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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF THE NATIONAL AND  
INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Toponymy and memory: Toward an international protocol for toponymic  
commemoration

(Submitted by Canada)\*\*

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\*\* Prepared by the Commission de toponymie du Québec, Canada

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pour la commémoration toponymique"

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## TOPONYMY AND MEMORY: TOWARD AN INTERNATIONAL PROTOCOL FOR TOPONYMIC COMMEMORATION \*

The naming of places to commemorate persons or events or simply as geographical tributes is a very active process over which toponymic authorities have only partial control. Attributing to places the names of living or recently deceased persons is still a widespread practice. It is generally has more disadvantages than advantages in terms of the public interest, particularly where it jeopardizes names of cultural or historic importance. In 1960, the Group of Experts acknowledged that replacing a geographical name with the name of a living person could pose problems. However, although world toponymic authorities would like to have the support of a United Nations resolution to condemn or eliminate the practice of using the names of living or recently deceased persons as toponyms, no Conference resolution exists in this regard. For these reasons, a proposed resolution has been prepared. The objectives of this resolution are to ensure that the relevant authorities discourage the use of the names of living persons in place names, that they announce an optimum waiting period before the name of a deceased person is used for such purposes, and that this waiting period be no less than one year. The proposed resolution also calls for the development of a toponymic commemoration guide.

### 1. Context and reminders

Toponymy, intimately tied to collective and individual memory, functions at times as a geographical memorial and at other times as a vector for memories in the making. In the Canadian province of Quebec, interest in these relationships is revealed by the number of active organizations dedicated to toponymy, genealogy, Quebec heritage, the province's shared heritage with France, and the civic life of the provincial capital. This interest is also evident in the number of gazetteers and toponymic dictionaries published, the dissemination of place-name origins and meanings on the Web, the adoption of commemorative names for unnamed features, the development of lists of names for commemoration, etc. Names commemorating persons or events are primarily assigned to transportation routes, public buildings, electoral districts, and certain geographical features.

Interest in the use of toponymy as a repository and as a vehicle of cultural information has also been conveyed via resolutions adopted by the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names, specifically the 6<sup>th</sup> resolution of the 1987 Conference (V/6), which acknowledged "the importance of geographical names as significant elements of the cultural heritage of nations," and the 9<sup>th</sup> resolution of the 1992 Conference (VI/9), which stated that it was "aware of the sensitivity to deliberate changing of geographical names, which could lead to the loss of cultural and historical heritage." Moreover, the Topical Exhibition - *Preserving the Past - Linking to the Future* - organized in conjunction with this 8<sup>th</sup> Conference, is eloquent confirmation of the movement to call attention to the strength and depth of the link between geography and history. This exhibition aptly places the standardization of geographical names in an overall perspective that is humanist in nature and that maintains the scientific rigour which is itself necessary to intelligible territorial discourse.

## 2. Problems related to names of living persons

Preservation of geographical names that are distinctive because of their cultural or historical value - names that comprise the geographical memorial of the nations of the world referred to above - is supported by United Nations' resolutions that unequivocally endorse the actions of agencies and persons who promote this objective. In contrast, there is no equivalent formal support from the Group of Experts or the Conferences for the actions of those who are building the heritage of the future by naming unnamed features primarily through toponymic commemoration. In 1960, the Group of Experts asked to what extent and how the use of commemorative names should be controlled, and proposed this nuanced response:

"If a geographic nomenclature is to become more or less orderly, new naming has to conform to a pattern. Some degree of control is generally possible, and, if shown to be in the public interest, is generally acceptable. The emotional storms that sometimes accompany proposed new naming involving the names of living persons can generally be avoided by an explicit statement of policy and adherence to it without exception." (Report by the Group of Experts on Geographical Names, published in *World Cartography*, Vol. VII, United Nations, 1962).

The toponymic authorities of the world have therefore found themselves in a position of writing their own code of ethics in this regard, without the unequivocal support of the international expert organization. Certain countries, such as Canada and the United States, have ruled on their own waiting period to be respected before posthumously applying a personal name. However, the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names have not yet deemed it appropriate to take a more concrete position in this regard. Four decades of work on the standardization of geographical names in the Canadian province of Quebec have revealed the persistence of a practice that local experts consider problematic: adoption of a personal name during the lifetime or shortly following the death of the person concerned. This persists despite a clear Quebec standard prohibiting officialization of place names commemorating persons who are living or have been deceased for less than one year. Toponymists see the practice as a source of problems for several reasons, including the following:

- a) The historical perspective needed to correctly assess the person's contribution to the community is lacking. It is impossible to consult archives to ensure that the decision made is a sound one, moreover, after a personal name has been used to designate a feature, the individual in question could behave in a manner inconsistent with the status of a person publicly honoured by a commemorative toponym.
- b) The practice may lead to excessive intervention
- c) The practice may lead to the replacement of historical names, often associated with important features, such as densely populated places or major geographical features, that may be targeted for their visibility and for reasons unrelated to sound toponymic management.

### 3. Proposed resolution

Modern societies set up bodies or authorities that are responsible for ensuring that national, regional, and local needs are met in terms of the commemoration of persons and events. Commemorations marked by the installation of commemorative plaques in significant locations, the erection of monuments, and the organization of ceremonies, etc., are legion, and their contexts are always carefully planned according to standards of protocol. Until now, however, commemorative toponymic activities have not received the attention from the United Nations Group of Experts that is warranted by their widespread nature.

Given that this activity, so widespread among the various toponymic authorities of the world, is associated with the problematical practice of the adoption of personal names during the lifetime or shortly after the death of the persons concerned, we believe that it would be appropriate for the Conference to focus on the matter and adopt a framework resolution. The following is a proposed model for such a resolution.

#### Standardization of toponymic commemoration

The Conference,

Noting that use of the names of persons or events to designate features for commemorative purposes or simply as geographical reminders constitutes an active process over which toponymic authorities have only a partial influence,

Recognizing that the adoption of a personal name during the lifetime or shortly after the death of the person concerned is a widespread practice.

Recognizing that this practice is generally more disadvantageous than advantageous in terms of the public interest and that it represents a serious threat to names of cultural or historical interest,

Recalling that previous Conferences have stressed the fact that geographical names are significant elements of the cultural heritage of nations and that to change them is a delicate undertaking that can threaten to undermine cultural or historical heritage,

Recalling that, during the meeting of 20 June to 1 July 1960, the Group of Experts acknowledged that replacing a geographical name with the name of a living person could be a source of problems,

Noting that no support exists for world toponymic authorities who are seeking the backing of a United Nations resolution denouncing or eliminating the practice of adopting a personal name during the lifetime or shortly after the death of the person concerned,

1. Recommends that the competent authorities discourage the use of a personal name to designate a place during the lifetime of the person in question;<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Place could mean a geographical feature or a populated place

2. Recommends that the competent authorities make public the desirable length of the waiting period to be observed before using a commemorative personal name, and that this waiting period be not less than one year;
3. Recommends that, in order to provide support within a standardized context for the commemorative actions of the various world toponymic authorities, a toponymic guide be prepared on the commemoration and recycling of names that have disappeared or have been replaced.

The Geographical Names Board of Canada would be pleased to collaborate on the preparation of such a guide, and is interested in receiving any suggestions or information on the subject.