

To whom it concerns,

I am writing concerning the proposed Valour District for Kingston.

I want to express my strong concerns about, and opposition to, this proposal. My sense is that the context surrounding the proposal is very complicated. I will address this complexity in my comments.

I am sending cc's of this email to: Rob Hutchison, councilor for the area that includes the proposed district; Jim Neill, councilor for the area in which I live; five members of the City's Municipal Heritage Committee (the two councilors, Liz Schell and Peter Stroud; and three committee members whose names I recognize, Mac Gervan, Laura Murray and Ed Grenda); and councilors Lisa Osanic and Ryan Boehme (the mover and seconder of the Council motion that initiated this process). I don't understand why Council's proposal went to the Planning Department rather than to the Municipal Heritage Committee, which seems to me to be the more appropriate first step -- although I am confident that the Planning Department and Council will be in good communication with the Committee about this matter.

I want to address three aspects of the context within which plans and decisions will need to be considered:

The cultural and historical context

The motion identifies local soldiers who fought in 'World War I and World War II' as the basis for the proposal. Since Canada is already in the middle of ongoing celebrations of World War I (which will continue for a few more years), my sense is that the centennial of that war actually constitutes the main rationale. 'The Great War'. 'The War to End All Wars'. According to what I have learned about World War I, it had two main causes or purposes: consolidation and extension of imperialism by major powers on both sides of the conflict; and the first substantial chance for warrior nations on both sides to use the implements and methods of industrial warfare that they had been busily (and profitably) developing. We see today in the Middle East dramatic effects of imperialist outcomes of World War I. And we have learned, to our considerable shame and sorrow, just what industrial warfare can produce.

I am reminded of some profound words from a song about World War I, 'The Greenfields of France', by the Scottish/Australian singer-songwriter, Eric Bogle:

*I can't help but wonder now Willie McBride,
Do all those that lie here know why they died?
Did you really believe them when they told you the cause?
Did you really believe that this war would end wars?*

I also know how divisive was the decision in Canada to conscript and send our soldiers to fight in that war. And how the war itself generated here at home all kinds of tensions and even hatreds, some of which caused serious oppression of people against whom those hatreds were directed.

What are we collectively trying remember when we commemorate wars in which Canada (including '...members of this community...') has fought? What should we remember? World War I was an ugly and destructive undertaking on all sides. Wars are like that -- this one especially so. Lest we forget.

The motion intends to commemorate the 'valour' of the '...brave members of this community who stepped forward...to fight for King and country....' Yes, valour can indeed be a behaviour which characterizes what soldiers sometimes demonstrate in wars -- but the word by no means captures everything that happens in battles. It is a word that expresses the glorification of war. If -- as I do -- we want our community to help our nation and the world to move beyond the tragedy that war represents, we need to make sure that we remember the ugliness and destructiveness of war, as well as its 'valour'. Not an easy responsibility to undertake -- but immensely important.

Kingston is and has always been a military centre in Canada. I do believe that it is important for Canada to have an appropriately strong and effective military, for times when it can play a useful role for our security and well-being, and to help accomplish social justice and stability in the wider world. (For example, I have never been prouder of contributions of the Canadian military than in its peacekeeping activities not so many years ago -- a role that has been roundly disparaged in recent times by some political and military leaders and others -- a role, incidentally, that generated incredible valour by our peacekeeping soldiers in frighteningly difficult circumstances.)

Given the strength of military culture and presence in Kingston, I realize that it will be difficult for councilors to vote against a motion that celebrates the 'valour' of local people who fought in The Great War (as well as in The Good War).

The political context

The proposal has a political context which confuses and confounds its city planning aspects.

My strong opposition to it does not represent opposition to the Canadian military. As with all Canadians who put themselves in harms way on our behalf (police forces on various levels, firemen, correctional staff and others), and especially those whom we authorize to use lethal force against others, I recognize that they are there to do significant tasks. Certainly we need to scrutinize how they are trained to do that work, and how they are organized and led when they do it. We must not lose sight of the possibly negative effects of the authority they are given, and the limits that must surround the work. For each of these examples -- and especially the military -- it is our political leaders who are ultimately responsible. Since we have a democratic politics, we elect those leaders.

This is a Federal election year. For a number of years, the leaders of our Federal government have been working to re-define Canada as a 'warrior nation'. They have discovered how to create and use fear of 'terrorism' to strengthen and extend Canadian military powers (and most recently, intrusions of 'security agencies' into our civil liberties). Obviously the lessons of World War I have not been lost, in this regard. In addition, we live next to what is perhaps the most militarized culture in modern history, with all its powerful influences on how we see ourselves within our world.

We recently experienced the silly, albeit expensive, celebration of another Canadian war, The War of

1812 -- as a lead-in to our current, several-year commemoration of The Great War. All this is occurring within the context of our current 'war against terror', and its glorification of soldiers giving their lives to protect 'our freedoms'. What is happening is the production of myths -- and really, the re-production of myths handed down to us from the past. (e.g., Vimy, the battle that created the Canadian nation.)

The heroes of these myths are invariably the soldiers (and sailors and war-plane fliers) -- we are encouraged to believe it is their valour which is keeping us free and strong. (In Somalia, In Afghanistan, in Libya, now in Iraq and Syria.)

Myth-building has many parts. It happens in many places, on many levels. It works best when we don't even know it's happening. Our current government has figured all this out, to an impressive (and incredibly effective) degree.

Establishing a Valour District is but one brick (among countless others) in the wall of constructing the myth of Canada as a warrior nation. I'm not saying that was its intention among Councilors who voted (unanimously) to initiate this project -- I'm saying that will be its effect. This is an election year.

Opposing the establishment of a Valour District, especially here in Kingston, this military centre, will take civic courage and political will.

The planning context

I wonder a few things about the planning process for this proposal:

-What part will the people who live in the intended district play, in decisions about whether or not to move forward with the planning?

-How strong a role is it appropriate for military institutions in Kingston to play in a project which has implications far beyond the boundaries of those institutions?

-How will the Municipal Heritage Committee be involved in planning?

-What in the world makes the designated area relevant to what this proposal intends to accomplish? (We already have two major areas dedicated to the idea of the 'valour' of soldiers: CFB Kingston and RMC.)

-Very importantly: Given how difficult it will inevitably be for people in public life to seem to 'oppose' the idea of the 'valour' of Canadian soldiers, especially in events as filled with emotional meanings as the World Wars, what will the City do to make sure that all sides and interpretations of this proposal get fair hearing?

Thank you for reading and considering my submission.

Jeffrey Piker