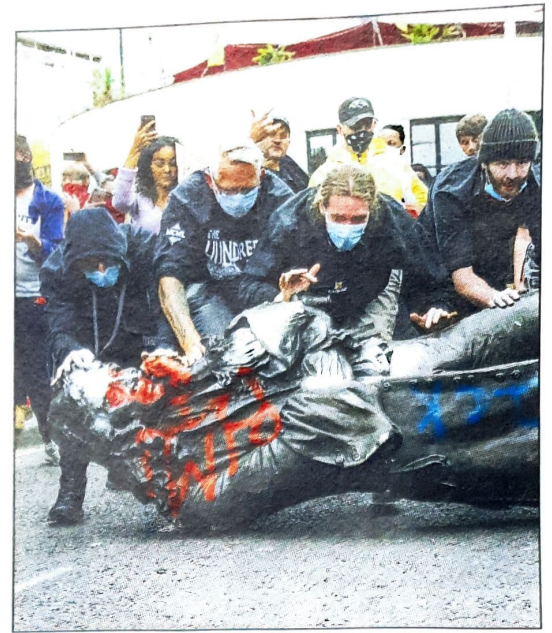


Controversy of the week

The statue wars

The boarding up of Winston Churchill's statue in Parliament Square last Friday, to protect it from protesters, says "much about the state of Britain today", said The Daily Telegraph. "The eradication of a nation's historical artefacts usually follows revolution or war." But now we are being encouraged "to erase parts of our past" in response to the death of George Floyd. Ever since the statue of Edward Colston, a Bristol merchant, was thrown in the harbour because of his links to the slave trade, the hunt has been on for others to topple. They range from obvious targets like Cecil Rhodes to the not-so-obvious – Gladstone and Peel, because their families were involved in the slave trade – to the baffling, like Dickens. As for Churchill, whose statue was daubed with the word "racist", well – if people think he was racist, they "should hear about the man he beat". This "is an attempt to impose a single, organised, hostile narrative on this country", said Charles Moore in the same paper. The tactics of the mob are being used "literally to efface our rich national story" – encompassing not just slavery, but abolitionism and democracy too – and to "retell it as one of racial oppression".



Colston en route to the harbour

When I moved to Bristol in the 1990s, I learnt that there was a statue to a slave trader in the city centre, said David Olusoga in The Guardian. I found out that while he was a major figure at the Royal African Company, it shipped some 84,000 Africans to lives of misery in the Americas. Some 19,000 perished en route and were referred to as "wastage". Seeing Colston on his pedestal every day "made me feel that this was a city I would struggle to ever call home". Petitions to remove the statue were blocked for years, said James Bloodworth on UnHerd. Even an explanatory plaque was stymied by the Merchant Venturers – the group to which Colston belonged – which tried to water down the wording. Many in the UK find it easier "to talk about the lawless mobs tearing down statues than the crimes these monuments commemorate", said Nesrine Malik in The Guardian. But protests like these happen because polite petitions to acknowledge black suffering "go unheard".

True, said Janice Turner in The Times, and it's clear that many younger Britons, white and black, want to see many statues removed. But "we still need to talk" about it. We can't judge the past by modern standards, and we can't have a culture war descend into a street battle, with left-wingers attacking statues, and right-wingers defending them. We also need to keep the issue in proportion, said Daniel Finkelstein in the same paper. For instance, no serious body of opinion, in Black Lives Matter or elsewhere, is calling for Churchill's statue to come down. A tiny handful of extremists may want that, but we don't need to debate their views seriously. This "unsettling moment" in our history is frenzied enough without getting involved in "disputes with nobody about nothing".