

HISTORY IS NOT STATIC, IT'S A JOURNEY

DEBATE ABOUT THE FUTURE TREATMENT OF HOBART'S CROWTHER STATUE IS A SMALL PART OF THE HISTORIC SHIFT IN THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION ON TRUTH TELLING AND RECONCILIATION, WRITES ANNA REYNOLDS

IT has been heartening to see the recent national discussion about a Voice to Parliament and a pathway to truth telling and treaty. Our local debate about the future treatment of the William Crowther statue in Hobart's Franklin Square is just one small part of the historic shift in the national conversation.

These are complex and sometimes painful processes, but they are also absolutely necessary.

In January 2020, Hobart City Council launched our Aboriginal Commitment and Action Plan. It included a pledge to explore options for dealing with the Crowther statue which Tasmanian Aboriginal people have been calling for the removal of, for many years. Its presence in our premier civic square is a constant, distressing reminder of a confronting chapter in our state's history.

Crowther was a 19th century naturalist and surgeon who served for a short term as Tasmanian premier. He is known for mutilating the remains of Aboriginal man William Lanne – also known as King Billy – in the 1860s. After Lanne's death, Crowther removed his skull and sent it to the Royal College of Surgeons in London where it remained for many years.

There are people who say that Crowther's violent actions are only shocking when viewed through a contemporary lens; that his behaviour reflected the social and scientific norms of the time.

While it's true that Crowther was only one of several 19th century figures who were active in the now discredited field of 'racial science' – dividing people into races and ranking them based on their physical similarities and differences – it's also indisputable that even in 1869, his treatment of William Lanne was considered wholly unacceptable. It resulted in his suspension from his position as honorary medical officer at Hobart General Hospital and led to the passing of Tasmania's first Anatomy Act to provide better protections for dead bodies.

In recognition of the need to explore the Aboriginal community's request with the broader Hobart community, council ran an in-depth public engagement project to raise awareness of the Crowther story and provide a platform for discussion.

Throughout 2021, you may have seen one of the four low-cost public art projects that council commissioned to be installed on or adjacent to the Crowther statue. These pop-up artworks generated discussion and invited debate about what might be appropriate to do with the statue in the longer term.

A variety of voices were heard during the year-long process via survey responses, media coverage, public conversations, stakeholder meetings and formal submissions to council. Interested members of the public were able to have their say, as were Aboriginal and heritage organisations. The majority of participants were supportive of either partial or full removal of the statue from the site.

At last week's Community Culture and Events committee meeting, councillors heard deputations from a range of individuals and organisations. Many of them provided articulate and thoughtful responses to some of the misconceptions around removing the statue: that it is 'erasing history' or that it's an example of 'cancel culture'.

The Royal Society of Tasmania, whose very mission is to advance knowledge, noted that the absence of the statue is as

likely to be provocative of critical thought as much as its presence, and reiterated their position that removing the statue does not erase the historic record of Crowther's actions or his life. They support removal.

A Cultural Heritage consultant's assessment of the implications of removal notes that: "The removal of the Crowther monument would protect the values important to the community's sense of place by ensuring inclusivity, avoiding marginalisation and facilitating truth telling."

And UTAS Professor of History Greg Lehman made the point that council has a unique opportunity to address a challenging situation in a positive way, consistent with the desire for truth telling and reconciliation projects like this happening around the world.

On August 15, a full meeting of council will consider a recommendation for the statue to be conserved or potentially redisplayed in another location – such as TMAG. A new public artwork would be commissioned for Franklin Square to tell a more balanced story about this era when the decimated Aboriginal population were viewed by people like Crowther as specimens for experiments to test theories of racial order.

History is not something static. It is a journey. Cities and the communities that inhabit them change over time, as do public priorities and values. One way of recognising that is to make space for new public artworks that provide a more contemporary reflection of the discussions of our time.

We made a commitment in the Action Plan to work with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community: to respect their views and to be willing to take a stance, even when that feels hard.

I hope this project can be one practical step towards reconciliation in our city.

Anna Reynolds is Lord Mayor of Hobart.