

# Commentary



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## Commemorative policy: Obstacles to getting it right in Toronto

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An objective reading of the history, the significance of this street which crosses our city, the fact Mr. Dundas had virtually no connection to Toronto and most importantly, our strong commitment to equity, inclusion and reconciliation make this a unique and symbolically important change.

— John Tory, Mayor of Toronto, June 2021 (Artuso 2021).

**The recently sworn-in Toronto Municipal Council** will soon have to deal with a toxic legacy left behind by its predecessor. In the summer of 2022, acting in response to Mayor John Tory’s request, city staff proposed a transformative “Commemorative Framework” (CF). The idea was to provide broad guidelines on how Toronto should deal with the naming of streets and squares, public buildings, and in approving public monuments.

For a city that has always had a hard time remembering anything, the initiative was welcomed. What was delivered, however, was a grave disappointment.

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The study was only a few pages long yet articulated six prescriptions for a new, “enlightened” approach to remembering. Henceforth, city efforts to remember would have to meet these tests:

1. Be informed by historical research, traditional knowledge, and community insights.
2. Be supported by communities through meaningful engagement: Proposals for commemorations must include evidence of demonstrated community support, taking into account the broad range of voices, perspectives, and experiences of local residents and impacted communities.
3. Honour Indigenous ways of knowing and being: This principle will guide how subjects of significance to Indigenous Peoples are commemorated in public spaces.
4. Prioritize commemorations significant to Indigenous Peoples, Black communities, and equity-deserving groups [with an additional caveat from the “Why Guiding Principles Matter” section that says “most commemorations in Toronto have celebrated the city’s colonial history”].
5. Connect to Toronto, Ontario or Canada’s histories and cultures.
6. Share knowledge and stories behind commemorations: When something is being commemorated, it is important to tell the story of *why*. (City of Toronto 2022)

The gaps and the false preferences of the proposed framework are blinding. Generally, the city’s CF is dedicated to the idea that memory is a zero-sum game. In other words, if one thing is being remembered, then something else is being ignored. Instead of seeing city commemorations as cumulative and progressively enriching, the Toronto staff portrayed it as a battlefield for identity wars.

The first thing missing in the CF is a dedication to an evidence-based approach, a staple in any other policy field. Remembrance cannot be “informed” by knowledge, it must be anchored in it. Words such as “historical research” are meaningless if they are not done properly. “Traditional knowledge” and “community insights” are no doubt valuable, but both are notoriously changeable and interpretable.

The full text on the city’s website also speaks of the need to “consider a range of primary and secondary sources, including peer-reviewed historical research

*where possible*” (City of Toronto Undated a, emphasis added). The conditional in this phrase is troubling to say the least. The act of remembering cannot be done on whims and fashions. What is remembered must have enough significance to stand the test of time, not attitudes. The commitment to use experts in assessing historical relevance is also missing. Why should this subject matter, which will affect generations, be handed to amateurs? After all, legal matters are referred to lawyers, structural matters are referred to engineers and public health issues are referred to physicians. The task of “remembering” similarly needs to be directed by staff who possess relevant expertise and who know how to seek it objectively in the broader community.

Meaningful engagement, the second principle, is undoubtedly important, but very difficult to measure. A city as diverse as Toronto should of course consider the views expressed by its citizens, on issues like the CF as in all other issues. A commitment is made in this declaration to seek out a broad range of views. Admirable as it is, that task is always difficult to achieve, and again must be conducted by qualified staff who come to the job with open minds and who are committed to consulting representatives from all sorts of communities, not just a few.

“ *The act of remembering cannot be done on whims and fashions.* ”

The third point is important. There is no doubt that the territory occupied in modern-day Toronto was once a hunting ground for a number of Indigenous communities. That reality is not well recognized today (though the name “Toronto” itself has an obvious Indigenous extraction), but the high-importance given to “honouring Indigenous ways of knowing and being,” as important as that might be, displaces all sorts of other ways of “knowing and being.”

The fourth principle goes to the heart of the CF’s intentions: to prioritize some groups over others and to end celebrations of “colonial history.” No examples of such remembrance is offered, leading one to wonder: Perhaps this is about Fort York, a military fortification that dates back to the 1790s but that now hugs the Gardiner Expressway, in the heart of downtown Toronto. Not surprisingly, Toronto staff are working hard to divorce that small museum from its authentic roots. In 2022, it cut off funding to the Friends of Fort York, a volunteer

organization that had provided “living history” experiences for visitors since the 1950s and produced an exceptionally good quarterly newsletter, *Fife and Drum*. The funding was suspended while city bureaucrats examined how the “values of The Friends” aligned with “the City’s organizational values” (Friends of Fort York 2022).

Is it about the Cenotaph and Remembrance Day observances, the only time Torontonians actually suspend their crazy working lives for 20 minutes and do something together? Do they each smack of colonialism?

Or is this fourth stipulation about street signs like Dundas, to cite but one of dozens of family names used to identify venues? What about King Street, Queen Street, and all the “Prince” and “Princess” streets? Clumsily written, the fourth principle highlights two communities in its first sentence, then offers a long list of peoples whose contributions have been “underrepresented.” The problem here is that the city is far more complex demographically and culturally than what the clause pretends. There is no doubt that commemorations need to do a great deal more in highlighting the accomplishments of women, workers, artists, writers, performers, athletes (to name a few) and equity-deserving groups, but it is not a zero-sum game. There is ample room and opportunity to recognize contributions without tearing down what a select few see as “colonial” inheritances.

It is worth noting that the Indigenous role is highlighted three times in the first four of the CF’s principles, far out of proportion to its presence in the evolution of the city. (The Mississaugas of the Credit were in fact located at the mouth of the Credit River on Lake Ontario – Toronto was part of their hunting grounds, never a dwelling site. That reality prompted the French to establish Fort Portneuf well east of the community, near the Humber River, in 1750.)

Principle five is reassuring, in that commemorations should have a clear connection to Toronto, Ontario or Canada’s histories and cultures. But by this logic, that might mean pulling down the Sun Yat-Sen statue in Riverdale Park, as Sun had nothing to do with Toronto. Of course, Jean Sibelius Square Park in the Annex neighbourhood would also need to be renamed as there is absolutely no link between the great Finnish composer and the city.

The final principle is laudable. Toronto has mediocre track record in “sharing knowledge and stories behind commemorations.” This is a reality that impedes its growth as a cultural centre and tourism destination.

A seventh principle is glaringly absent: to reveal the final cost, both to the city and to its residents, of any changes to Commemorative practices.

### **Comparison: The City of Montreal's *Recognitions Interventions Framework***

Coincidentally, the City of Montreal had commissioned a study from its staff on how to refresh its approach to commemoration. It produced *Cadre d'Intervention en Reconnaissance*, a 60-page report in May 2021 (City of Montreal 2021). The document followed a classic policy-making approach. It recognized past practices and took note of the new stakes that have emerged in an increasingly identification-driven society. It rejected the term commemoration because it considered it too narrow. *Reconnaissance* means two things: recognizing and acknowledging. It also means an act of being “thankful” in a way, as in being *reconnaissant* for a favour. “The stakes in recognition are collective,” it declared, “and the chosen strategy must simultaneously account for both what is at stake in giving significance [e.g. to a person, a collective, or an event] and the means of remembrance possible” (City of Montreal 2021, 4). The report also noted, importantly, that acts of *reconnaissance* must reinforce solidarity, equity and inclusion, “amplify” democracy and participation and be reconciled with the city’s strategy of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

The report listed in detail the instruments at its disposal to enable a policy of *reconnaissance*, including ceremonial events, tangible commemorations such as plaques and monuments, toponymy, the power of identification itself as well as the power to cite a tangible good it owns as historically significant.

The objectives of the policy framework were clear:

- Reinforce Montreal’s identity;
- To recognize the history, heritage and memory of Montrealers;
- To give expression to various aspects of the culture, identity and value of the Montreal community;
- To recognize the past contributions of individuals, groups, events or savoir-faire to the identity of Montreal; and
- To protect and promote the significant elements of the identity of Montreal, a topic that is reinforced throughout the paper.

The contrast with Toronto’s policy statement is glaring. Instead of aiming for division by prioritizing only particular groups, the Montreal policy speaks of solidarity, of reinforcing the various elements that together give voice to a distinct identity. No one voice is favoured. The objective is to improve on practices, to make them more diverse and inclusive and to ensure that a fair process – including a strict temporal distancing so as to avoid rash decision-making such as what happened in Toronto with Dundas Street – is used to evaluate possible interventions. The report even lists a typical calendar for recognitions and calls for a strategic plan that makes room for review of previous commemorations. It is open to new ideas, notes that women have been dramatically underrepresented in its *reconnaissance* of the past.

The City of Montreal has made grave errors in previous remembrance practices, and has recently again shown that it is prone to misjudgment in taking the position that the vandalized Macdonald monument on Canada Square should not be re-erected. But at least its policy framework shows a serious commitment to the subject of how a community should remember and is worthy of emulation.

### **How the City of Toronto Commemorative Framework actually worked: The Dundas Street debacle**

John Tory indicated in July 2022 that no decisions would be made on the adoption of the CF until after the municipal election and that is now a *fait accompli*. However, it is clear that the CF principles have already been applied on the issue of Dundas Street in downtown Toronto.

In a fit of sudden historical awareness, Mayor Tory encouraged the exploration of a plan to erase “Dundas” in the summer of 2020. Dundas is one of the oldest names on Toronto’s streetscape, dating back to the late 1790s.

For over 200 years, most Torontonians would likely have imagined that the name had been given to honour some important family like the Crawfords, Thompsons, Jarvises, Christies, or Bloors. The better-travelled might have made the link to the Dundas Clan of Scotland, many of whom had immigrated to Canada and to the city. A select few might have wished that it was named for Captain George Dundas, a young University of Toronto student who had joined the Canadian army in 1915, survived gassing at Passchendaele in September 1917 and was killed in April 1918 at Amiens.

In other words, there was no issue with “Dundas”. The street was never publicly associated or identified specifically with Henry Dundas (in over 200 years, no street signage has ever indicated “Henry Dundas”, nor is the square at Yonge known as “Henry Dundas Square”). But the link was made nevertheless and suddenly “Dundas” became an issue. City staff were convinced that the association had to be made and rushed to the conclusion that Dundas Street had to be renamed. In the summer of 2021, it published a report stuffed with countless errors of fact that grievously distorted the life story of Henry Dundas. Not least, it adopted a process that completely side-tracked the broader community, choosing instead to consult only a few groups to justify its conclusion.

### *Who was Henry Dundas, really?*

Henry Dundas (1742-1811) was a giant figure in British politics during the wars that marked the last third of the 18th century and the history of Canada after the American War of Independence. In traditional British and Canadian historiography (English and French), those wars constituted a struggle to maintain British freedom and order from revolutionary threats, oppression, and mythology.

Born in Edinburgh, Dundas studied law at the city’s university and found himself powerfully attracted to the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment. He was also immensely talented. He was named Solicitor General for Scotland almost straight out of university, but particularly distinguished himself in leading the defence of Joseph Knight, a young black man who had been enslaved in Jamaica and taken to Scotland. Knight tried to escape upon setting foot in Britain, but was unsuccessful. Dundas fought for Knight’s freedom and won the landmark case. He was a man of the world.

He combined pride in his Scottish heritage with a broad Enlightenment humanity. He had all the virtues and deficiencies of a progressive Whig and on occasion defended even the rights of Catholics (much to his personal peril – rioters attacked his house in Edinburgh while his mother was at home). He stood up for displaced Highlanders, as well as the enslaved. He took inspiration from Sir Guy Carleton’s *Quebec Act* of 1774 that showed Great Britain could indeed learn to live with Catholics, at least in the context of its large majority-French colony. In fact, Henry Dundas was the man who ordered the government of Lower Canada (today’s Quebec) to *support* the pleas of *Canadien* politicians and ensure that laws introduced in the Legislative Assembly be written in French and that all bills be presented in translation. He was thus responsible for the first policy of bilingualism in this country.

Dundas was also a politician who worked hard to dominate Scottish affairs. He was elected to the House of Commons in 1774 as a protégé of Lord North and later as a leading figure in the government of William Pitt. He served as Secretary of State for the Home Office (1791-4), Secretary of War (1794-1801), and First Lord of the Admiralty (1804-5). His reconstruction of the Royal Navy led to Britain's triumph in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and shattered Napoleon's plans to invade England.

### *The City of Toronto's Report on Henry Dundas*

The report was clearly written by individuals who had no expertise in interpreting the past. No effort was made to consult with experts. Instead, city staff adopted a closed-door, secret process. The report's priority was to focus on the meaning of the word "Dundas" to a very small number of discrete communities.

At least, the report had the virtue of being candid. The city acknowledged that the report was done "in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd and the global protests that followed" (City of Toronto 2021a, 8). The report's accompanying "reading list" declared that Dundas Street was "an act of oppression to continue to honour and recognize individuals who have contributed to the subjugation of Black and Indigenous peoples, and people of colour" (City of Toronto 2021c). It concocted even more bizarre accusations: Dundas was condemned for trying to capture the revolutionary St. Domingue (Haiti) from the French (the report failed to mention that Napoleon crushed the revolt and reinstated slavery).

Unchained, the report piled more accusations (drawn from City of Toronto 2021c): Dundas was accused of having defeated the French forces in Egypt, "a victory that enabled England to enforce colonial control of India." This was a new twist: the British were wrong to defeat Napoleon as he sought total domination of Europe, parts of Africa and the Middle East? The report's *Recognition Review* reading list also cherry-picked one geostrategic effect of that defeat and missed the forest for the trees. "Dundas played a key part in the expansion of Britain's presence and influence in India," it argued. Clearly the authors of the report were unaware of Dundas's opposition to Britons buying *any land* in India. It's a wonder they didn't hold Dundas responsible for the outbreak of the First World War or the Spanish Flu.

According to the City of Toronto (Undated b), "20 academic experts knowledgeable in the areas of public history, Black Canadian studies and public commemoration as a whole" were consulted. In fact, no qualified historians of



either 18th century Britain or Upper Canada, of whom there are a number in Ontario, were involved. Instead, the team writing the report consulted the city's Anti-Black Racism Unit and the Indigenous Affairs Office and concluded that the question was ripe for public consideration.

The five-paragraph history (really, four paragraphs as the first offers no substance) presented in the report revealed the limits of the research that was undertaken. It claimed to be based on a review of “published peer-reviewed academic research prepared by professional historians on Henry Dundas to understand his legacy and how it may impact Black and Indigenous communities in Toronto” (City of Toronto Undated b), but the only source that contends that Dundas “subjugated” Indigenous people was *not* peer-reviewed.

The report's potted history, titled “Recognition Review-Historical Research on the Life and Legacy of Henry Dundas,” does not give any overview of Dundas's career or the times in which he lived. Instead it focuses entirely on one disposition of his at one moment in time, based on select and biased readings, presented without context, and egregiously illogical. First, the text:

In 1792, independent Member of Parliament William Wilberforce brought a bill before the British House of Commons to immediately abolish the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. This proposal followed growing support for abolition among the British public, with a then-record 500 petitions being submitted to the House in support of Wilberforce's bill. During the parliamentary debate, Dundas proposed an amendment qualifying support for the bill by adding the word “gradually”, so that it read that the slave trade “ought gradually to be abolished”. In his speech to parliament, Dundas explained that while he had “long entertained the same opinion ... as to the abolition of the slave trade”, he “must consider how far it may be proper for [him] to give [his] assent” to the bill. He went on to describe how “this trade must ultimately be abolished, but by moderate measures which shall not invade the property of individuals, nor shock too suddenly the prejudices of our West India Islands”. (City of Toronto 2021b, 1)

There are several problems with this material. In fact, Wilberforce first proposed a motion in the House to abolish slavery in 1791, when it was roundly defeated. When he reintroduced it in 1792, Dundas, who was in the legislature this time, introduced a petition from Edinburgh citizens and pronounced himself against slavery.

Dundas then gave his first speech in the House of Commons on abolition, in which he denounced both the slave trade and slavery and warned his colleagues that public opinion was changing and that certain men's business interests in the slave trade were in jeopardy. It was then that he suggested an amendment to win over recalcitrant members and added the word "gradual" to the resolution. This gambit was designed to get *more* support for abolition. Dundas then laid out a plan that would abolish slavery and its trade within seven years. Dundas's amendment helped secure the support of a majority of MPs, providing a rationale and a prescription.

The resolution was supported by the House of Commons but was then defeated in the House of Lords. There were other successful votes in 1794 and 1799 in favour of a motion to ban slave-trading to foreign territories, and both met the same fate. This showed how impossible it was to progress at all on abolition. The Lords were immovable, and so was King George III.

“*Dundas then laid out a plan that would abolish slavery and its trade within seven years.*”

The resolution of 1792 showed Dundas's remarkable courage in a hostile political environment. He was always in favour of Wilberforce's position on abolition in principle, but he knew that Scottish merchants were disproportionately profiting from the slave trade and that it would take time to persuade them that there was a more enlightened and perhaps profitable way to run their business interests without slaves.

Dundas managed to convince most of the recalcitrant Scottish MPs to abstain, and those who did vote mostly voted to support the Wilberforce-Dundas resolution. The point is that Dundas consistently supported an unpopular position and should thus be regarded as something of a hero of the anti-slavery movement.

At the same time, Dundas, in his role as Home Secretary, appointed a celebrated soldier of the Revolutionary War, John Graves Simcoe, who was a friend to both Dundas and Wilberforce, to the position of Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada. It was not an accident that Simcoe's first priority was to abolish

slavery and the slave trade in Upper Canada, making it the first territory of the British Empire, and thus in the world, to pass such legislation. He approved the *Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada* in July 1793, partly in retaliation at the US Congress's *Fugitive Slave Act* of February 1793.

Of course, Simcoe encountered some resistance, but, supported by William Osgoode, the first Chief Justice – also a Dundas appointee – and others, he pressed on and won his case. Reflecting the spirit of his friend Dundas, Simcoe pointedly welcomed black freedom-seekers to Upper Canada, confirming a refugee tradition that reached from the Black Loyalists of the Revolutionary War to the Underground Railroad of the 19th century.

It was as a result of Dundas's intervention that the House of Commons pronounced itself against slavery, knowing full well that King George III and the Lords would not play along. This is not a trivial point. When today's opponents of Henry Dundas attribute to him the defeat of abolition, they forget that most of the political establishment was against it.

Moreover, the incident revealed a difference between Wilberforce and Dundas. The latter consistently argued in favour of ending slavery: for Dundas, it was the only place to start. Wilberforce did not share that view. His focus was on ending the slave *trade* rather than the end of slavery itself. That is because Wilberforce believed that ending the trade would cause planters to improve conditions for slaves in order to “keep up the numbers” and that in turn improving conditions would eventually bring slavery to an end. It was a naive view that later proved to be mistaken in the years after passage of the 1807 Anti-Slave Trade Bill. It would take a long time for Wilberforce to come around. Only in 1823, 12 years after Henry Dundas had died, did Wilberforce help found the Society for the Mitigation and *Gradual* Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions (my emphasis), taking a page from Dundas's approach to the problem.

The fact that the 1792 motion had absolutely no hope of passing has been acknowledged by the most severe critics of Henry Dundas. Even Stephen Mullen, the historian most relied upon by the City of Toronto staff, has admitted that the “1792 bill had no prospect of passing the Lords.” The notion only survives in the heart of the City of Toronto's staff.

This was the second “history” paragraph provided by the city staff in its report:

In moving this amendment, Dundas set out a middle-ground proposal that voiced moderate support for abolition, while also

acknowledging the arguments of opponents of the bill, who saw the continuation of the slave trade as essential to the economy of the British West Indies. Dundas' intentions for doing so have been subject to debate. Biographer Michael Fry, for example, has interpreted the amendment as a compromise solution that allowed the bill to pass in the House of Commons, laying the groundwork for eventual abolition. On the other hand, peer-reviewed academic research offers different interpretations of his actions. Scottish historian Dr. Glen Doris suggests that Dundas' amendment was motivated by "fear of radical change". Dr. Iain Whyte described how Dundas' amendment "effectively delayed abolition for nearly two decades". (City of Toronto 2021b, 1)

Wading skittishly into the historical debate, city staff knew which side they favoured: It was the views of Doris and Whyte, those that supported their thesis. They ignored a whole range of scholars who had demonstrated that such an interpretation of Dundas was wrongheaded and anti-historical.

Why were other experts in the field not considered? The work of Sir Tom Devine, widely regarded as the most authoritative, was not included.<sup>1</sup> Christer Petley's books (2010; 2018) on the remarkable independence of slaveholders in the British Caribbean in the late 18th century were ignored. Oxford professor Brian Young's (1998) exploration on Dundas's progressivism went unmentioned. The work of Guy Rowlands (2021), the Professor at the University of St. Andrews who explored how the war environment around the turn of the century made it impossible to end slavery, was not read. The work of the Henry Dundas Committee for Public Education on Historic Scotland, which included facsimile of key documents, is ignored. New Zealand-based Angela McCarthy (2022a; 2022b), another Scottish history expert, highlighted the fact that the peer-reviewed literature has long considered that Dundas supported the Wilberforce resolution out of goodwill. Her research demonstrated vividly that there is simply no logic in concluding that Dundas delayed anything. It has fallen on deaf ears in Toronto.

To return to the city's report's third paragraph:

Dundas' actions following the 1792 parliamentary debate show a clear opposition [sic] to abolition. Wilberforce continued to present an abolition bill every year until 1799 – but as Glen Doris argues, Dundas "worked hard to defeat subsequent bills". He

points to a communication between Dundas and Wilberforce in 1794 in which Dundas stated that he had “used all the influence he possessed to prevent the abolition question being raised at any rate while the nation was at war,” in reference to Britain’s wars with France (1793-1815). The work of historian Roger Buckley shows that from 1795 until the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the British government sought to enhance its army’s military capability by purchasing approximately 13,400 slaves to serve in the West India Regiments. (City of Toronto 2021b, 2)

This highly distorting passage wilfully ignores the constant communication Wilberforce maintained with Dundas – it was not just a single memo. Dundas is mentioned 40 times in Wilberforce’s 1793-1800 diaries, prompting the Wilberforce Diaries Project to recognize them as evidence of ongoing dialogue. The passage also suppresses the fact that Wilberforce opposed the abolition of slavery for more than 20 years – even after Britain abolished the trade in slaves in 1807. The fact that a law banning slavery was eventually enacted revealed the goodwill that built around the movement, in part because of Dundas. No acknowledgment is made of how an economic case was built in favour of abolition.

The text continues:

As Secretary of War, Dundas was a key architect behind this policy, which made the British Government the largest individual purchaser of slaves during this period. In a paper titled “Henry Dundas: a ‘Great Delayer’ of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” Dr. Stephen Mullen expands on this work, arguing that Dundas’ opposition to abolition after 1792 was grounded in his interest in preserving both the economy of the British West Indies as well as British military capabilities, describing how Dundas “designed a gradual abolition to suit the needs of enslavers and the British state”. In a recent interview with the Scottish Herald, Dr. Mullen concludes that scholarship by historians of slavery and abolition is “unequivocal that Henry Dundas played an instrumental role in delaying abolition for vested interests after 1792”. (City of Toronto 2021b, 3)

This paragraph essentially repeats the previous one, holding Stephen Mullen’s view as entirely authoritative when it emphatically is not. Mentioning the tendentious title of Mullen’s work in the main body of the text, as opposed

to putting it in a footnote, reveals the staff report's bias. It goes on in the last paragraph:

Whatever the motivation behind his amendment may have been, the consequences of Dundas' actions are clear. Whether he is viewed cynically or as a pragmatist, his actions and those of the British government he served contributed to the perpetuation of the enslavement of human beings. Though Dundas' amendment was adopted and a date for abolition was proposed for 1796, the bill was never enacted by the House of Lords. It would be 1807 before the [Abolition of the] Slave Trade Act was finally passed. During this time, more than half a million Africans were enslaved and trafficked across the Atlantic, many to British colonies. (City of Toronto 2021b, 3)

Here again, no actual evidence is brought forward, and so the paragraph essentially repeats the same selective argument, except that now the charge is augmented to include 500,000 slaves. Henry Dundas is thus set up as a straw-man to carry the blame for the entire British Empire on his shoulders, all based on his role in the only vote *in favour* of ending the slave trade. It defies common sense.

As numerous scholars have pointed out, it was Dundas' predecessor as Home Secretary, William Grenville, the 1st Baron Grenville, who authorized the Governor of Jamaica to *purchase* on public account the slaves needed to staff the British garrison on the island. Grenville did not enslave people, but he did rent their services. This practice remains historically and ethically murky. What is clear, however, is that purchase in the late 18th century did not mean "to buy" but instead to "hold" on contract for a period of service. His intention may well have been to *release* the slaves after the emergency was resolved.

Dundas became Secretary of State for War in 1793 and showed his mettle when General Sir John Vaughan asked him repeatedly to authorize the purchase of slaves for black regiments in the British Army. Dundas declined his requests. Vaughan proceeded against Dundas's orders and in 1795 Dundas ordered a halt to this recruitment. A few weeks later, Dundas was forced to reverse his order and authorized the purchase of some slaves. Dundas wrote to Vaughan again, and this time authorized the purchase of slaves. Dundas noted that it was "the king's confidential servants," the cabinet, that made this decision (Buckley 1977).

The reality was that ending slavery in the Caribbean in the 1790s was impossible. Scholars have long known that politicians in London were acutely aware of dissent in the colonies (America being the most prominent) and certainly did not want to see other parts of the empire lopped off. More recently, historians have documented the high degree of conflict between local legislators and the government's representatives. In war, they urgently needed to keep those alliances solid, and there was no way slavery or the slave trade could be abolished without the support of the colonial populations. It was a matter of holding off on that demand until emergencies subsided. That window of opportunity did open in 1807.

Not to be overlooked in the background is the serious geopolitical challenge that Britain faced. A slave revolt in St-Domingue (today's Haiti) had reduced the country to cinders. Britain, at war with France, needed stability in the area in order to fund and supply its military efforts. To suddenly upend slavery there would have impaired that stability and depleted Britain's treasury and ability to fight. Yes, defeating the Europe-wide bloodbath launched by the French Revolution mattered more than ending the slave trade. At least, this was the feeling in the British political establishment.

The original staff report (which was removed from the City of Toronto website in the fall of 2022) pursued the topic of Dundas's relations with Indigenous peoples in the following paragraph:

Consideration must also be given to Dundas' role in the continued subjugation [sic] of Indigenous peoples in Canada in his capacity as Home Secretary. The Home Secretary held oversight over colonial affairs, and as such was a powerful figure who upheld imperial rule. Drawing on maps produced in the 1780s and 1790s, Professor Thomas Pearce has traced how the origins of the western portion of Dundas Street are traced [sic] back to an Indigenous trail pre-colonialism. The naming of this street, which assumes the path of a traditional Indigenous route, after a colonizer, erases Indigenous presence from the landscape, further calling into question the appropriateness of commemorating it with the Dundas name.<sup>2</sup>

This passage was completely inaccurate. If anything, Henry Dundas treasured the alliance struck with Indigenous people as a bulwark against any northern expansion of the American Republic. Simcoe formalized the boundaries of the Six Nations Mohawk people almost as soon as he arrived, resolving a conflict

that had endured for years. Dundas (1791) instructed the Governor at Quebec, Sir Guy Carleton, the 1st Baron Dorchester, that the Crown wished “to show every consistent mark of attention and regard to the Indian Nations” and that any diplomatic interventions with the Americans would strive to protect the interests of the “Indian Nations” such as “securing to them the peaceable and quiet possession of the Lands which they have hitherto occupied as their hunting Grounds, and such others as may enable them to procure a comfortable subsistence for themselves and their families.” That wording, unlike the city’s report, *accurately* reflects Dundas’s approach. Not surprisingly, this paragraph has been suppressed.

Governor Simcoe’s designation of a street that would in time allow for the building of modern residences and businesses may well have been traced upon an older trail (the claim is unproven, but not improbable), but that in itself would have been a compliment to the Indigenous trailblazers. If the exact name of the old trail can be established, there would likely be no objection to adding it to the signposts. That would add charm and depth to an already-rich history behind the street-name. It is worth remembering that the city’s founders were not opposed to Indigenous influences – they actually changed the northern English name of “York” back to a distinctive old Mohawk moniker in 1834. Torontonians today would no doubt share in the spirit of combining an old heritage with another old heritage without erasing the history of the city.

The sad truth is that Toronto’s City Council, led by the mayor, bought the staff report and voted 17 to 7 to rename Dundas Street as well as two subway stations, a public library, the major square in the middle of the city, and a number of parks.<sup>3</sup>

### **Poorly designed consultations**

The city then retained QuakeLab, an independent consultancy on “equity-deserving communities” to further bolster its position. Four “discovery” sessions with 25 unnamed “community leaders” were held. The city claims that business organizations were supportive of renaming the street. It is not clear if they were ever told of the actual cost and asked to suggest better ways to spend such monies, such as helping people who suffer from actual racial discrimination. Instead, according to the report, “the new context” (that is to say, the feverish, violent American summer of 2020) required quick action, leaving no room for such subtleties.



## Insufficient policy capacity

The Dundas Street fiasco showed that there was no expertise in the City Council or in the administration on how to manage and research re-naming issues, let alone manage a Commemorative Framework. The structures and the processes urgently need an overhaul. In my view, the first thing to do would be to create a specific committee to oversee Heritage issues. Such a commission could systematically review commemoration issues as they arose. It could easily identify duplications in street names which could create many opportunities to commemorate. At the same time, it would lead the search for under-memorialized but important people and events that should be on public display.

That committee should be supported by a professional secretariat, headed by a person with deep and extensive experience in evaluating historical evidence. Ideally, this person should have a PhD in Canadian history and capable of leading a small team of researchers and community outreach experts.

There is an important lesson contained in this issue. The assault on Dundas has proven to be another Groundhog Day in what has become a ritualized politics of deception. Whether it is Sir Hector Langevin, Sir John A. Macdonald, Egerton Ryerson, Queen Victoria, or even Fort York, politicians have allowed the extreme views of small cliques to dictate what should be publicly remembered. No public debates are ever held or sponsored, no legislative committees are struck to hear from expert witnesses. Instead, decisions are handed to carefully selected like-minded objectors whose mission is to cut the link between Canadians and their past. The Dundas affair is different in terms of the enormous expenditures it has triggered already and will in the future. What makes this example starker is how city staff have willingly conspired to distort the life and times of Henry Dundas.

The same impulse to invent history has also been revealed at the City of Toronto's Spadina House Museum (a grand historic home located right next to Casa Loma). A new installation titled *Dis/Mantle* "reimagines" the home's history by making it look as if a Ms Louisa Pipkin, a Black woman who was employed by the Austin family who owned the house, had been the owner.<sup>4</sup> The museum – dedicated to the past – becomes the focus for an "Afrofuturist" narrative. Spadina House, the home of one of the richest families in Toronto, is reimagined as a Underground Railroad safehouse for enslaved people. It is an act of fiction and has no bearing whatsoever on the history of Spadina House or on the history of Black lives in Toronto. Instead of using the facility to offer

a proper and dignified historical treatment of the Black historical experience in Toronto, the city authorized a fake. The competence of the staff in charge of “commemoration” really must be questioned.

## Leaving Dundas Street as is

Toronto should also look at what is happening around it. In January 2022, the City Council of Mississauga, the sixth largest city of Canada (population 750,000) where less than half the population speaks English at home, voted unanimously *against* renaming its three-kilometre stretch of Dundas Street, refusing to foot the bill of almost \$2 million. Mississauga wisely concluded that the “interpretations of history” and in particular the “motives and accomplishments of historical figures – are open to controversy and misinterpretation, especially when viewed through a modern lens” (quoted in Jackson 2022). There are no indications yet that the old town of Dundas, Ontario (which is now part of Hamilton Ontario) or the United Counties of Stormont-Dundas and Glengarry in eastern Ontario, will change their name. The town of Belleville, Ontario, has no plans to change the name of its Dundas Street, and neither will London, Whitby, Burlington, or Oakville.

That leaves Toronto with three real policy alternatives. The first is to maintain “Dundas” Street as it was, essentially an anonymous common label familiar to the people living here for two centuries. The second, the better one, would be to rename it “Henry Dundas Street” and take great pride in his accomplishments and his lifelong efforts to defend and help Indigenous people and slaves. The third, of course, would be to pay the high costs of a massive name change campaign, even if it’s founded on fake history, estimated by city staff to range from \$6 million to \$10 million. The financial burden of rebranding for businesses located on Dundas Street or who bear the name “Dundas” is estimated at nearly \$100 million. By branding “Dundas” as a word equivalent to slaver, the city would also expose itself to a class-action suit from the hundreds of people who live in Toronto with that name.

Toronto’s Commemorative Framework has now codified the flawed approach that was used in dealing with Dundas Street. John Tory put a false issue on the policy agenda, agreed to a research path informed by prejudice, and favoured the views of uninformed activists over an evidence-based investigation. The work performed by city staff proved shoddy, leading to recommendations that are divisive and oblivious to cost.

There are policy opportunities in this debacle. Dundas Street should be left as is, and that sorry page in the history of Toronto policy-making should be turned. Toronto does need a Commemorative Framework to guide its policies. Every great city in the world has one, and Toronto needs significant reform to remove meaningless commemorations and to take advantage of opportunities to create “places of memory” that will have a community-and-city building potential.<sup>5</sup> The City of Montreal offers a worthy example of how it can be done, but there are other good examples around the world. Good policy design demands that best practices be solicited and that institutions and practices be aligned so as to deliver a Commemoration Framework that will elevate the city, not diminish it. Toronto is a city of rare accomplishments that deserves to be remembered. [MLI](#)

## About the author



**Patrice Dutil** is a Senior Fellow at MLI. He is an award-winning Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Toronto Metropolitan University. Dutil joined the university in 2006 following 19 years in various parts of the public service and non-profit sector. He is the author, co-author or editor of eleven books and of dozens of scholarly articles and chapters in refereed publications, as well as hundreds of articles in a variety of media. His most recent volume is an edited

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He was the founding editor (1991-1996) of the *Literary Review of Canada* and President of the Champlain Society (2011-2017). In 2013-14 he was a visiting scholar at Massey College (University of Toronto) and visiting professor in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. In the fall of 2018 he was visiting professor at Boston University. He holds a PhD in History from York University, an *Maîtrise ès Arts* from the Université de Montréal, and a BA (Hon.) from York University.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Devine's oeuvre on Scotland's diaspora is considerable. See Devine 2004 and 2011. Devine has been outspoken in his critique of those who have misinterpreted Dundas's actions. See Horne 2021 and Devine 2020.
- 2 This passage can still be found at City of Toronto 2021a, 11.
- 3 The heroic dissenters deserve honourable mention: they were Councillors Gary Crawford, Michael Ford, Mark Grimes, Stephen Holyday, Denzil Minnan-Wong, Frances Nunziata (Chair), and James Pasternak. Only Crawford, Holyday, Pasternak and Nunziata are on City Council following the October 2022 election (the others retired and Grimes was defeated).
- 4 For more information on the art exhibit, see <https://www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/history-art-culture/museums/dismantle/>.
- 5 A rough translation of the French concept of "*Lieux de mémoire*" or places/names that will meaningfully invoke the past.

*constructive* *important* *forward-thinking*  
*excellent* *high-quality* *insightful*  
*active*

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