

'No pride in genocide': vandals deface Captain Cook statue in Sydney's Hyde park

Australian prime minister says graffiti is part of 'totalitarian campaign' to obliterate country's history

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The Captain Cook statue in Hyde Park Sydney has come under a graffiti attack, along with two other statues. Photograph: Mike Bowers for the Guardian

The Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, has likened the vandalism of statues of Captain Cook and Lachlan Macquarie to Stalinist purges, warning the acts were part of “a deeply disturbing” campaign to “obliterate” Australia’s history.

Australia has been engaged in intense debate this week over an inscription on a statue of explorer, Captain James Cook, in Sydney’s Hyde Park. The statue’s inscription claims Cook “discovered” Australia, prompting criticism that it ignored tens of thousands of years of Indigenous history.

Early on Saturday, three statues in Sydney’s Hyde park – including one of Captain Cook – were attacked by vandals.

The words “change the date” and “no pride in genocide” were spray-painted on the Captain Cook statue, the former a reference to a campaign to stop celebrating Australia’s national day on the date the First Fleet landed.

Similar words were scrawled on a monument to Lachlan Macquarie, the fifth governor of New South Wales, and a statue of Queen Victoria was also targeted.

Turnbull, in a lengthy Facebook post on Saturday afternoon, described the vandalism as a “cowardly criminal act”.

“But it is also part of a deeply disturbing and totalitarian campaign to not just challenge our history but to deny it and obliterate it,” Turnbull said.

“This is what Stalin did. When he fell out with his henchmen he didn’t just execute them, they were removed from all official photographs – they became non-persons, banished not just from life’s mortal coil but from memory and history itself,” he said.

“Tearing down or defacing statues of our colonial era explorers and governors is not much better than that.”

Turnbull said the statue should be interpreted for what it was: a perspective on history from 1879, when the monument was erected.

“We do not adopt every inscription on every statue or monument – it is a voice at a point in time,” Turnbull said.

“How many ancient Roman monuments show slaves shackled to the chariot wheels of their Roman conquerors? Does that mean modern Italians endorse slavery? Or chariots?” he said.

Police have launched an investigation into the “malicious damage” in Hyde Park, which they believe happened between 2am and 3am on Saturday.

Debate about the statue was prompted by Indigenous broadcaster Stan Grant, who said the inscription perpetuated a “fiction” that spoke to the emptiness and invisibility of Indigenous Australians.

On Saturday, Grant condemned the graffiti as “appalling” and “disgraceful”, telling Fairfax Media it damaged the cause of Indigenous Australians.

The Australian treasurer, Scott Morrison, tweeted: “A national insult & disgrace. Does not keep one indigenous child safe, in school or end up in a job. Grow up idiots.”

While debate raged in the media, many in Hyde Park remained oblivious to the controversy over the statue on Saturday.

One man acutely aware of the debate’s significance, however, was Michael Richards, a trainee school teacher.

Richards is planning an excursion to Hyde Park to help his students understand why the inscription causes offence. He was in Hyde Park on Saturday, just after the graffiti was cleaned from the statue, taking pictures for his class.

He believes the inscription is misleading without being put in its proper historical context.

“I’m personally of the view that we do need to understand ourselves as a nation before we can go forward with a clear conscience,” Richards said.

“I guess if we just encourage the next generation to understand the power of words – that ‘discovered’ isn’t quite the right one,” he said.

Richards said the vandalism was misguided, saying “there is a right way to do things”.

One tourist lying next to the statue on Saturday said he was unaware anyone had been on the continent before the Europeans. Another was unaware of Australian Indigenous history.

Richards said the statues in Hyde Park, a popular tourist attraction, should serve to teach the world about our history accurately and in context.

“I guess we’ve got to bear in mind the image that we project to the world as well, it’s a little bit naive not to have it put in context,” he said.

Another Sydneysider, Max Plodr, said the vandalism was wrong, but had helped to fuel debate.

“I agree it is stupid, but it does spark conversation, but in a bit of a negative light,” Plodr said.

“But it still does get a conversation started, but I think there are better ways to go about it.”

Police said graffiti was also used on Sydney’s ANZAC memorial, park benches in Hyde Park, and on the Archibald memorial fountain.

They described the man responsible as “caucasian appearance with a full face beard”, and as wearing black sunglasses, a khaki coloured jacket, and black track pants.

The assistant immigration minister, Alex Hawke, who is vehemently opposed to changing the date of Australia Day, condemned the attack.

“This disgraceful extreme attack on our history & culture is shameful. Phillip & Cook were enlightened for their times,” he tweeted on Saturday.

– *Australian Associated Press contributed to this report*