Twitter Thread by Robert Saunders

Robert Saunders
@redhistorian

If anyone thinks this is a good faith proposal, designed to secure democratic consent for changes to public monuments, let's look at what Robert Jenrick said four months ago about the procedures he is about to impose. [THREAD]

> Robert Jenrick is to change the law so that historic statues, plaques, memorials or monuments cannot be removed without going through a formal planning process.
> Twelve thousand statues are covered by the law changes.
>
> — Christopher Hope\U0001f4dd (@christopherhope) January 16, 2021

2. In a speech last September, Jenrick complained that "the planning system is broken". Only "1% of people" had "the esoteric knowledge to navigate [its] arcane and protracted world", shutting out those "who don't have the time to contribute to the lengthy and archaic process".

3. If campaigners make it through that process (which Jenrick himself calls "as inconsistent as it is slow") more barriers lie ahead. "I will not hesitate to use my powers as Secretary of State" to enforce the view, to "be set out in law", that statues should "almost always" stay

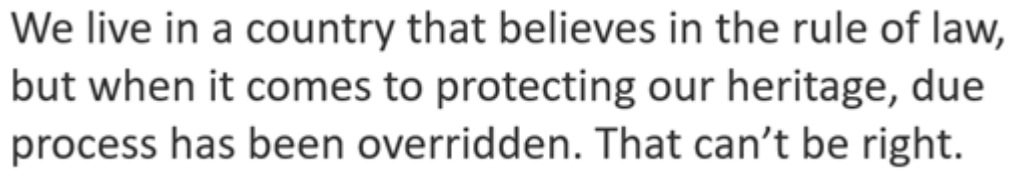
4. When this govt wants councils to do something - like building houses - it invariably overrides the planning system. When it wants to *stop* them doing something - like moving statues - it enforces it. This is not an attempt to democratise change. It's an attempt to obstruct it

5.If the goal were to prevent direct action against statues, blocking lawful & constitutional avenues for change would be a foolish way of doing it. As I wrote here, we need good faith mechanisms where the case for change can be argued & contested lawfully https://t.co/E1CUuMo0FB

> 8. Debate around public statues is not going to go away. Nor should it, for it raises profound questions about our values & the ownership of public space. So councils need to establish good-faith processes in which debate can happen - and from which meaningful change can emerge.
>
> — Robert Saunders (@redhistorian) June 9, 2020

6. It is comforting to read that the government now believes in "the rule of law" - a welcome change - and I agree on the importance of "due process". But that process must be in good faith. If it exists simply to obstruct change, it will merely drive

people outside of it.



7. The rest of the article reproduces the usual nonsense about "censoring" or "editing" the past. I tackled some of these claims in this thread. https://t.co/IVgDYmNMwi

> 1. No one is trying "to edit or censor our past", let alone "pretend to have a different history". On the contrary: campaigners are asking us to *stop* editing out those, like Colston's slaves, who had been erased from public memory. This is about *remembering*, not forgetting.
>
> — Robert Saunders (@redhistorian) June 12, 2020

8 Ultimately, it's not for Jenrick (or me) to rule on how we remember the past. What matters is that there are democratic procedures in the present, by which communities can decide who they celebrate in their public spaces. Those processes must not be rigged to secure one outcome

9. The Telegraph describes this article, approvingly, as "one of the first salvoes by the Tory govt in the culture war". We can expect a lot more of this in the years ahead. It's cheap, it stirs the base, & it's easier than the hard graft of managing a pandemic or feeding kids.

10. We shouldn't be distracted by this, or deflected from holding ministers to account. But we should keep championing the right of the public to debate & rethink their past - and insist on good-faith, democratic mechanisms to decide who & what we celebrate in the present. [ENDS]