

# Obituary: Victor Goldbloom was a cabinet minister, a bridge builder, and a 'true gentleman'



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Victor Goldbloom is invested as Companion to the Order of Canada by Governor General Adrienne Clarkson in 2000. JONATHAN HAYWARD / CANADIAN PRESS

There could be no more apt description of Victor Goldbloom's life than the title of his recent book, *Building Bridges*.

A pediatrician and politician, a Jew who was honoured by the Catholic Church for his efforts to build interfaith dialogue and an anglophone with deep roots in francophone Quebec, Goldbloom was the quintessential Montrealer, Quebecer and Canadian.

He died of a heart attack Monday night at age 92.

Despite his age, Goldbloom was in good health and still active in public life right up until his death.

Graham Fraser, Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages – a post Goldbloom held from 1991-99 – noted that Goldbloom had been scheduled to speak before an upcoming National Assembly committee on the reorganization of Quebec school boards.

"It's rare with somebody at 92 that you have the sense that we are losing someone who is still in total mastery of his powers and still has the capacity to influence anybody who hears him," Fraser said.

"His commitment, his passion, his eloquence were undiminished," he added.

Throughout his varied career as cabinet minister, interfaith advocate and language commissioner, respect was Goldbloom's hallmark, Fraser said.

"He was very respectful of everybody that he dealt with, after growing up in a period when there was anti-Semitism in Montreal," he said.

Goldbloom demonstrated the "pediatrician's skills of listening, of observing and of patience and respect," he added.

Goldbloom was born in Montreal on July 31, 1923, into a distinguished medical family with a passion for music. He studied medicine at

McGill University, following in the footsteps of his father, Alton Goldbloom, a pioneer of modern pediatrics who helped develop the Montreal Children's Hospital.

In 1966, Goldbloom was elected as MNA for D'Arcy McGee. He served in Premier Robert Bourassa's cabinet from 1970 until 1976, when the Parti Québécois came to power.

Fraser, a former journalist, recalled the first time he met Goldbloom in 1976 in a popular Quebec City restaurant frequented by politicians and journalists.

Goldbloom, then Municipal Affairs and the Environment Minister, stopped by his table and, with little prompting, broke into a creditable operatic rendition of O Sole Mio, Fraser said.

At the time, Goldbloom had earned national fame for saving the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal, plagued by construction delays, cost overruns and labour conflict.

In his memoir, published last year by McGill-Queens University Press, Goldbloom was characteristically modest about his role, saying all he did was to set up daily meetings where organizers gave progress reports.

But without the timely intervention, the games might not have opened on time, Fraser said.

"Until he did that and managed to bring everybody together, the Olympics had been on a fast track to failure.

"It was characteristic of his modesty and his lack of desire to claim credit for something that he felt other people had done that he played this down, but it was critical," Fraser added.

From 1979 to 1987, Goldbloom was president and CEO of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews.

"He was a really strong voice for interfaith dialogue and for progressive Judaism," said Lisa Grushcow, rabbi of Temple Emanu-

El-Beth Sholom in Westmount, of which Goldbloom was a past president.

“He stood in the best tradition of really ground-breaking dialogue. In addition to that, he was just what we would call a *mensch*. He was a wonderful human being. He cared about people, Grushcow said.

Still extremely active in the congregation, Goldbloom had a lunch meeting scheduled Tuesday with the synagogue’s president, she said.

“I don’t think there are many people who at 92, if you hear about their death, that it’s a shock, but it absolutely was with Victor, because I think we all thought he would go on forever, and we were counting on him because he still brought so much in so many ways,” Grushcow said.

“We say in our tradition, you want to leave the world better than you found it and that he really did,” she added.

Goldbloom’s many volunteer activities included chairing the Board of the Health and Social Services Agency of the Island of Montreal from 2002 to 2015, serving as honorary president of the Jules and Paul-Émile Léger Foundation and as president of Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Montreal.

He was a Companion of the Order of Canada – Canada’s highest distinction – and an Officer of l’Ordre National du Québec.

In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI awarded him the Pontifical Equestrian Order of St. Sylvester Pope and Martyr for his outstanding contribution to promoting Christian-Jewish dialogue.

In the National Assembly, politicians observed a moment of silence after speaker Jacques Chagnon announced Goldbloom’s passing.

Premier Philippe Couillard expressed his sympathy and reminded Quebecers of the work Goldbloom did uniting people of all stripes.

“He was a great Quebecer, a great Canadian of course,” Couillard said.

“He did a lot for Quebec in uniting people across lines of religion, of language of communities. He’ll always be remembered and we’ll always be grateful to him,” he said.

Native Affairs Minister Geoffrey Kelley called Goldbloom’s death “a very great loss.”

“I think many, many people in Quebec learned a great deal from Victor Goldbloom,” Kelley said, noting that Goldbloom “worked hard to make sure relations improved between various communities on the island of Montreal and Quebec society.”

David Birnbaum, the MNA for D’Arcy McGill, also hailed Goldbloom’s moral leadership.

“Victor, beyond being a gift to the Jewish community that I’m proud to be part of, was a gift to Quebec, to Canada and in some ways to the entire world in his work on inter-religious dialogue,” Birnbaum said.

He added that Goldbloom “in so many ways to me represents the love and connection of English-speaking Quebecers to this province. He spoke of unity of moving this province and this country forward with grace, intelligence and real wisdom.”

Mayor Denis Coheere saluted Goldbloom as “above all a unifying force, an extremely talented politician and a great expert on compromise.”

McGill principal and vice-chancellor Suzanne Fortier also hailed Goldbloom for “helping foster greater understanding and tolerance.”

David J. Cape, national chair of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA), praised Goldbloom’s accomplishments in politics, language relations and interfaith dialogue.

“The Jewish community of Canada has lost a beacon and one of the most outstanding leaders of our time,” he said.

Eric Maldoff, chair of CIJA Quebec, called Goldbloom “a pillar upon whom we could rely and to whom we could turn for thoughtful advice and wise counsel. He was a true gentleman, moderate in his views,

balanced in his judgment and generous with his time for community, building bridges and goodwill.”

Goldbloom’s elder son Michael, the principal and vice-chancellor of Bishop’s University in Lennoxville and former publisher of the Montreal Gazette, said his father was a model of moderation who brought together “people of different faiths, different languages and different political perspectives.”

His brother Jonathan, a public relations consultant who ran for the federal Liberal nomination in Mount Royal in 2014, praised his father’s commitment to dialogue, a trait Victor learned from his own father.

Goldbloom always made time in his busy schedule for family and during his years as a politician always called home at breakfast, supper and bedtime when the National Assembly was in session, Jonathan recalled.

Goldbloom is survived by his wife of 67 years, retired McGill professor of social work Sheila Goldbloom; their children, Susan Restler (Peter Restler), Michael Goldbloom (Fiona Macleod), Jonathan Goldbloom (Alice Switocz); as well as four grandchildren, two great-grandchildren and Victor’s brother, Dr. Richard Goldbloom.

A funeral will be held Friday at noon at Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom in Westmount.

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