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Tories blasted for firing nuclear watchdog

OTTAWA - The Harper government was accused yesterday of behaving like a dictatorship after it fired the head of Canada's nuclear safety watchdog for refusing to start up a reactor she deemed unsafe.

The "dead of night" firing of Linda Keen, only 12 hours before she was to testify before a Commons committee, left opposition MPs howling with outrage.

Liberal natural resources critic Omar Alghabra said firing the head of the independent, quasi-judicial nuclear regulator is akin to firing a judge whose rulings displease the government.

"Today is a really sad day," Alghabra said.

"We often hear of incidents like that in countries abroad where there is dictatorships firing independent judges or quasi-judicial (officials) at their whim. But I never expected to see that day happen here in Canada."

Alghabra said Prime Minister Stephen Harper should have fired instead his natural resources minister, Gary Lunn, for "blatant interference" in an independent agency.

Opposition parties further accused the government of trying to silence Keen and cover up its own incompetence in the handling of last month's shutdown of the research reactor at Chalk River, Ont., which prompted a worldwide shortage of medical isotopes used to diagnose and treat cancer and other illnesses.

And Liberal David McGuinty suggested the government may be trying to remove someone it perceives as an obstacle to the growth and prosperity of the nuclear industry in Canada.

But Lunn said Keen was axed because she failed to use her executive powers to resolve the impasse over the Chalk River reactor, owned and operated by Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. He said she displayed a "lack of leadership."

"(Keen) has lost the confidence of the government in fulfilling her executive responsibilities in that role," he told a special meeting of the Commons natural resources committee.

Lunn also said that Keen's appointment is "held at pleasure" of the government, meaning it can be terminated without cause.

However, a government website listing cabinet appointments shows that Keen was appointed "to hold office during good behaviour." Such appointments typically require some proof of incompetence or wrongdoing to terminate.

Keen was scheduled to testify at the committee following Lunn. She initially agreed early yesterday but backed out about an hour later, citing her late-night firing. She also declined to speak to the media.

The Chalk River reactor, which produces more than half the world's supply of medical isotopes, was shut down for a few days on Nov. 18 for routine maintenance. But it remained closed for almost a month after the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission objected to the fact that it had been operating for 17 months without the required emergency power backup system for two cooling pumps that prevent the reactor's core from melting down.

AECL spokesman Dale Coffin said yesterday that the Crown corporation is on track to complete the safety upgrade by mid-March.