. And yet statues in public spaces have enormous symbolic importance, for they are erected to promote particular ideals and values. This is why many have welcomed the removal of dictators’ images in eastern Europe and the Middle East in recent years as signs of freedom, while the restoration of Stalinist slogans in the Moscow metro has been condemned as a sign of authoritarianism.

Clearly the current political context is crucial. Statues of Henry VIII – one of our more unpleasant and brutal rulers – are, like 16th-century politics itself, pretty uncontroversial, and it would be absurd to remove them. But in contemporary Cape Town, memorials to Rhodes are very hard to defend. Rhodes was not just personally unscrupulous and venal, making his enormous fortune by cheating and bullying Africans out of their land, but he was also a committed ideologist of British racial supremacy and an important progenitor of apartheid. Even contemporaries saw him as extreme in his imperialist views. Given that apartheid fell so recently and its

legacies survive in huge disparities of wealth, education and land distribution, what is truly surprising is that the monument has survived for so long.

The Cecil Rhodes memorial at Oriel College in Oxford. Photograph: The Independent/Rex Shutterstock

Parts of the past are not dead and symbols matter. We too need to confront our imperial and racist past more openly

The lesson for Britain is that parts of the past are not dead and symbols matter. And we too need to confront our imperial and racist past more openly and consistently, for the sake of both good international relations and social harmony at home. This government's decision to place a statue of Gandhi in close proximity to his arch-enemy Winston Churchill outside parliament last month was therefore a good one. It showed respect to British Asians and was also a shrewd move, given that the government wants trade deals with India.

This suggests there are ways of recognising the crimes of our imperial past short of the mass removal of statues and wholesale changing of street names. Liverpool has built an International Slavery Museum and some Bristol campaigners have called for plaques to be put on monuments to slavers, reminding viewers of how these granite heroes came by their wealth.

Moscow monument park. Photograph: Robert Harding/Rex Shutterstock

Another solution is to create theme parks for the currently detested, the embarrassing or the simply inappropriate. After the fall of the USSR, the Yeltsin government established a monument park, crammed with the Lenins and Stalins so swiftly dispatched from the squares and city centres of Russia. In India, Delhi's Coronation Park, once the Raj's ceremonial parade ground, has become the slightly surreal resting place for the marble monarchs, viceroys and governors of yesteryear; it is now quite a successful tourist attraction. History is therefore respected, but in a way that provokes critical reflection; this avoids pretending the memorials never existed, or leaving them in place, as if the wounds of the past don't matter.

Statues of King George V and other imperial notables and viceroys at the Coronation Park near Delhi, India.

So here is a proposal for a possible Labour-SNP coalition – a policy that both parties could agree on easily: create a park of fallen “heroes”, perhaps near the English-Scottish border, or maybe to liven up London’s Olympic Park. Scotland could exile its cruel aristocrats there, while English cities would find a home for their more embarrassing local sons; the Robert Clive (“of India”), currently swaggering outside the Foreign Office, might join them. And perhaps Oriel College could consider sending its Cecil Rhodes there too, replacing him with somebody more appropriate for a 21st-century international university.