

**Recording Decisions and Actions connected with Claims for the Removal/Protection of Statues in UK Civic Spaces during the Summer of 2020**



Interview Date:	13-08-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Adam McVey	Organisation:	Edinburgh City Council
Position:	Leader of Edinburgh City Council		

## Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Adam McVey, Leader of Edinburgh City Council. 13-08-2020

Tom Crowley 0:14

So, yeah, this is Tom Crowley from Cambridge University Heritage Research Centre and Councillor Adam McVey, Leader of Edinburgh City Council speaking on the 13th of August of 2020. And, Adam, I've basically got three questions and then maybe a kind of follow up question or two, that I'd like to ask. And I was wondering, firstly, if you could fill us in on the history of the Council's involvement with the Melville Monument, and especially its becoming a problematic part of the fabric of the city. And then how has this summer's Black Lives Matter protests and the pulling down of the Colston statue in Bristol impacted that discussion and prompted you to take certain actions and then your kind of plans going forward.

Adam McVey 1:27

Okay, I mean, in terms of its presence in the city, yes, it's now hundreds of years old. And in terms of positioning it was put there when the New Town was put there. So it's certainly had a long history of being there and being a familiar part of the city's landscape. And the space that it's in isn't actually owned by the Council even though the Council has been involved. For instance, a good couple of years ago, close to 10 years ago, there was Heritage Lottery money to refurbish the monument. And the Council had a bit of involvement in that although I'm not sure to what extent public money was spent, I think it was before my time at the Council. So it's there, it's part of the landscape, it's part of the city's history, it's talking about a very prominent member of, you know, prominent resident of Edinburgh, who, served in very senior positions in the UK cabinet and other positions. And the monument was there, I think, either paid for voluntarily or solicited in some way, depending on who you ask. And by naval subscriptions, and that's what was paid for. So, I don't even think it was paid for by the city as such, when it was built.

In terms of this summer, it's quite a difficult thing to meander around because we had commissioned as a council a panel to look at this monument in particular. And that some years ago, I think it was three or four years ago that process started and that was following a petition from a local resident. Really I think that the purpose of the petition was saying, well, why do you still have a statue to this guy? And why aren't you telling the story, the actual story of this person? A few years ago, the Council commissioned a panel. That panel included academics, included people with an enormous amount of built

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knowledge like Sir Geoff Palmer, and included the petitioner himself and one of the descendants of Henry Dundas, a guy called Bobby Dundas. And they sat on that panel and talked things through along with, I think there was one politician at the time, who was the Lord Provost, who sat on it, talked it out and tried to get to a version of events that could be put on the monument as a more accurate reflection of the man's input.

That panel did not come to a conclusion partly because some members of the panel kind of drifted away and didn't follow up on action points and partly because there just wasn't that agreement on what the text should say. You're talking about 200 odd words, it's not a lot to try and encapsulate a whole multi-dimensional, you know, aspects of any human's life is quite difficult, particularly when you're talking about some very big things: both some may say positive and many would say negative in someone's life. So that failed to come to a conclusion. And the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer helped alert us to this because it was mentioned quite specifically in a speech at Holyrood Park by Sir Geoff Palmer. And I was following the events in line with guidance, not there in person but online and saw a protest and when I heard him say—

Tom Crowley 5:15

Sorry, just very quickly, was that on Sky? What was that speech on?

Adam McVey 5:21

On Twitter. I was following along sort of various photos, videos streamings that were kind of going on Facebook and Twitter. Because our guidance at the time obviously being, you know, still within a global health pandemic, our advice to people was, you know, please if you're going to go you know, follow guidance, follow any instruction, but please don't go if you can, and follow online. So, we weren't saying people were bad or doing anything wrong, but we were certainly encouraging people not to go and to follow events online to try and build support for the protest that way. So that was the guidance I followed, but so when I heard Geoff Palmer say that, you know, years of talking and delay has meant that we've not got anywhere on a simple plaque. That seems to be, frankly, ridiculous.

So, I think that day I contacted some relevant people and proposed a motion for a kind of different panel, I suppose, to meet and to give guidance on to Council on what wording would be appropriate. So, we had Sir Geoff Palmer, we had Edinburgh World Heritage, we had an academic from the University, Edinburgh University I should say, who became a link to their academics who had specialist knowledge in these things. Some relevant politicians, from the council I think were three or four of us. So, we talked it out, we used the last point, I think there were four versions believe it or not. It was a small panel that had been convened previously and there were versions of the text that were still in existence, which they couldn't get agreement on. So, we had a starting point for our discussions. We then talked through and, you know, quickly

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rallied around the one that we thought was most accurate, most appropriate, talked out some of the details, changed it and then got to a finalised text fairly quickly at one meeting.

That meeting then gave people the day so the University ran it past pass some academics to make sure it was accurate and came back with any suggested changes, and then spent the next day sort of making sure that all those people who were there, were comfortable with that. And that's how we arrived at finalised text, and that text was put to Council Committee and all parties bar one supported that text and we also had agreement from the landowner because the site isn't owned by the Council. It's a kind of unique Edinburgh quirk, that some of our city centre parks are owned by the buildings around them not by the Council. So, Charlotte Square and St Andrew's Square for example, the green space isn't owned by local authority quite usually. So, the businesses who use Essential Edinburgh, which is the business improvement district, to manage that space, were in agreement that they would put up a new plaque. So, it was approved by Council and now we have a temporary board on site and the plaque is being built as we speak. The way forward after this— I mean, this is one monument in our city littered with history of slavery, and certainly we have Black history intertwined into our own. And, you know, one of the things that's really come from this is a real appreciation, or the need to appreciate, Edinburgh's actual history right across the board. And that's looking at all monuments, looking at how we, I suppose, come to terms as a city with our past and in that sense confront many of the legacies of that past that are still in our present. We have started this journey anyway. Um, but I think things have definitely had a catalyst effect.

If you look at Hogmanay, and that was last Hogmanay which was before, obviously a lot of the protests began. And Edinburgh had as part of our Hogmanay celebrations commissioned a piece of art by Kayus Bankole of Young Fathers, which was a fantastic short film piece. And it was projected onto our City Chambers. And that was telling the story of Edinburgh's role in the sugar trade and slavery and people being, you know, yanked from their families from their homes from their communities and taken into slavery. You know, an incredibly powerful piece, quite aptly projected onto our City Chambers building, that's where the Council sits. So, every evening, it started at 5pm every evening, and it was literally projected onto my window in my offices as Council Leader, which I thought was a brilliant thing. And so we have started to tell that story we have started to gain an appreciation, but we can understand now that we have to go farther and faster to get acceptance of the facts and help confront some issues that are still in our society.

So, we're commissioning a panel to look specifically at monuments in the city and what we do with them. We know there's a lot of people who want them removed. And we know there's a lot of people who don't want any change whatsoever and see it very much as an attack on them or some sense of themselves. I don't really have much truck with that. And from what I've seen the same people who are sending me those kind of emails are the same kind of people who've been tweeting all lives matter so I'm absolutely not aligned to that point of view. And, you know, the third way that I think has to be done regardless of what we do with, you know, where statues are or what streets are called is look at how we explain it and tell the story and not in a hidden away way in some museum somewhere, but that story has to be told on the streets that people live in, the communities they live in. And so, I think that's our challenge. And you know whether

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things are removed or not removed, I think it's important that we tell that story and that it's something that's very visual in our city.

Tom Crowley 12:40

Have you got— I guess it's very early days, but have you got a kind of plan in motion about how you might realise that. Who you might consult? How does that intersect with your tenure as well?

Adam McVey 12:55

So, this will be quick. The panel that we're putting together— literally now, we're talking about names of chairs. That will be tasked very quickly with trying to come to conclusion on that stuff. You know, this isn't just about monuments because we need to remember, you know, the New Town that Edinburgh is so proud of and rightly proud of is a superb piece of global architectures, it's literally a World Heritage Site. You can't get any more significant than that. But the uncomfortable truth about our New Town is how a lot of it was paid for. And even in my own ward in Leith, there's a church that was paid for by money that was paid to a former slave owner through the compensation payment, and that built a church in Leith. Now, the story of that church is incredibly interesting because now it's not a church, now it's a gurdwara, doing amazing work in the community. And you know, all our buildings, our assets are in so many ways for our communities, our foundations are intrinsically linked to so much of Edinburgh's history. And so much of Edinburgh's history is linked to the global involvements they had, and you can't get away from the slave trade in looking at that properly. So, they'll be tasked with very quickly coming to recommendations in terms of monuments and what we do. And because you can't really swing a pole without hitting something in the city with a connection to being paid for by slavery or having some connection to someone who was involved in it. So that will be tasked very quickly with coming up with recommendations, and then we'll look to act on them and despite the fact that my administration is a minority administration, my expectation would be that the recommendations which would be put forward would be would be adopted.

Tom Crowley 15:10

That's very interesting. Thank you. I've got one quick question, I'm aware that you're running out of time, but I'm just wondering if it is worth expanding on this. There's obviously been a lot of a lot of media coverage, a lot of press, and a lot of social media activity about all this. Has that impacted on your decision making? I mean obviously you watched Geoff Palmer give his speech on Twitter.

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Adam McVey 15:47

Yes, I mean, I think the most powerful thing actually is not— I'm going to try and put this as subtly as I can, but there's been quite a few White folk who have, you know, tweeted me and emailed me and that's all very well, but actually, a lot of those communications, I'm not saying all, but a lot of them had absolutely no cognizance of the fact that this was White people continuing to speak for Black people. And the most important thing for me, the thing that I've been listening to incredibly carefully and have been heavily influenced by is the voice of Black people in particular, a lot of young Black people in the city who are saying, this is what I would like to see and articulating themselves incredibly powerfully and articulately, in trying to kind of push our way forward. So, I have been heavily influenced by that.

I think everyone should be heavily influenced by that because that speaks to what this is all about. This isn't about, you know, a dead guy that's been dead for 200 years. An involvement of things that he did two hundred years ago, this is about the people who are living in the city here now, and how they want their city landscape to look and how they want their place in the city to be understood and respected. So the thing that's affected me far more than, you know, dare I say, people getting annoyed about certain aspects of it, is listening to really those voices of residents and citizens in Edinburgh, who are saying, this is my experience and this is what I want acted upon. I think that's been incredibly powerful and welcome.

Tom Crowley 17:42

Sure, thank you very much. And I guess with your panel, it's too early to begin to speculate what those kinds of interventions or suggestions might look like?

Adam McVey 17:54

Yeah, I mean, again, we're trying to give that as much free rein as possible. It will be led by Black and Ethnic Minority residents, and try and build that kind of lived experience into it. Just like we've done with our poverty commission and with our sustainability commission driving down carbon. We're trying to take a similar approach to make sure people's voices are heard and the people's voices who are most affected, actually, shape what the recommendations are. But you know, it's not for— we want that to be meaningful. We don't want to just say, you're the face of a conclusion that we've already come to. We want that challenge. We want that kind of roadmap to be set out in a meaningful way and we will respond to it and I hope respond positively.

Tom Crowley 18:47

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Okay, I know you've got to go. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Adam McVey 18:50

That's no problem.

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