

# Majority wants flag lowered: poll; More women back honour for fallen soldiers

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A strong majority of Canadians -- two out of three -- say they want the Canadian flag atop the Peace Tower to fly at half-mast every time a soldier dies overseas, according to a new Ipsos Reid poll that shows the Conservative government's policy of refusing to lower the flag is unpopular with women in particular.

The survey, conducted for Canwest News Service and Global National, said 66 per cent of Canadians want the flag lowered to mark individual deaths, as well as on Nov. 11, the day set aside to collectively honour all fallen soldiers.

The poll says women are significantly more likely than men to think the flag should be lowered each time a soldier is killed. The split was 72 per cent to 60 per cent.

Pollster Darrell Bricker said the 12-point gender gap is striking, and illustrates anew the problem the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has attracting women voters.

"This is clearly 72 per cent of women nationwide saying they are offside with the government," said Bricker, president of Ipsos Reid. "You don't generally see gender gaps this big on an issue."

Bricker speculated it reflects a greater tendency of women to sympathize with the mother of a fallen soldier and put themselves in her shoes.

Flag protocol catapulted into the limelight last week when Liberal, Bloc Quebecois and New Democrat MPs banded together and easily outvoted Conservative MPs to approve a motion requiring the government to lower the flag each time a soldier is killed overseas in a military operation.

The government has said it plans to ignore the motion and stick to its policy of not lowering the flag to mark individual soldier deaths. The Conservatives reversed the former Liberal government policy of flying the flag at half-mast for each soldier killed when they assumed power in February 2006.

Opposition MPs have predicted the Conservative stance will hurt the party with voters.

Calgarian Tim Goddard, who lost his daughter Capt. Nichola Goddard in Afghanistan, said his views are in the minority.

"Lowering it on Remembrance Day is a stronger symbol of remembrance," Goddard said Tuesday.

After Nichola's death, the University of Calgary lowered its flag, as did other communities in which she'd lived.

"They had a connection with her. The Peace Tower flag was not lowered and, to be honest, I hadn't expected it to be.

"I worry sometimes about the politicization of these things," Goddard said, adding it's a case of opposition parties looking to flex their muscles.

Wild Rose MP Myron Thompson said Tuesday there are many ways to show respect for military deaths in Afghanistan, such as lowering the flag in the soldier's home community, but he disagrees with the motion to lower the flag atop the Peace Tower after every military death abroad.

"If you overuse that (symbol), sooner or later it becomes meaningless. It has a very substantial meaning that has been recognized for years."

Bob Bergen, fellow at the Centre of for Military and Strategic Studies at the U of C, said the sentiment is misplaced by those who want to lower the flag for every death in Afghanistan.

"I believe the time to remember people who die in Afghanistan is on Remembrance Day because the other soldiers who died peacekeeping or in exercise are just as dead as the ones who died or are dying in Afghanistan."

The poll said younger Canadians were slightly more inclined, at 71 per cent, than middle-aged (69 per cent) or older Canadians (59 per cent) to believe the flag should be lowered each time a soldier is killed in the line of duty.

The poll, conducted Friday through Monday, involved telephone interviews with 1,021 adults. In a sampling that size, the estimated margin of error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.