

# Petition calls for name change of Montreal metro station honouring priest

This summer, the memory of Father Lionel Groulx, a French Canadian historian, has been at the heart of a controversy regarding the name of a metro station.

On June 16, Montreal resident Naveed Hussain filed an online petition for the Lionel-Groulx metro station to be renamed Oscar Peterson Station. Pianist and jazz composer Oscar Peterson grew up in the Montreal neighbourhood where Lionel-Groulx station is located.

Peterson is an eight-time Grammy Award winning musician known to be a virtuoso in the international jazz community, Hussain said. He is considered “one of the greatest jazz pianists of our time” with a career that has spanned more than 60 years, he added.

Renaming the station “would allow Montreal to celebrate the legacy of a man who proudly represented our city on the international scene. It also provides Montreal with a golden opportunity to celebrate the beautiful cultural diversity and representation that black Montrealers bring to the city,” he said.

By mid-August, more than 25,000 people were asking for the name of the most important metro station in southwest Montreal to be changed.

Hussain said the goal of his petition “is not to minimize the impact that Lionel Groulx had. It is rather a question of recognizing the contribution of this great Montreal artist who still continues to bring us all, citizens of the city of Montreal, around his music. Oscar Peterson alone embodies the image of the great vibrant, multicultural, open-world metropolis that the city wants to project.”

“There was never any question of rejecting the importance and relevance of Lionel Groulx to the identity of Quebecers,” he added.

Hussain, a Quebec-born Muslim, said he learned a lot “about the kindness and love of Christianity” during his studies in Catholic schools and knows well “the history and struggle of the Quebec nation.”

In an online interview, he said he admires the strength and willingness to overcome oppression in all its forms, which Quebecers have been doing for three centuries.

Ten days after the launch of this petition, a second appeared online. Its initiator, Vincent Filteau, said “the erasure of Lionel Groulx’s name from the Montreal metro map represents a consent to amnesia and to a recasting of our

past.”

“We don’t oppose the nomination of Oscar Peterson’s name for a new Montreal metro station,” he said. “We simply wish that the intellectual contribution and memory of Lionel Groulx be honored at their true value. They certainly don’t deserve to disappear in this way. For this reason, we consider that the name of the Lionel-Groulx station must remain.”

By mid-August, more than 12,300 people had signed Filteau’s petition.

Historian Norman Cornett, a former professor of religious studies at McGill University who earned a PhD on Father Groulx’s theology, said he regrets “this wave or fashion that is becoming a form of inquisition, where we put the past on trial with our values, our point of view, our mentality.”

Montreal is right to recognize the presence of the Black community in the city and to recognize one of its most illustrious representatives, said the professor. “The presence of this community is an integral part of our history.”

“But must history be erased in order to be fashionable?” he asked. “Then we run the risk of becoming short-sighted.”

“No matter how you look at Lionel Groulx, there is no way to understand the evolution of Canadian historiography without going through him,” Cornett said. Father Groulx wrote history books of major importance about French Canada and Quebec, he added.

Changing the name of a street, a park or a metro station is not a trivial gesture because the purpose of toponymy “is to establish points of reference.”

“If we want to have benchmarks in Quebec society in 2020, we have to refer to Lionel Groulx. It’s an anchor point. Society, people, culture need anchor points,” he said.

Reluctant to change the names of streets or institutions, Cornett asked for a “balance between current events and history,” a synergy rather than a confrontation in order to “do justice to all aspects of Montreal.”

*-Gloutnay is a reporter for Presence info in Montreal.*