

De-Naming and Re-Naming: A Plea for Proper Proceduralism[†]

I. Introduction

History serves as a means to objectively contextualise individual and collective memories of the past. We may find ourselves inextricably linked to certain of these contextualised memories, be it by common heritage or a separate intellectual curiosity. They drive us and aid in the creation of a certain social harmony, all-the-while teaching us what we must and mustn't do in the foreseeable future.

Importantly, however, memories may hold the capacity to cause particular upset within a group of people who may feel such a memory negatively impacts them, or conversely (be it due to diverging morals and ethics or simply a difference in prioritisation).

When such memories are publicly displayed, conflict will almost always naturally ensue. This was recently evinced in the much-publicised case of the Berkeley Library.

Berkeley sought to proselytize and institutionalise Protestantism. It is understood that his views on cultural relativism are principally a consequence of intergenerational practice, as well as his participation in the formal hierarchy of the established Anglican Church of Ireland. He had planned to, once settled in Middletown, Rhode Island, procure indigenous Americans from bordering tribes, in order to convert them to Protestantism. Despite owning 10% of Middletown's population, he only converted three of them. Recent evidence has also shown that he was supportive of the Yorke-Tabolt opinion, which read that slaves should be legally restricted from obtaining freedom subsequent to forced baptism. These issues were identified and accepted by the Trinity Colonial Legacy Group.

Earlier this year, a petition was started by a student in response to the forementioned legacy issues identified by the Legacy Group. It received scarce feedback. The matter was subsequently presented by way of motion to the Student Union's 2021-22 5th Council, and was then carried without any major opposition. In the ensuing months, the matter was renovated on multiple

[†] Sébastien G. Laymond, Second-Year LL.B Student, Trinity College *Dublin* & Massimiliano Romagnoli, Second-Year B.A. Trinity College Dublin.

occasions. After more than seven months of lobbying by the Union, the petition has been signed by 584 people, *i.e.*, » 2.8% of the College population – external signatures notwithstanding... Of parenthetical – yet wholly pertinent – import, this figure has increased by a mere 13 as of January, 2023. This, again, suggests a scarce ongoing interest in the petition; though it has brought to mainstream attention on a multitude occasions.

Similar demands were made in Yale University to rename their ‘Berkeley College’, again following the publication of the new evidence regarding Berkeley’s accordance with the Yorke-Tabolt opinion. However, Yale tranquilised these demands, stating that ‘such action would not happen overnight’.

The object of this short Article is to conduct a multi-faceted analysis of the TCDSU’s proposal to strip the Berkeley of its name. Briefly, we will criticise the decision from two separate aspects: procedural and historical/moral, respectively. Importantly will not be addressing the legality of their decision: acting on the will of their council is right and proper.

On the 23rd of August, 2022, the TCDSU, in a letter addressed to the Provost, demanded that that College:—

‘immediately remove the sign which bears Berkeley’s name outside the Library and engage in a stakeholder consultation to decide a new name for the Library in coordination with all the staff and students’.

In a later letter, dated from the 9th of September, 2022, they specified that this process will be conducted in collaboration with the Senior Dean to ‘devise an evidence-based transparent process which engages with stakeholders’.

We find numerous issues with such.

II. The Cause for Similitude

Renaming is an exceptional event, one that should only occur following a thorough, transparent, and compelling examination of the issues at hand. Unfortunately, the conduct of the Sabbatical Officers doesn't reflect such.

To further-address this point, it is primordial we clarify the distinction between ‘re-naming’ and ‘de-naming’. The act of re-naming entails a procedure whereby a given board of assessors will commence an impartial investigation into the merits of the claim, all-the-while maintaining the Library’s name, until they decide otherwise.

The act of de-naming, conversely, is twofold. If implemented subsequent to the abovementioned re-naming process, then it can be said to be *proper*. However, if implemented without regards to such *proper* procedure, then it implies a change which fails to fulfil the tenets of proper proceduralism. Furthermore, adopting such a procedure effectively amounts to an improper re-naming; through the deletion of its well-known name, the library is cleft from its essence.

Therefore, when, in their August 23rd letter, the Union urged the Provost to consider the act of de-naming prior to that of re-naming (*i.e.*, a thorough analysis of the original name itself), they failed to respect those tenets of proper proceduralism. Does the simple fact that they obtained vote of their council grant them the intellectual integrity to provide guidelines to College? One could only label such behaviour as improper given both the intricacy of the issue at hand, and the supposed professionalism of the Union.

An unfortunate by-product of such a decision is the obfuscation of Berkeley’s praise-worthy academic and politico-social achievements: these being trampled underfoot not only within the decision-making procedure, but equally – and consequently – from within campus grounds. This one-faced approach was equally mirrored within the 5th Council Minutes of 2021-2022, wherein the first motion to de-name the library was carried. Perusal of the motion reflects a lack of assiduousness, a faculty the President of the Union must not forgo. Nonetheless, satisfaction was displayed towards a perniciously reductionist approach; to the extent that at the end of the motion, then-President of the Union Leah Keogh reportedly stated that ‘it was not a matter of if but when’.

Further, we think their using the said ‘petition’ as further-justification for their demands improper. It is unrepresentative of campus opinion and serves as a veil to the unassumed irrationality of the entire affair. There is nothing within the Union’s Constitution that prohibits them from adopting a more thorough procedure to assess the campus-wide opinion. Forlornly, such powers have not been utilised.

III. Implications

As abovementioned, an improper and reductionist de-naming procedure can readily be interpreted as a negation of history. This additionally portends a state of moral turpitude, one whereby we can't distinguish right from wrong, effectively robbing history of its moral-guiding functionality: indeed, a double negation.

Another issue is linked to the typical observer's view of the building. It may be the case that the average student will not see the building's name as a current endorsement of its namesake. Much like we do, they may dissociate the name from its contemporaneous interpretation, and respect the decisions of the those who originally proffered the name, seeing it as part of a greater historical period.

There is a certain degree of respect that must be afforded to these people. Such respect must be evidenced in the re-naming process.

Lastly, the Union's decisions have future implications. They must understand that in carrying such an informal decision-making process, they are establishing an asinine precedent, which belittles the respect duly owed to the previous decision makers. What if in the future, same was done to the Union?

IV. Conclusion

We feel we must mention that we are not in total disagreement with the decision to *formerly* re-name the Berkeley. We do understand and agree with the fact that there are multiple reasons to re-name the Berkeley; albeit in an entirely different manner. Indeed, the College itself, in recently thawing the Union's demands, invoked a similar 'proper proceduralism' that we here seek to advocate. As a consequence, we witnessed a change in the words used by the president Gabi Fullam, from 'immediately remove the sign' to 'devise an evidence-based transparent process'. This piece, however, does purport to be a mere critique of the Union's *modus operandi*.

Given that the 'Berkeley Debate' is gradually being afforded with a more formal and constructive status – wherein evidence-based arguments occupy a grander space than their irrational consensus-based counterparts – we have sifted out a few issues which we now believe need addressing:

- (1) – **The overall harmful impact of the subject’s behaviour:** has the morally repugnant behaviour of the subject effected the University’s core principles?
- (2) – **The strength and clarity of the evidence:** where is the evidence extrapolated from? Is it correct (*i.e.*, more than a mere assumption) in its totality?
- (3) – **Uneven impact on communities:** many factors are to be considered here: the community identification with the building where the feature is part of a valuable identification shared by a large part of the college community; the centrality of the building in students’ life; &c.
- (4) – **In what environment is the name visible:** is it visible within an intimate and personal setting (dormitory), or a largely impersonal setting (library or lecture hall).
- (5) – **Relation to university history:** was the subject integral to the University’s development?
- (6) – **Pertinence of substitute:** was a properly thorough investigation of the worthy substitute undergone?

Taking these factors into account, we believe the correct method to approach would be to retain Berkeley’s name remains on the Library, with another name appended to it, *e.g.*:—

‘The ‘x’ library, formerly the Berkeley’.

SÉBASTIEN G. LAYMOND ✉
 MASSIMILIANO ROMAGNOLI