



Ottawa advised not to lower flag for dead soldiers

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OTTAWA—An expert panel has advised cabinet to oppose a move to lower the Canadian flag on the Peace Tower whenever a soldier dies in Afghanistan because it would debase the honour.

In a report to Secretary of State Jason Kenney, a former chief herald of Canada urged the government to keep Remembrance Day as the lone anniversary to mark Canadian war dead by lowering the tower flag to half-mast.

The Commons is poised to vote Wednesday on a flag-lowering motion proposed by a Liberal MP.

Former chief herald Robert Watt, with the support of four other experts, recommended a new protocol that would limit half-masting the Peace Tower flag to mourning the deaths of current and former representatives of the Crown, the prime minister and the chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Under the recommendations, the flag would no longer be lowered on the deaths of senators and MPs, or former senators and MPs.

"In addition, we also strongly believe that there is only one commemorative day each year where the National Flag needs to be half-masted," Watt wrote in a covering letter to Kenney.

"That is Remembrance Day. Our rationale in this case is that coinage of half-masting has been debased."

Kenney commissioned the report last year in part to buttress Conservative arguments against lowering the Peace Tower flag for Afghanistan war dead.

A debate has been simmering over Liberal MP Andrew Telegdi's motion calling on the Commons to declare that the Peace Tower flag should be lowered to honour "Canadian Forces and other Canadian government personnel who were killed while serving in overseas peacekeeping, peacemaking or humanitarian missions."

The motion threatens to rekindle a furor that raged in May 2006, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper and then defence minister Gordon O'Connor came under fire for refusing to lower the Peace Tower flag for each Canadian combat death in Afghanistan.

The former Liberal government of Paul Martin briefly broke with the Canadian Heritage Department's protocol for half-masting the Peace Tower flag by extending the honour for several Canadian soldiers who died in the line of duty in Afghanistan.

Existing protocol calls for the tower flag to be lowered on the death of a lieutenant governor, on the death of a Canadian privy councillor, the legal title for a cabinet minister or former cabinet minister, a senator, a member of the House of Commons or "on the death of a person whom it is desired to honour."

Harper also came under criticism early last year after he ordered the Peace Tower flag lowered upon the death of former U.S. President Gerald Ford, after having earlier refused to lower it for Canadian dead in Afghanistan.

Eighty-one Canadian soldiers and one Canadian diplomat have been killed in Afghanistan, the vast majority of them after the current combat mission began in Kandahar.

A Conservative source said Harper is concerned that if the controversy is renewed, only two weeks after a Canadian soldier was killed by a landmine in Kandahar province, it may take a political turn.

"The prime minister does not want this to be a partisan issue," said the source.

But the political manoeuvring was evident as MPs debated Telegdi's motion before the Commons March break.

Telegdi noted the Peace Tower itself was constructed as "a living national monument to peace" following the First

World War, and noted that Conservative MP James Moore, now parliamentary secretary to Public Works Minister Michael Fortier, once demanded the Peace Tower flag be lowered to half-mast for a Canadian sailor who died after a fire on the HMCS Chicoutimi submarine.

Conservative MP Mike Wallace argued "what must not be forgotten is the importance and meaning of November 11, Remembrance Day."

As well as resisting pressure to lower the Peace Tower flag for Canadians killed in Afghanistan, Harper and O'Connor also temporarily barred the news media from coverage of Canadian dead arriving at Canadian Forces Base Trenton, Ont., and then ruled family members would decide on the extent of coverage.

"We feel that our recommendations will ensure that the National Flag is properly respected when it is half-masted," Watt said in his letter to Kenney.