



History UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

City of Toronto Executive Committee
Toronto City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

July 12, 2022

Attn: Julie Amoroso, Council/Committee Administrator

To the Executive Committee,

My name is Dr. Melanie J. Newton and I am an Associate Professor and Associate Graduate Chair in the Department of History at the University of Toronto. I am also the Co-Chair of the City of Toronto Committee for the renaming of Dundas Street. I am writing today to support “A New Commemorative Framework for the City of Toronto’s Public Spaces” report, submitted today for consideration by the Executive Committee.

The report and its recommended policy changes represent a substantial advancement of best practices in this area, and crucially build on creating municipal policy that appropriately centres the voices of Black, Indigenous, and other equity-deserving communities. City staff are to be commended for their strong commitment to advancing proposals that seek to tell a broader range of stories through our public commemorations, monuments, and public art, and that affirm our city’s commitment to the values embedded in our motto, “Diversity, Our Strength.”

I also wanted to take this opportunity to rebut some of the arguments put forth today by other correspondents on this agenda item. These assertions seek to reopen the settled matter of renaming Dundas Street and cast aspersions on the integrity of the people involved in this process, particularly City staff. These arguments engage in dangerous revisionism and attempt to cast scholars who are critical of Henry Dundas as people who are guided blindly by politics. This misrepresents and diminishes the professional credentials of scholars and city staff, particularly scholars and staff of colour, and exposes them to the possibility of politically motivated abuse.

As a historian, it shocks me to continue to see submissions that willfully cherry-pick information to support the position that Henry Dundas was somehow an opponent of the transatlantic slave trade, despite well over a century of scholarship, not to mention contemporaneous accounts to the contrary. The Pitt government in which Dundas served *chose* to pursue a pro-slave trade and pro-slavery colonial and foreign policy. This was a political decision, not a historical imperative. Dundas served in the Cabinet of this government, as Home Secretary, Minister for War and Colonies and First Lord of the Admiralty – all powerful portfolios. Some of Dundas’s own contemporaries are on record, in no less an institution than Parliament, describing him personally as an impediment to the abolition of the slave trade.

Some people today misunderstand the term ‘gradual abolition’ as an abolitionist position only because they do not know enough about the terminology of the slave trade abolition debate in the 1790s. The Danish government adopted ‘gradual abolition’ in 1792, delaying abolition until 1803 explicitly in order to allow slave traders time to transport more Africans and increase the size of the enslaved population in the Danish Caribbean. This is the same with Dundas’ proposal for ‘gradual abolition’ in the British Empire.

Any debate about Dundas Street and the celebrations of other architects of colonial violence reveals the ongoing work that these monuments do to naturalize and sanitize the legacies of inequality that we have inherited from this shared past. They legitimate a political order, inherited from colonialism, slavery and Indigenous genocide, which constantly reproduces structures that enable some people's access to the levers of power at the expense of others.

It is important that the Executive Committee accept the recommendations put forth by city staff in this new commemorative framework, and further support initiatives to centre the voices of Black, Indigenous, and equity-deserving groups. We can and must share, acknowledge and find appropriate ways to commemorate the reality of the diverse past, present, and future of the land on which we live.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Melanie J. Newton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Melanie J. Newton

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Department of History,
University of Toronto
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