

Press Release

For immediate release

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IRR statement on hooliganism at the University of Cape Town

Last night a series of tweets we issued on the University of Cape Town, and its future as a leading academic institution, attracted much attention. The tweets argued that intimidation and racial nationalism would harm the standing of the university. We want to set out our position in more nuance than 140 characters would allow.

Ten years ago Professor Jonathan Jansen delivered a lecture to the IRR titled *When does a university cease to exist?* His thesis can be summed up as follows:

I [argue] that a university ceases to exist when the intellectual project no longer defines its identity, infuses its curriculum, energises its scholars, and inspires its students. It ceases to exist when state control and interference closes down the space within which academic discourse can flourish without constraint. The university ceases to exist when it imposes on itself narrowing views of the future based on ethnic or linguistic chauvinism, and denies the multiplicity of voices and visions that grant institutions their distinctive character. And the university ceases to exist when it represents nothing other than an empty shell of racial representivity at the cost of academic substance and intellectual imagination.

Our concern is that this is what is happening at the University of Cape Town. A university ceases to exist when an open culture of argument and counter argument is replaced by fear, intimidation, and racial nationalism. In the early days of the #RhodesMustFall movement a member of the academic staff was attacked by students when she carried a poster urging them to improve their arguments. A week later the extent of the growing fear and intimidation was best expressed in the Senate voting by 189 to 1 in favour of removing Rhodes's statue. This is an extraordinary result considering the great difficulty academics have in agreeing on anything and further considering their usual condition of bickering with each other in principle. This morning a journalist expressed the view to us that the Senate vote sounds like 'North Korea's election result'. Later the Council agreed to remove Rhodes' statue even as students danced on the tables at the Council meeting singing 'one settler one bullet'. That is intolerable hooliganism that would not be allowed in most organisations. That it happened at, arguably, the leading university in our country is a terrible indictment of our country and of the quality of our future leaders. Are we headed to where a mob may one day march into the Constitutional Court to dance on the table of the Chief Justice, singing 'one judge one bullet' and demand his court changes a judgement?

Rhodes and his statue are not the concern – our concern is exclusively how quickly a tide of intimidation was able to overcome the liberal culture of open academic discourse that should prevail on all our campuses and what this means for the future of our academic institutions. As a leading liberal think tank we have a direct interest in maintaining a culture of academic openness on South Africa's campuses.

Issued by Frans Cronjé, CEO

Ends.
