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Telegdi's bill to salute fallen soldiers slams up against Tory policy

March 31, 2008

GEOFFREY STEVENS

This is a small story about a member of Parliament who is fighting for a principle in which he believes. Although he appears to have the support of a majority of MPs, the principle he espouses has run into the stone wall of Conservative government policy.

The MP is Andrew Telegdi, the Liberal member from Kitchener-Waterloo since the 1993 election that brought Jean Chrétien to power. His cause is a simple one -- to persuade or, if necessary, to embarrass the government into lowering the flag to half-mast on the Peace Tower whenever a Canadian soldier is killed in Afghanistan or on some other overseas assignment. He also asks that the House of Commons honour the memory of each fallen soldier by observing a moment of silence.

Things are seldom simple in Ottawa, however. Telegdi's motion -- which is scheduled to come to a vote on Wednesday -- has attracted the opposition of the prime minister, his cabinet and most of the Conservative caucus, including his neighbour (in geography if not in political philosophy), Harold Albrecht, the first-term Conservative from Kitchener-Conestoga.

The two MPs crossed verbal swords when Telegdi's motion was debated in January. Telegdi noted that under the Chrétien and Paul Martin Liberal governments, the flag was lowered when Canadian troops were killed overseas. That practice ended when Stephen Harper became prime minister and adopted the George Bush approach. The Conservatives attempted to prevent media coverage of the repatriation of the bodies of Canadian soldiers -- an attempt that ended when military families protested -- and they stopped lowering the flag and pausing for a moment's silence.

"We are talking about something that is very simple and very basic," Telegdi said. "We should be commemorating the passing of the soldiers who have been killed overseas while serving this country, soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice. We should be commemorating their passing in this House and also lowering the flag on top of the Peace Tower."

But Albrecht wasn't having any of that. Lowering the Peace Tower flag, he said, "insulted the relatives in memory of tens of thousands of past veterans who gave their lives for Canada but who were not granted this additional honour. Was their sacrifice any less important than those today?" And what, Albrecht asked, about Canadian Forces personnel killed while serving in Canada? Would the flag be lowered in their honour? And what about police officers and firefighters?

Prime ministers and cabinet ministers seldom deign to involve themselves in debates on private member's motions or bills. So the government sent forth Conservative MP Jim Abbott, a parliamentary secretary, to buttress Albrecht's arguments.

Governments have policies on just about everything. Thanks to Abbott's intervention, we now know that since 1966 the federal government has had a policy, amended from time to time, on when the flag should be lowered. In brief, the Peace Tower is half-masted (as they say) if the Queen dies, or a member of the Royal Family, or a present or former Governor General or prime minister, or a serving MP or senator. It is also half-masted on special commemorative occasions -- Nov. 11 (Remembrance Day), Dec. 6 (to commemorate the killing of 14 young women at Montreal's Ecole polytechnique) and April 28 (to honour workers killed on the job). But not when a soldier dies in Afghanistan.

What happens if, as seems likely, Telegdi's motion passes on Wednesday? The government could accept it. Or it could simply ignore it. The latter would raise an interesting jurisdictional issue. The Peace Tower is part of the Parliament Buildings. Who controls those buildings, including the flagpole? Who decides whether the Commons may take a moment to honour a fallen soldier? Is it the government of the day? Or is Parliament? I'd vote for Parliament.

Cambridge resident Geoffrey Stevens, an author and former Ottawa columnist and managing editor of the Globe and Mail, teaches political science at Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Guelph. He welcomes comments at geoffstevens@sympatico.ca

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