

Bye bye Batman? Melbourne founder's name to be erased from electorate, history

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He was the man who once tried to name Melbourne "Batmania".

Now the controversial founder of Victoria's capital, John Batman, could have his named stripped from a federal electorate due to concerns about his legacy.



Plans are afoot to rename the electorate of Batman. Photo: Justin McManus.

Batman already has naming rights to more than two dozen locations around Melbourne, including multiple Batman parks, streets, avenues, a hill and a railway station.

But a modern audience has begun to look less than kindly on his role as colonist, including his involvement in the murder of Aboriginal people in Tasmania in the early 1800s.



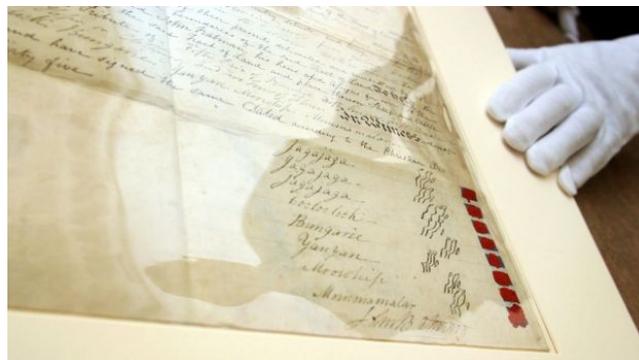
A non-contemporary engraving of John Batman meeting Aborigines on the banks of the Merri creek.

This week the City of Darebin council voted to make an application to the Australian Electoral Commission to rename the Federal Electoral Division of Batman, a Labor-held seat that takes in suburbs in Melbourne's north including Northcote, Bundoora, Macleod and Preston.

Federal Labor Member for Batman, David Feeney, said federal electorates should be named after prominent and distinguished Victorians, and help unite the community.

"There can be debate about what the contribution of John Batman was," Mr Feeney said.

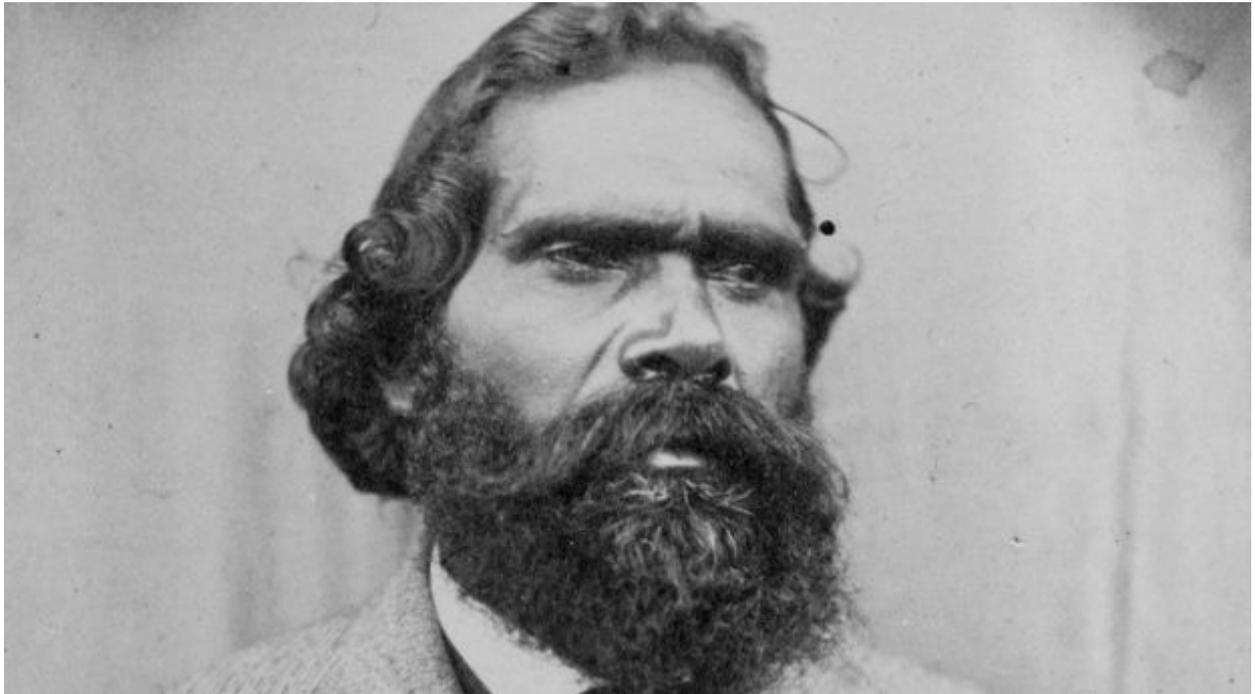
"But clearly modern scholarship has revealed that his participation in conflict in Tasmania and the notion that he was essentially bounty hunting first Australians in Tasmania mean that the Wurundjeri's angst and other's angst is perfectly reasonable."



John Batman's treaty with the Kulin people. Photo: Melanie Faith Dove

Batman has previously held a reputation of being somewhat sympathetic to Aboriginal people in the Melbourne area because he brokered what was described as a treaty to rent their land.

He reportedly gave the Kulin people 68 kilograms of flour, four suits of clothes and a collection of axes, knives and scissors for 250,000 hectares of land.



Simon Wonga at Coranderrk Station in 1866 aged 37. Photo: State Library of Victoria

An alternative name for the Batman electorate of "Simon Wonga" has been suggested by the Wurundjeri Land Council.

Simon Wonga was a Wurundjeri elder who was one of the first Aboriginal leaders to successfully regain lands taken by settlers and he also secured land that later became the Coranderrk Aboriginal mission, where he died in about 1875.



John Batman. Photo: Supplied

Wonga saw momentous change in his life, being born in 1821 (more than a decade before Melbourne's European settlement).

John Batman died in 1839 after contracting syphilis.

The electorate of Batman is likely to undergo a redistribution from December, presenting an opportunity for a new name to be introduced.

Darebin councillor Susan Rennie said the area had a high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents, with more than 1100 people counted in the 2011 Census.

"The current name of the electoral division is actually divisive for many members of our community who feels as though, despite any contribution [John Batman] may have made, he is also tied up in the history of invasion and dispossession of land that belonged to Aboriginal people," Cr Rennie said.

'I think it's no longer a unifying force in the same way Australia Day is no longer a unifying date.

"I think it's this is the beginning of a process where we look to establish reconciliation."

The City of Darebin is also planning to rename Batman Park in Northcote.

The Wurundjeri Land Council declined to comment for this story.