

AEC Objection Hearing, 6 June 2018

I thank the Augmented Commission for the opportunity to speak today, and for the opportunity to expand upon my original objection (OB67) to the decision to retain the name Division of Batman.

By way of context, I am an academic philosopher, and have recently published both scholarly and popular work on the nature of moral progress, and in particular how we relate to the fact that the beliefs and practices of our forebears now strike us as ethically repugnant. I am also a resident and enrolled voter in the Division of Batman. Hence this is for me both an intellectual and a personal issue.

It's to the Commission's credit that the redistribution report recommended changing the name of the Division of McMillan, withdrawing recognition of a murderer of Kurnai people in favour of a more worthy candidate. With regards to other Divisions, however, the Redistribution Committee noted in point 124 of its report, that "it does not consider that strong enough reasons to alter electoral division names have been provided in suggestions and comments on suggestions."

Other objectors have already described, with far greater eloquence and authority than I could, the extent of the atrocities committed by John Batman and why he is so manifestly not a fit and proper person to be honoured by having an electorate named after him (in addition to the ten streets named after him in Melbourne alone). I don't therefore propose to rehearse those points again.

Instead, I would like to raise a question: what principled reason can be given for removing the name of McMillan while retaining that of Batman?

If there is some merely processual reason why Batman cannot be changed but McMillan can be, then this reason needs to be put forward. That said, on the current guidelines it is difficult to see what such a reason could be.

If the reason for the name change in McMillan is simply that Angus McMillan's 'outstanding service' is outweighed by that of Sir John Monash, then any non-Federation division not named after a person would have served that purpose. If the very existence of more deserving candidates counts as a 'very strong reason' per the Guidelines to change the name of one electorate then it is also not hard to suggest more deserving figures than John Batman too. I note that the City of Darebin and the Wurundjeri Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council Aboriginal Corporation among others have already put forward Simon Wonga, and I support that suggestion.

Removing the name of McMillan is, rather, a repudiation of *Angus McMillan*. It is an admission that, in light of his crimes, he has never in fact deserved an honour he has enjoyed for the last sixty-nine years. That is how moral progress works: a recognition that the moral judgments of the past were incorrect all along. What once seemed unobjectionable suddenly shows itself to be unconscionable.

If we can admit that a naming decision made in 1949 with regard to the Division of McMillan could be wrong, then there is surely no impediment to admitting that a naming decision taken in 1906 was likewise wrong (especially given that Batman is not a Federation Division name, replacing as it did the Division of North Melbourne).

The only other possible reason, then, for treating the two cases differently is a different judgment on the respective merits of Angus McMillan and John Batman. Yet it is beyond question that both men committed murder in the process of dispossessing the First Nations of this continent. Claiming that there is some moral difference between them relevant to the issue of naming electorates would lead us into a sort of perverse moral arithmetic in which we are invited to weigh up the putative achievements of both men against the number of murders they committed. I cannot imagine that this committee wishes to entertain the idea that a certain amount of murder is outweighed by some other quantity of service, and that Batman meets that threshold but McMillan does not. If it does not, then there is no principled reason for treating the two divisions differently.

If no principled reason for treating the two cases differently can be given, and if we agree that the decision to change the name of the Division of McMillan is the morally right one, then rational consistency requires that the name of the Division of Batman also be changed. More importantly, our duty to both the dead and to the living, our obligation both to Batman's victims and to their descendants, demands the same thing.

I therefore implore the Augmented Commission to reverse its recommendation and to change the name of the Division of Batman. If it refuses to do so, then it should, in the interests of transparency and to avoid future conflicts, at least let us know how many murders someone has to commit before they don't get to have their name on an electorate.