

# The New Criterion

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## Rhodes not taken

*On the recent controversy over the Rhodes Scholarship.*

**O**f all the world's beneficent politically incorrect figures, perhaps none is more politically incorrect than Cecil Rhodes, the short-lived diamond magnate and apostle of British Imperialism who gave his name to a once-functioning country in South Africa and what is perhaps the world's most famous international scholarship. Rhodes, who died at forty-eight in 1902, ranks even higher on the Global Index of Political Incorrectitude than Rudyard Kipling, the great scribe of empire, partly because his stupendous wealth helped lift untold thousands out of savage misery—a founding dictum of political correctness is that “No Good Deed Shall Go Unpunished”—and partly because his confidence in the mission of British Imperialism had an unacceptable racial component. In his will, Rhodes affirmed his conviction that Anglo-Saxons were “the first race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race.” Try that out on members of the “Black Lives Matter” movement at your local college campus.

**W**e've always regarded the PC attack on British Imperialism—and by extension, on Cecil Rhodes—as slightly preposterous. The philosopher George Santayana got it exactly right, we think, when, reflecting on British exploits around the world, he noted that “Never since the heroic days of Greece has the world had such a sweet, just, boyish master. It will be a black day for the human race when scientific blackguards, conspirators, churls, and fanatics manage to supplant him.” The behavior of Sir Charles Napier in India provides a good example of what Santayana had in mind. Napier was approached one day by some native Hindus who were unhappy about the British proscription of *suttee*, the custom of burning widows alive on the funeral pyre of their husbands. This little ceremony, they explained, was woven deep into their culture. It had the sanction of longstanding custom. Napier responded (we paraphrase), “OK, burning widows is your custom. Splendid. Prepare the sacrificial pyre. But my nation has also a custom. When men burn women alive we hang them, and confiscate all their property. My carpenters shall therefore erect gibbets on which to hang all concerned when the widow is consumed. You follow your custom, and we shall follow ours.” Thus was the barbaric practice of *suttee* all but eradicated.

When the subject of the moral character of British imperialism comes up, we generally think of this edifying historical episode. We also recall a famous sketch from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. Angry political activists are meeting to plot against the Romans. They curse their oppressors for pillaging their property for generations. "And what have they ever given us in return?" asks the character played by John Cleese. Harumphs all around until a timid voice from the throng ventures "The aqueduct?" "Well, OK," Cleese allows. But besides the aqueducts? "Sanitation," responds another voice. "And the roads," pipes up another. "Irrigation." "Medicine." "Education." "And the wine." "And the public baths." "And it's safe to walk in the streets at night." "Alright," cries a disgruntled John Cleese, "but apart from sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

We thought of this cheery skit recently when the figure of Cecil Rhodes once again entered the news. A young South African man called Ntokozo Qwabe, who reminds us a bit of Evelyn Waugh's Emperor Seth from *Black Mischief*, is attending Oxford University courtesy of a scholarship funded by Rhodes. The scholarship covers all Qwabe's university fees and round-trip airfare from Africa, and allows him a personal stipend of £13,658. But that hasn't stopped him from leading a campaign against the legacy of Rhodes. Qwabe is co-founder of a group called "Rhodes Must Fall," whose signature demand is the removal of a statue of the great philanthropist from a building at Oriel College. "I'm no beneficiary of Rhodes," Qwabe insisted. "I'm a beneficiary of the resources and labour of my people which Rhodes pillaged and slaved. . . . All that he looted must absolutely be returned immediately."

Qwabe exudes what we might call an equal-opportunity animus. According to him, Cecil Rhodes was a "racist, genocidal maniac." In the aftermath of the slaughter in Paris last year—an incident of Islamic terrorism that left some 130 dead—Qwabe took to Facebook to announce "I do NOT stand with France. Not while it continues to terrorise and bomb Afrika [sic] & the Middle East for its imperial interests. We will not end terrorism by choosing the terrorist our subjective sensibilities and popular propaganda normalise."

Apparently innocent of Godwin's law, a corollary of which states that spurious comparisons to Hitler or the Nazis entail that one automatically loses the argument, Qwabe can barely turn around without mentioning Nazis. Not only was Cecil Rhodes "as bad as Hitler," but according to him the Tricolore is a "violent symbol" that should be removed from universities: "I would agree with that in the same way that the presence of a Nazi flag would have to be fought against."

At least some of the responses to Qwabe's histrionic performance have been salutary. One upstanding member of the public suggested to him: "Give back your scholarship and remove the chip off your shoulder." Another observed: "Your hypocrisy is breathtaking. . . . If you object so much to this nation's lack of political correctness, the answer is in your hands. I wasn't lucky enough to go to university and I take your narrow-minded attitude as a slap in the face to the freedoms we fought world wars to keep." True, all true. But that didn't stop students at the Oxford

Union from voting 245 to 212 to remove the statue of Rhodes as part of a wider movement of “decolonization.” Arguing against the motion, Professor Nigel Biggar noted that if the statue of Rhodes were removed, then statues of Winston Churchill would be next on the list of proscribed figures. “If Rhodes must fall,” he said,

so must Churchill, whose views on empire and race were similar. And so probably must Abraham Lincoln. While Lincoln liberated African-American slaves, he doubted they could be integrated into white society and favoured their separate development—their apartheid—in an African colony. If we insist on our heroes being pure, then we aren’t going to have any. Last year the shine on Mahatma Gandhi’s halo came off, when we learned of his view that Indians were culturally superior to black Africans. Should this blot out all his remarkable achievements? I think not.

Ridiculous? Absurd? There are already calls to remove statues of Thomas Jefferson on several college campuses in the United States: really, Churchill and Lincoln cannot be far behind.

Writing in *The Spectator*, Douglas Murray castigated Qwabe, “the insincere little demagogue,” noting that the “claim that modern-day Oxford University is ‘racist’ is so obviously untrue that it can only have been claimed by people pressing for some blackmail advantage or higher cash offer.” Indeed. In the United States, all it takes is a few “students of color” to whine about “racism” in order to prompt nervous administrators to start disgorging epic amounts of cash to soothe the made-up grievances of coddled minorities. Yale’s President Peter Salovey, for example, promised \$50 million for new programs, “cultural centers,” and professors to cater to skirling “students of color” who complained that the university had provided an insufficiently “safe space.”

Brown University saw Yale’s \$50 million and raised it another \$50 million, pledging to disburse more than \$100 million to create what Christina Paxson, Brown’s president, called “a just and inclusive campus.” The response? Students occupied the president’s office, claiming that the \$100 million “diversity plan” doesn’t go far enough. “The Diversity Action and Inclusion Plan,” the protestors wrote, “is illegitimate and insufficient. . . . [T]he administration has not acknowledged our countless and persistent demands to this institution. . . . We are tired of open dialogues and forums, and we will not be tokenized and exploited in these conversations any further,” etc., etc.

So far, the response in the United Kingdom has been more robust. Chris Patten, the Chancellor of the University of Oxford, responded to the demand that the statue of Rhodes be removed by observing that “Education is not indoctrination. Our history is not a blank page on which we can write our own version of what it should have been according to our contemporary views and prejudices.” Patten went on to suggest that those who refuse to embrace freedom of thought and who want to censor both past and present should “think about being educated elsewhere” — which, as Douglas Murray wryly pointed out, “is Oxonian for something often said more curtly.” In a letter to *The Telegraph*, a group of British academics seconded the Chancellor’s robust common sense. “An open and democratic society,” they wrote, “requires people to have the courage to argue against ideas they disagree with or even find offensive. At the moment there is a real risk

that students are not given opportunities to engage in such debate. A generation of students is being denied the opportunity to test their opinions against the views of those they don't agree with."

**A**s we have had frequent occasion to note in these pages, this bit of homely wisdom—a liberal chestnut in the old and highest sense of "liberal"—is under siege at Western universities. The public's response to these spectacles of intolerance is partly one of nervous bemusement, partly impatient contempt. Seldom, we suspect, is the depth and virulence of the intolerance really taken on board. The economist Larry Summers, a former president of Harvard University who was drummed out of that position by a coven of angry feminist and black students and faculty, recently noted the growing presence of "a kind of creeping totalitarianism in terms of what kind of ideas are acceptable and are debatable on college campuses. And I think that's hugely unfortunate. I think the answer to bad speech is different speech. The answer to bad speech is not shutting down speech."

**R**eflecting on Summers's observations, the commentator Glenn Reynolds usefully noted that the people shutting down free speech on campus are not "good people overcome with well-meaning zeal. They're awful people, who are engaging in bullying and totalitarianism. They should," Reynolds advises, "be treated accordingly. Note also that much of this is encouraged/enabled by administrators in 'student life' bureaucracies, and remember that those people don't have tenure." Good advice.

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