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UK: Ignore the Cries of ‘Vandalism’ - Tearing Down the Statue Was Pure Justice

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It’s rare that a single image expresses an ideal as complex as ‘justice’. That isn’t for want of trying, of course. Lady Justice, blindfolded and holding the scales of consequence aloft, is a mainstay in popular metaphor, her figure adorning law courts around the world. In London she stands atop the Old Bailey, the central criminal court of England and Wales. Perhaps tellingly, her eyes here are wide open, a sword of retribution in her hand.

Yet justice was what I saw in an image of a young black man kneeling on the neck of Edward Colston’s fallen statue. He was wearing a Black Lives Matter t-shirt, while another person beside him had the words ‘Trump is a Wasteman’ emblazoned across his chest. For all the frothing from conservative radio hosts, the home secretary and the Daily Mail, this is the future of the British electorate.

Historic scenes in Bristol as protesters kneel on the neck of the toppled statue of Edward Colston for eight minutes. [#blacklivesmatter pic.twitter.com/MrNCoKiEd1](#)

— Martin Booth (@beardedjournor) [June 7, 2020](#)

But the crowd wasn’t satisfied with simply dismounting Colston – his lightweight figure reminiscent of those cheap, increasingly dethroned confederate statues across America’s south. No, they proceeded to roll him towards the city’s docks and dump him in the very passage of water where the Royal Africa Company’s slave ships set sail for Africa and Britain’s West Indian colonies in Colston’s day.

Despite the soporific cries of vandalism and criminality from both major parties, this was a form of justice more fitting than the humdrum circulation of paperwork could ever hope to deliver. That has its place too, of course: for all the perennial attacks on bureaucracy, it remains the basis of democracy and individual rights. But so too are acts of spontaneous, collective solidarity. On Sunday this was precisely what happened.

A 21st century democracy should not be elevating slave traders. Rather than relaying history, imparting knowledge about our past, the very point of the Colston statue was to obscure it – offering ideological fantasy in place of the truth. This man grew rich, in part, because he sold human beings like pieces of meat. That he was a lauded philanthropist says more about the endeavour of philanthropy – often built upon rampant inequality and exploitation – than the content of his character.

Then there is the claim that slavery was itself contested at the time, and that we shouldn’t judge those such as Colston by contemporary standards. Does anyone actually think slavery was

‘contested’ by those subject to its torments? Was it a debate for the tens of thousands who died at sea while being trafficked from old worlds to new? Was it a matter of nuance for the shackled women and men who – on arriving in the Americas – were known to have their mouths covered so as to not attempt suicide by asphyxiating themselves with dirt? Of course it wasn’t. People knew slavery was evil – it simply made them sufficiently rich to pretend otherwise.

The idea that we inhabit an altogether different world to Colston’s is seductive, but wrong. Slavery may have long been abolished, but De Beers mines in South Africa still make extraordinary profits in a country marked by poverty and violence, just as they did in the era of British coloniser Cecil Rhodes. Brazil, whose president [laments how the murder of its indigenous population was not as ‘efficient’](#) as in the United States, remains essentially a racial hierarchy. More people are in US prisons, on parole and on probation than were forced to work in America’s south before the Emancipation Proclamation. We have come a long way, of course, but nowhere near as far as some might have you believe.

It is in this context that Britain is becoming a very different country to that of even the late 20th century. Often this shift is viewed solely through the prism of a fragmenting union, as Cardiff, Belfast and Edinburgh exert a greater political pull of their own. But beyond issues of devolution or independence is another transformation that is often ignored. This is how the identity of many modern Britons is at odds with an archaic national story. One which venerates slave traders, genocide and oppression against the ancestors of people who teach our children, keep us healthy and who are our neighbours and friends. You may indeed be one of them.

By the end of next year, Birmingham – Britain’s second largest city – will gain ‘minority-majority’ status, meaning it is sufficiently multi-racial that no single group constitutes a majority. This already applies to London and Leicester, as well as smaller towns and cities like Slough and Luton. [Almost 34% of children in Britain’s primary schools are already from BAME backgrounds](#), and the reality is that over the coming decades our country will not only become older as a result of demographic ageing, but less white too. These future citizens are entirely justified in despising conspicuous symbols of the slave trade and empire, precisely because many features of modern life – from policing to relations between the Global North and South – are their visible, ongoing legacy.

For Britain, perhaps even more than the US, this poses a major challenge. While the latter was founded on the original sins of white settlement, genocide and slavery, it appears more capable of acknowledging its past than the former. As the diplomat Dean Acheson observed in 1962: “Britain has lost an empire but not yet found a role”. This applies as much to its sense of domestic selfhood as its position in global affairs. For the electorate of tomorrow – who are increasingly concerned with issues of social, racial and environmental justice – this raises important questions. What kind of country does Britain want to be? What, and who, does it want to be proud of? What brings us together?

A clue, I suspect, is what we saw in Bristol last Sunday. A day of justice and joy. A glimpse, just perhaps, of our future.

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