

The Captain Cook statue is a warm-up for a populist election campaign

Scott Morrison's blathering when announcing the \$3m monument shows how little he understands about Aboriginal culture

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'On Sunday, the prime minister joined his treasurer in a well-publicised excursion around the Port Botany site where on 29 April 1770, Cook's first landing party forced their way onto the shores of the modern-day suburb of Kurnell.' Photograph: Daniel Munoz/EPA

Earlier this week a beleaguered prime minister and his federal treasurer provided us with an illuminating glimpse of the kind of populist campaign they intend to orchestrate between now and election day. Forget meddling in state affairs along heavily racialised lines of law and order. Hysterical fear-mongering over ethnic gangs was merely an amuse-bouche. Now mains is under the lamps, waiting to be carved: its meat most powerful at the heart.

In a week where Australia's history was flared intensely again, last Saturday, on the eve of the anniversary of Lieutenant James Cook's first trespass on

First Nations lands, treasurer Scott Morrison foregrounded his impending 2018 budget by announcing a \$50m injection into his own electorate.

Wading headlong into the recent conflagrations over Australia's cultural identity, the treasurer declared the lucre will finance the memorialisation of an agent of the British Crown, who in 1770 clambered up a hillock on an island off the northern tip of New Holland to claim possession of an already occupied continent.

On Sunday, the prime minister joined his treasurer in a well-publicised excursion around the Port Botany site where on 29 April 1770, Cook's first landing party forced their way onto the shores of the modern-day suburb of Kurnell.

"It was a momentous occasion in our history," Malcolm Turnbull pontificated during the visit. "And this is a momentous place, one we need to celebrate, understand, interpret and reflect on. One that has to be deeply understood and reflected and interpreted with wisdom and with empathy."

Accompanying Turnbull and Morrison were representatives of the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council (LPALC). In a media statement issued on Friday 27 April, LPALC chairperson Noeleen Timbery said that the council was "excited" that the state and federal governments were "investing substantial infrastructure to the area" and "welcomes the opportunity to continue its engagement to ensure Aboriginal cultural and economic participation is achieved." The statement provided no indication of LPALC knowledge of the \$3m aquatic monument to James Cook that was announced by Morrison the next day.

There are other intriguing aspects regarding Morrison's remarks on Saturday. Firstly he made some highly speculative remarks about the scene of Cook's intrusion. "What's really important is the monument would seek to depict the aquatic features of what occurred here, something that would capture the moment, in a very interpretative, sensitive and beautiful way. The other part of the brief has to pick up what else was on the water at the time. There would have been canoes."

It's been a fabulous past week for Australian history. It's difficult to top the historical porkies made in Fairfax papers by "historian" Jonathan King in relation to mythologising the role of John Monash and the Anzac legend in the battle of Villers-Bretonneux in 1918, in which the errors were so numerous and flagrant that the paper's correction made international headlines, but Morrison's tranquil historical representation goes close. For an accurate account, we need only refer to Cook's own journal.

As we approached the shore they all made off except two men who seemed resolved to oppose our landing ... as soon as we put the boat in they again came to oppose us upon which I fired a musket between the two which had no other effect than to make them retire back where bundles of their darts lay and one of them took up a stone and threw at us which caused my firing a second musket load ... and although some of the shot struck the man yet it had no other effect on him than to make him lay hold of a shield or target to defend himself ... immediately after this we landed which we non sooner done than the thrower two darts at us this obliged me to fire a third shot soon after which they both made off, but not in such haste but what we might have taken one ...

In this context, it's fairly unlikely that any canoes were harmoniously bobbing out on the water as Cook and his armed invaders launched their first land assault. Further evidence of the true nature of that first encounter sits in the British Museum in the form of a shield that was pierced by one of the shots fired. Also just as well known, is Cook's 30 April journal entry in which he reflected, "all they seem'd to want was for us to be gone."

But the blathering from Morrison's maw became curiouser still when he posited that the proposed aquatic representation memorialising the invasion would have to be done sensitively because "you can't depict Aboriginal forms in statues".

This is what happens when people who know nothing about Aboriginal culture and traditions mouth off while refusing to unfasten their socks from their ears. The quickest of audits yields statues in the Aboriginal forms of political activist Doug Nicholls, the Noongar resistance fighter Yagan, political activist and artist William Barak, the heroes Yarri and Jackey in Gundagai, and the forthcoming statue of Nicky Winmar's iconic gesture at Victoria Park in 1993. Statue sculpture is also widely recognised within traditional contexts in many First Nations around the continent.

Morrison's artful omission, like his blinkered historical revision, reveals the true nature of this \$50m folly. It's nothing more than a cynical, colonial-white dog-whistle to a particular constituency that has proven in the not-so distant past to get embattled governments across the line come election time. More alarming, perhaps, is the likelihood that within this swamp of colonial aggrandisement, our current federal treasurer is sizing himself up for his own impending tilt at Liberal party leadership. And that is truly troubled waters.

- *Jack Latimore is a Guardian Australia reporter and columnist*