

TORONTO STAFF REPORT

March 12, 2001

To: Economic Development and Parks Committee

From: Joe Halstead, Commissioner Economic Development, Culture & Tourism

Subject: Appointment of the City of Toronto Poet Laureate
All Wards

Purpose:

The purpose of this report is to appoint the first Poet Laureate for the City of Toronto.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement :

Funding for the Poet Laureate honorarium is provided by a \$5,000 allocation from funds donated to the Public Art Reserve Fund and a \$5,000 grant from the Canada Council for the Arts.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and concurs with the financial impact statement.

Recommendations :

It is recommended that:

- (1) Dennis Lee be appointed the Poet Laureate for the City of Toronto for the years 2001, 2002 and 2003, under the terms outlined in this report; and
- (2) the appropriate City Officials be authorized and directed to take the necessary action to give effect thereto.

Background :

At its meeting held on July 4, 5 and 6, 2000. Council directed the Commissioner Economic Development, Culture and Tourism to develop a plan, in partnership with the League of Canadian Poets and other community stakeholders, for the selection and appointment of a Poet Laureate for the City of Toronto in 2001.

Comments:

The position of Poet Laureate recognizes a poet whose poems display excellence and resonate with a people. In Britain, the Poet Laureate is named by the sovereign as a member of the royal household and is charged with the preparation of suitable verses for court and state occasions. Ben Jonson is widely reported to have been the first, purportedly beginning his tenure in 1616, but the first formal appointment recognized John Dryden in 1668. Poets held the honour for life until the 19th Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, was given a ten-year term in 1999.

The United States Congress officially created the post “Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress” in 1985, but there has been a “Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress” since 1937. Thirty-eight US states have authorized such a post, though not all are currently filled. California was the first, in 1915, followed by Colorado in 1919; Wisconsin appointed its first in late 2000.

Canada does not have a Poet Laureate. However, a Senate bill (S-5, “An Act to amend the Parliament of Canada Act (Parliamentary Poet Laureate)”) to create that position passed Third Reading in June 2000. It must be adopted by the House of Commons before it can come into force.

The position of City of Toronto Poet Laureate honours a poet who writes excellent poetry and has written on themes that are of relevance to the people who live here. Toronto’s Poet Laureate will advocate for poetry and the arts, attract people to the literary world, and use his or her unique perspective to cast light upon society.

City of Toronto Poet Laureate:

An expert Selection Committee was assembled from the literary community to nominate the Poet Laureate. A majority of the eight member Committee were practicing poets. The Selection Committee included Edita Petruskaite (League of Canadian Poets); Rhea Tregebov (poet, Writers Union of Canada); Helen Lanteigne (Toronto Public Library); Bev Daurio (Mercury Press); Victor Coleman (poet, Coachhouse Press); Al Moritz (poet); Stan Rogal (poet); and Daniel David Moses (poet and playwright). In keeping with the notion held in Britain and the United States that the position of Poet Laureate is an honour that is bestowed and not a position of employment, poets were not asked to apply. The Selection Committee relied on its expertise and consultations within the community to select a candidate. The Selection Committee developed a list of candidates that was comprised of twenty-nine prominent poets.

It is the unanimous recommendation of the Selection Committee that Dennis Lee be appointed the Poet Laureate of the City of Toronto. Staff are in complete agreement with this selection.

Dennis Lee was born in 1939, in Toronto, Ontario. His collection ‘Civil Elegies and Other Poems’ was awarded the 1972 Governor General’s Award, one of Canada’s highest literary honours, but Lee continues to be best known for his collections of cleverly-rhymed children’s verse. ‘Wiggle to the Laundromat’ (1970) was written for his daughters, and like much of his

writing, drew upon his experiences as a parent. His other books of poems for children include 'Alligator Pie' (1974), one of the best-selling Canadian children's books of all time; 'Nicholas Knock and Other People' (1974); 'Garbage Delight' (1977); and 'Jelly Belly' (1983). In much of his work, he uses Canadian place-names, local cultural idiosyncrasies, and environmental issues to try to communicate a sense of national identity, but his poems have proven popular among English-speaking audiences all over the world.

Duties:

The Poet Laureate must be given the opportunity to write. It is understood that the Poet Laureate has a full schedule of writing and other professional commitments, independent of the Poet Laureateship. In exchange for the honorarium, the Poet Laureate will commit approximately 15% of his working time to duties as Poet Laureate. With the exception of the annual reading at City Council, the remaining time is to be devoted to serving as Toronto's literary ambassador at events that promote the literary arts and to creating a poetry legacy for the people of Toronto. The duties of the Poet Laureate do not include reading manuscripts or writing poems for civic occasions.

Council is proud that Toronto has a strong literary tradition and wishes to show its support for the vibrant writers who call our city home. Therefore, the Poet Laureate is requested each year to help open the first meeting of Council with a reading.

It is Council's wish that the Poet Laureate help bring poetry to the public, thus, the Poet Laureate is expected to give a reading at the annual Word on the Street festival. From time to time Council may identify priority audiences and would ask that the Poet Laureate make the effort during the term of office to include appearances before and readings to such groups. In this diverse city, the Poet Laureate will be able to bring together people with many different voices.

It is the wish of Council that the Poet Laureate develop a legacy project for the City. The project must be designed in cooperation with City staff and the Toronto Public Library. The legacy project will be unique to the individual. It is easy to imagine a Toronto Poet Laureate helping to create a special collection at the Toronto Public Library or editing an anthology of Toronto poems by young immigrant writers. The Toronto Public Library will be the repository for the legacy if it is not a permanent installation elsewhere.

Term:

The term of the Poet Laureate is tied to the Council term. The Selection Committee will submit its recommendation to Council at its first April meeting; the Poet Laureate serves until the end of Council's term, a little less than three years.

Selection Criteria:

The Poet Laureate must be a resident of Toronto who has produced a body of published work that:

- (a) displays literary excellence;
- (b) includes poems about Toronto subjects; and
- (c) has influenced other writers.

The Poet Laureate must be willing to serve and have the ability to be an ambassador for writers and the literary arts.

Remuneration:

The Poet Laureate will receive an honorarium of \$10,000 per annum. Travel and incidental expenses associated with performing the Poet Laureate's duties shall come from that sum and will not be reimbursed. The City of Toronto gives the money to the Poet Laureate outright and will not audit expenses. The honorarium will be paid on or around May 1 each year.

Administrative Support:

As a City honour, the Poet Laureate will receive from the Toronto Public Library office space and administrative support necessary to perform the public duties. Administrative support includes a mailing address and support for routine office tasks and correspondence. It does not include secretarial assistance for preparing drafts or manuscripts for publication.

Intellectual Property:

All writing, notes and original materials produced during the tenure of the Poet Laureate remain the property of the individual, who shall retain all rights thereto.

Publicity and Promotion:

The City of Toronto undertakes to use its communications resources to promote the post of Poet Laureate. The City makes extensive use of its web page and shall create a link within the Culture Division's existing site. The City already supports the annual Word on the Street festival and shall promote the presence of the Poet Laureate at the festival. The City regularly publishes calendars of events and uses a variety of media to communicate with the people of Toronto. The artist will be asked to work with both the City's Culture Division and the Toronto Public Library to target special audiences and publicize the legacy project.

Conclusion:

Toronto has a strong literary tradition. By establishing the honorary position of City of Toronto Poet Laureate Council reinforces support for this tradition and for the literary community as a whole. It is the intention that through this confirmation the Poet Laureate will bring poetry to a

wider public and that the City of Toronto can look forward to the beginning of an important literary legacy project for the city. Toronto can be proud to have as its first Poet Laureate a world renowned poet of the stature of Dennis Lee.

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Joe Halstead
Commissioner Economic Development, Culture and Tourism

English Poets Laureate

John Dryden 1670-88	William Wordsworth 1843-50
Thomas Shadwell 1688-92	Alfred, Lord Tennyson 1850-92
Nahum Tate 1692-1715	Alfred Austin 1892-1913
Nicholas Rowe 1715-18	Robert Bridges 1913-30
Laurence Eusden 1718-30	John Masefield 1930-67
Colley Cibber 1730-57	Cecil Day Lewis 1968-72
William Whitehead 1757-85	John Betjeman 1972-84
Thomas Warton 1785-90	Ted Hughes 1984-1998
Henry Pye 1790-1813	Andrew Motion 1999-
Robert Southey 1813-43	

US Poets Laureate

Joseph Auslander, 1937-1941	Reed Whittemore, 1964-1965
Allen Tate, 1943-1944	Stephen Spender, 1965-1966
Robert Penn Warren, 1944-1945	James Dickey, 1966-1968
Louise Bogan, 1945-1946	William Jay Smith, 1968-1970
Karl Shapiro, 1946-1947	William Stafford, 1970-1971
Robert Lowell, 1947-1948	Josephine Jacobsen, 1971-1973
Leonie Adams, 1948-1949	Daniel Hoffman, 1973-1974
Elizabeth Bishop, 1949-1950	Stanley Kunitz, 1974-1976
Conrad Aiken, 1950-1952	Robert Hayden, 1976-1978
William Carlos Williams (<i>Appointed in 1952 but did not serve</i>)	William Meredith, 1978-1980
Randall Jarrell, 1956-1958	Maxine Kumin, 1981-1982
Robert Frost, 1958-1959	Anthony Hecht, 1982-1984
Richard Eberhart, 1959-1961	Robert Fitzgerald, 1984-1985
Louis Untermeyer, 1961-1963	Reed Whittemore, 1984-1985 (<i>Interim</i>)
Howard Nemerov, 1963-1964	Gwendolyn Brooks, 1985-1986

Robert Penn Warren, 1986-1987 (*First to be designated Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry*)
Richard Wilbur, 1987-1988
Howard Nemerov, 1988-1990
Mark Strand, 1990-1991
Joseph Brodsky, 1991-1992
Mona Van Duyn, 1992-1993
Rita Dove, 1993-1995
Robert Hass, 1995-1997
Robert Pinsky, 1997-2000
Stanley Kunitz, 2000-

