



RHODES MUST FALL in Oxford

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RMF Responds to Tony Abbott Remarks 26/12/2015

Key Points:

1. Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) rejects Abbott's assertion that the preservation of an honouring monument amounts to "truth seeking" – arguing that this whitewashed glorification stands in the way of understanding the full history of Rhodes' crimes
2. RMFO rejects Abbott's unsubstantiated claim that racism is a thing of the past, citing surveys by Oxford University's Campaign for Racial Awareness and Equality (CRAE), which demonstrate that it is still embedded specifically in the Oxford University experience. [This is a reality that even the college is willing to admit to.](#)
3. RMFO points to Abbott's own record of racially insensitive rhetoric and policies as problematizing his intervention in discussions of historic, structural racism.
4. RMFO asserts that Abbott's invocation of the Rhodes Scholarships as a justification for the continued whitewashing of Rhodes' violent, destructive legacy is unethical and unacceptable. RMFO reminds critics that these scholarships are not the result of philanthropic kindness – or "genius" – but built on stolen wealth with the specific aim of advancing the colonial project.

Mr Abbott reminded us, somewhat patronisingly, that the university should strive to 'seek truth' and 'understand before rushing to judge'. It seems ironic, therefore, that he failed to apply this principle before making [his statements about our movement](#). Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford (RMFO) are in fact the ones striving to seek truth, and assert historical integrity in the face of sentimental attachments to violent figures of the past; sentimental attachments that were rife in Abbott's comments. The statue is a celebration of Rhodes as a benefactor and a philanthropist, which we see as a distortion of the truth that Rhodes' victims still face to this day. Rhodes was a murderous colonialist who laid the frameworks for Apartheid, and in advocating for the preservation of his statue, Mr Abbott also advocates for the obscuring of undeniable historical truth.

Abbott's uninformed claim that it is "hardly virtuous to be against racism today" is a prime example of his outright dismissal of the truth, and his lack of research; his claim, implies that race and racism are widely discussed and even more widely resisted. You only have to look at Oxford Student Union's Campaign for Racial Awareness and Equality (CRAE) survey 'Race, Ethnicity and the Student Experience' to see that, especially within Oxford, this is not the case; nearly 60% of BME respondents said they had been made to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable on the basis of their race or ethnicity. If it is in fact *truth* that Mr Abbott strives to seek, then we implore him to make use of the various resources from Oxford and further afield that make it patently clear that racism is not dead in Oxford or anywhere else. The fact is that the university and its component colleges are reluctant to enact change and therefore reluctant to take racism seriously. They employ bureaucratic delay tactics to avoid both responsibility and resolution for their problems, meaning that standing against such a predominantly white institution when it comes race is, in fact, a significant hurdle. The media frenzy that has been whipped up in response to our campaign – which asks for the slightest concession that a monument to a white supremacist be removed – is a perfect testament to the enduring racism that plagues our society. Indeed, it takes just a cursory look at the language used on social media and even by some journalists in their responses to the RMFO campaign to see that racism is in no way a thing of the past.



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Perhaps an endeavour to convince Abbott of the existence of racism is entirely futile, given the bigoted nature of his own policy history. Australia itself is a country founded upon the displacement of indigenous peoples and colonialism; Abbott's whitewashing of this – to the extent where he called the enduring poverty faced by indigenous people today as a “lifestyle choice” – demonstrates that he is not invested in the process of engaging earnestly with the past and questioning colonialism. This is not to mention his [rhetoric](#) and [immigration policies](#), which were widely denounced as racist during his premiership of Australia. One who cannot admit to the gross racism they have themselves participated in is quite unlikely to condemn anybody else of similar disgraceful behaviour.

His use of the Rhodes scholarships to provide some kind of moral counterbalance to Rhodes' actions (actions which he himself even he admits are unjustifiable) demonstrates a misconception that is all too common amongst the responses to our campaign. It goes without saying that the systematic exploitation of an entire nation of people cannot be forgiven because he left some wealth to a college in Oriel (wealth that was left to *continue* to the very same system of exploitation). However, let us provide some clarity: The Rhodes Scholarships were not an act of philanthropic kindness, and they are certainly not the ‘genius’ Abbott celebrates them as. They were established with the specific aim of advancing the colonial project.

Furthermore, the scholarships were built on stolen money, accumulated through the exploitative, illegal colonial system. Contrary to false claims by a number of journalists – we do not support the total removal of the scholarship. However, given that we do not honour Rhodes' will for the scholarships to be used exclusively for future colonists, there is no reason why we must continue to honour Rhodes' naming of the scholarship. Furthermore, we are committed to interrogating whose interests the scholarship advances, and at whose expense this advancement has historically come. It is ludicrous to suggest that occasional BME students receiving scraps of money Rhodes historically stole from their ancestors is something for which they should be “grateful”. It is also deeply inappropriate for Abbott, whose personal history is not entangled with Rhodes' violent legacy, to continue to celebrate a scholarship that has such a complex history and existence.

Mr Abbott tells us to be ‘proud’ of Rhodes' achievements, and warns against letting our view of his failings cloud this. With this, he reveals his overall misunderstanding of our view of Rhodes and the statue. The problem is not that we are trying to white wash history; in fact, we are the ones operating with nuance. The problem is that his so-called ‘achievements’ – namely the Rhodes Scholarships – were an intrinsic component of his crimes; they were funded by colonial money and with aims to make more. We refuse to see this as an achievement, we refuse to be ‘proud’ of the man who directly caused the suffering and death of thousands, and we refuse to distort history as well as the truth of our colonial present through allowing his statue to remain.