

Second Thoughts on Racism

by Michael Curtis



The story sounds as if it were apocryphal, but it is authentic. In 1986 Nelson Mandela was visited in the Pollsmoor prison by the former Australian prime minister, Malcolm Fraser. Mandela's first question to his visitor was, "Tell me, is Don Bradman still alive?" After Mandela was released from prison in 1990, Fraser presented Mandela with an autographed cricket bat reading, "To Nelson Mandela in recognition of a great unfinished innings, Don Bradman."

Bradman was a great cricket batsman, sharing with W.G. Grace the label of the greatest of all time, whose Test batting average was 99.94 and who captained the Australian team for many years. Interestingly Bradman also linked cricket and politics. As chair of the Australian Cricket Board in 1971-72 he withdrew the invitation the invitation to the South African national cricket team to tour Australia, declaring that Australia would not play South Africa until they chose a team on a non-racial basis.

The link between cricket and politics has returned in June 2021 with the decision by the England and Wales Cricket Board, ECB, to suspend a cricketer, Ollie Robinson, now 27, from international cricket while it is conducting an investigation into tweets he made in 2012 and 2013. Robinson had played on June 7, 2021 in his debut for the English team in a Test match against New Zealand, and did well. He is a medium-fast bowler (akin to pitcher) and took seven wickets and as a batsman scored 42 runs. But the tweets he made as a teenager were rediscovered and widely distributed. He has been dropped for the second Test match on June 10.

Robinson's tweets, racist and sexist were seen as offensive and wrong and he immediately apologized for them, but insisted he is not a racist or sexist. He said his actions were thoughtless and irresponsible, he deeply regretted them, said they were inexcusable, and unreservedly apologized. He had worked hard, he said, in the years since the tweets to mature and turn his life around. If you cried a little when first you learned the truth, blame it on my youth.

The decision of the ECB is debatable. The obnoxious tweets are a decade old and were written by a young man, 18-19, and the question arises, in view of the time that has passed since their publication and recognizing his successful career as a cricketer, whether he should be penalized. Robinson was a poorly educated teenager who left school early. Should allowances be made for foolish youth?

On the other hand, according to British law the legal age of responsibility for actions is 18. British authorities are divided. The captain of the national English cricket team, Joe Root, approving the suspension in contemporary language, said "we want to make the game as inclusive and diverse as we possibly can." The opposition Labour Party has also supported the suspension, arguing that the ECB was right to take the action it thought necessary and appropriate to tackle racism and other forms of discrimination in their sport.

However, the British government Culture Secretary, Oliver Dowden and Prime Minister Boris Johnson have argued that the ECB has “gone too far and should think again.” This raises two concerns: one that the ECB decision was hasty and that Robinson’s stupidity in his youth should not define him permanently as irredeemably racist; the other is whether political leaders should interfere or exert undue influence on private decisions.

Though the issue has not happened, at any rate not up to this point, in British cricket games, a more general problem has arisen in the UK as in the U.S. in other sports over players in teams “taking the knee” in a gesture of opposing racism.

There has been a mixed reaction to this gesture which links politics and football, and was started by American football quarterback Colin Kaepernick in August 2016 when he sat on the bench during the playing of the U.S. national anthem at a game. The symbolic gesture has become a familiar sight, supposed to highlight racial injustice and show solidarity with the BLM movement.

Those approving the gesture see it as a token of advocacy of racial equality. However, some football fans have responded to the gesture with boos and jeers, regarding it as meaningless tokenism, and irrelevant political baggage, a communication of dissatisfaction with present society and part of the agenda of identity politics.

Far from the football field is manifestation in academia of various forms of cancel culture in the quest to combat “systemic racism.” This enterprise underlies the new actions of the Classics Department at Princeton University. They mean that students majoring in classics will now not be required to learn Greek or Latin, or have proficiency in those languages.

It will end the rule that students majoring in classics should have at least some familiarity with the two languages. The stated intention is to create a “more inclusive and equitable program” in the Classics Department. The

accompanying explanation is curious and dubious. The department spokesperson has said that having people who have not studied classics in high school and might be unfamiliar with Greek and Latin "will make a more vibrant intellectual community."

One wonders whether this enhanced community will solve the dilemmas of whether Homer was really blind, or whether the Trojan War actually took place, and if so where and when. The department website states that it wants to create opportunities for the advancement of those from "historically underrepresented backgrounds within the discipline."

This departmental action result from the message on September 2, 2020 of Christopher L. Eisgruber that the University was developing plans to "combat systemic racism at Princeton and beyond." The desired change is urgent "after the events around race that occurred last summer." We are, he said, seeing widespread and urgent desire to take action to achieve a more just society. Eisgruber went further: racist assumptions from the past remain embodied in the structures of the University itself.

Princeton University has already settled with Woodrow Wilson, president of the U.S, and of the University, whose name has been removed from its building of the School of Public and International Affairs for his racist background as a supporter of segregation, one who spoke approvingly of the KKK, and banned black students when he was University president. Eisgruber and the Princeton Board of Trustees agreed that Wilson's racist thinking and policies made it inappropriate for him to be a namesake for a school or college that must stand firmly against racism in all its forms.

Now it is considering the problem that the classics department is housed in a building named after Moses Taylor Pyne, a university benefactor and general philanthropist, one whose family wealth partly came from enslaved laborers on large

Cuban sugar plantations. Interestingly, one of those who benefited from this philanthropist is Justice Sonia Sotomayor of the U.S. Supreme Court who gained the 1976 Pyne Prize, the highest honor given to Princeton undergraduates.

No doubt the classics students are disturbed by the statue, close to their class room, of John Witherspoon, 6th president of Princeton, whose name is commemorated throughout the town of Princeton, but who was a slave owner and opponent of abolition. Their consternation may be reduced after learning that Witherspoon was also one who advocated principles of liberty and personally tutored Africans and African Americans.

Some second thoughts on all this are in order. One is being illustrated by the city museum in Bristol, England. Last year, the statue of Edward Colston, a 17th century slave trader, was vandalized and thrown into the harbor by BLM protestors. It has now gone on view, fallen and painted, accompanied by a timeline that mentions its toppling in June 2020. It can tell the story of Britain's relationship and role in the Atlantic slave trade. But, even more important, viewers in the museum have the opportunity to make their own judgements about the statue, whether the toppling of Colston was a celebration of criminal violence and mob rule, and about whether peaceful discussion of political differences can bring about collective change.