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THE HOUSE OF COMMONS' VOTE ON BRITISH INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

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With its vote on Syria in August 2013, the UK House of Commons delivered a historic defeat to a Prime Minister and a government on a matter of military policy. We examine that vote, and the developments leading to it, by identifying the conditions that produced this unexpected outcome. We conclude that public opinion, intraparty divisions, poor party management, and the shadow of Iraq combined to create a context in which parliament exerted decisive influence.

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The invitation to struggle

On 29 August 2013 the UK House of Commons inflicted the first defeat on a Prime Minister over a matter of war and peace since 1782¹. The Commons, recalled by David Cameron to debate and vote on the prospect of military action against Syria, surprised the Prime Minister and crucially impacted the development of UK foreign policy. This was, as one observer put it: “A leader humbled, a nation cut down to size”². A clear foreign policy preference of the UK government was taken off the table as a result of the vote, which also triggered calls for parliamentary debate on the issue in both Paris and Washington. This analysis examines that vote, and the developments leading to it, by identifying the conditions that produced this unexpected outcome.

These conditions resonate with extant research on parliamentary influence in foreign policy, which challenges conventional wisdom that parliaments are particularly weak in this area. Despite appointment by and accountability to parliament, cabinets generally lead in decision-making and parliaments follow. At times the role of the parliament is little beyond a rubber stamp. Modern political parties have multiple mechanisms for enforcing party discipline and most votes are typically and predictably in support of the government’s position. Again, this is particularly true in foreign and security policy. Parliaments lack the knowledge and expertise required to challenge powerful foreign and defence ministries and “most parliamentarians remain quite parochial and national in their concerns”³. In addition, the need to present a united front toward the ‘enemy’ is a security imperative by which parliaments often abide. Despite these constraints, parliaments at times surprise the leadership and redirect foreign policy, as happened in the House of Commons on 29 August.

(Not) the Road to War

The trigger event for the debate and vote in the Commons was the chemical weapons attack on rebel-held suburbs of Damascus on 20 August. As highly disturbing images flooded media, the governments of the United States, France, and the UK began to discuss military action against Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Although Syria agreed (by 25 August)

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¹ In 1782 Lord North, then Prime Minister, lost a vote of no confidence following the British defeat at Yorktown.

² G. RACHMAN, *A leader humbled, a nation cut down to size*, «Financial Times», 30 August 2013.

³ O. GREENE, *Democratic Governance and the Internationalisation of Security Policy: the Relevance of Parliaments*, in H. BORN and H. HÄNGGI (eds.), *The Double Democratic Deficit*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, p. 30.

to permit UN inspectors to visit sites of the attacks, preferences of leaders in Washington, Paris, and London crystallised in the direction of punitive military strikes against the Syrian government.

Cameron agreed, on 24 August, with President Obama that a robust response was needed if credible evidence pointed to the Syrian regime as the culprit. Returning from vacation on 26 August, Cameron faced growing calls for a parliamentary debate and vote prior to any UK military action. He acquiesced and recalled Members of Parliament (MPs) from their summer recess⁴.

As MPs rushed back to London, Cameron negotiated with the other major party leaders, Nick Clegg (leader of the Liberal Democrat party and Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition government with Cameron's Conservatives) and Ed Miliband (leader of the main opposition party, Labour). Cameron had resolved, by 28 August, to go to the Commons the following day with a motion authorising military action. Late in the day, Miliband informed Cameron that Labour would not support any motion that did not commit the government to returning to the Commons *a second time* following the completion of work by UN inspectors. Cameron agreed to alter the government's motion. When MPs convened at the Commons on 29 August two motions were before them: a government motion and a Labour motion (with the backing of some minor parties). The two differed in very minor ways and were united on critically important issues: leaving the possibility of military action on the table and stating that a further vote would be required in the Commons explicitly authorising the use of military force⁵.

The outcome of the vote was stunning. Neither motion was supported. Critically, the government proposal was defeated 285 votes to 272. Cameron, acquiescent yet visibly surprised, stated: "It's clear to me that the British parliament and the British people do not wish to see military action; I get that, and I will act accordingly"⁶. Cameron confirmed that the UK would not participate in military action against Syria, even with the proviso that the Commons would have to be consulted again. Newspapers quickly pronounced that the UK was finally abdicating its global role, that the fabled 'special relationship' between the UK and the US was severely damaged, and that Cameron had hit a new low point in his stumbling premiership.⁷ Few reports led with the issue of parliament finding its

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⁴ *Syria: Cameron and Obama threaten 'serious response'*, BBC News, 25 August 2013; *David Cameron recalls parliament over Syria crisis*, «The Guardian», 27 August 2013.

⁵ The motions can be read in Hansard 29 August 2013, Col. 1425-26 (government motion) and 1440 (Labour motion).

⁶ Hansard 29 August 2013, Col. 1556.

⁷ E.g. J. GANESH, *Britain abdicates its role*, «Financial Times», Westminster blog, 30 August 2013; *Special relationship with US under 'some strain' after Cameron's historic*

voice and humbling the government on a matter of foreign and military policy. Yet the vote was unprecedented and quite remarkable, given that the UK parliament is a particularly weak institution both generally and specifically in foreign and security affairs.

Explaining the Vote on Syria

Indeed, the 29 August vote was not a product of constitutionally defined war powers. The Commons is a poster child for weak parliaments in the area of foreign and military policy⁸. Authority to deploy military force is a so-called Royal Prerogative, as it derives from the powers of the Crown (invested in the Prime Minister) and not the parliament. Although there has been recent and increasingly vocal and concerted effort to strengthen the role of parliament in decisions to deploy military force (including a number of bills and two parliamentary committee inquiries⁹), there is no legal requirement for parliamentary approval. Tony Blair's decision to put to a vote his government's decision to use military force against Iraq in 2003 is an important precedent for which successive UK governments have, at least rhetorically, signalled their support¹⁰. Yet nothing has changed legally or constitutionally. The UK government deployed military assets and 240 military personnel (in a non-combat role) to Mali in 2013 without a parliamentary vote and, in June 2013, insisted it had the right to arm the Syrian rebels without parliamentary approval¹¹. It is thus impossible to attribute the role of the Commons in the Syrian vote to a strengthened institutional or legal role in the foreign policy process.

Nor can the House of Commons vote be traced to coalition politics in the first multiparty cabinet in Britain since World War II. Although coalition government can often lead to parliamentary influence when coalition partners disagree¹², the question of military force against Syria was not a

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Commons defeat on Syria, «The Daily Mail», 30 August 2013; *Blow to Cameron's authority as MPs rule out British assault on Syria*, «The Guardian», 30 August 2013.

⁸ D. PETERS and W. WAGNER, *Between Military Efficiency and Democratic Legitimacy: Mapping Parliamentary War Powers in Contemporary Democracies, 1989-2004*, «Parliamentary Affairs», vol. 64, no. 2, 2011, pp. 175-192.

⁹ House of Commons, *Taming the Prerogative: Strengthening Ministerial Accountability to Parliament*, Public Administration Select Committee 4th Report of Session 2003-04, London, HMSO, 2004; House of Lords, *Waging War: Parliament's Role and Responsibility*, Select Committee on the Constitution 15th Report of Session 2005-06, London, HMSO, 2006.

¹⁰ Most notably the foreign secretary William Hague, see Hansard 21 March 2011, Col. 799.

¹¹ *David Cameron on Syria: we reserve the right to act without vote*, BBC News, 19 June 2013.

¹² J. KAARBO, *Coalition Politics and Cabinet Decision Making: A Comparative Analysis of Foreign Policy Choices*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2012.

source of friction within the cabinet. Both the Conservative and Liberal Democratic leadership supported the government's motion, as did the majority of the MPs from the ruling parties. Although it is true that some of the defection came from the Liberal Democrats (with 9 voting against), more of the government's internal opposition came from within the Conservative party (with 30 MPs rebelling). It is difficult to know if a single party Conservative government would have succeeded, given the messiness of the vote – 26 Conservative MPs were absent (including 5 members of the government), along with 8 Liberal Democrats (including 3 members of the government). Ultimately the government lost by a narrow margin (only 13 votes) and the makeup of the vote suggests that Conservative intraparty politics were far more significant than coalition politics to the outcome¹³.

Indeed, the Conservative parliamentary party was altered significantly as a result of the 2010 general election, in which 147 new Conservative MPs were elected (out of a total of 306). A rebellious streak was evident from early in the 2010 parliament with many of the new intake at odds with the leadership on issues such as Europe, defence, taxation, and business. UK foreign policy is an issue that has revealed particularly deep differences. The focal point is often 'Europe' (not just the EU, but also the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights) and Cameron has suffered a series of significant rebellions by his backbenches on this front. But there exists a broader foreign policy fissure which sets many backbench Conservative MPs against the liberal interventionism favoured by some in the leadership, Cameron included¹⁴. Yet it was not just the 'usual suspects' who caused problems for Cameron in the days before the vote. Other backbenchers expressed scepticism about UK involvement, several citing the Prime Minister's rushed timetable and failure to make a compelling case¹⁵.

The existence of intra-party tension was exacerbated by Cameron's leadership style and, at times, questionable management of his parliamentary party. Certainly the opposition Labour party played into this mismanagement. As late as Wednesday evening Cameron still felt

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¹³ The vote would have been even tighter had the government succeeded in getting all ministers back for the vote. Had the 8 government ministers attended they presumably would have voted for the motion, tightening the result to 285 to 280. Add in the two government ministers who were present but did not vote because they claimed not to have heard the division bell and it tightens to 285 to 282.

¹⁴ M. BEECH, *British Conservatism and Foreign Policy: Traditions and Ideas Shaping Cameron's Global View*, «British Journal of Politics & International Relations», vol. 13, no. 3, 2011, pp. 348-63; J. GANESH, *Custodian of an Interventionist Legacy*, «Financial Times», 21 January 2013.

¹⁵ *Up to 70 MPs "not convinced" by coalition case for Syria strike*, «The Guardian», 28 August 2013.

that he had the support of Miliband and a vast majority of Labour MPs. This may have lulled the Prime Minister into a false sense of security about the strength of support for his motion. Once Labour's support was withdrawn, Cameron found himself, with little time to spare, needing considerable loyalty from his backbenchers. But the work had not been put in to secure such loyalty. Peter Lilley, a senior Conservative backbencher and former government minister, cited poor party management and a failure to prepare the ground as pivotal in the loss¹⁶. Numerous news stories reacting to the vote stressed the failure by Cameron and his closest and most senior cabinet colleagues – Osborne and Hague in particular – to make the case compellingly and in private meetings with wavering backbenchers. Similar criticism was directed at the government whips office.

Even with more efforts at party discipline, however, many MPs may have remained unconvinced. The shadow cast by Britain's participation in the Iraq War was another significant factor in the vote. As the debate was proceeding *The Spectator* magazine ran a story about how Cameron was attacking Blair's ghost in the Syria debate, complete with picture of Blair's spectre floating over the Commons chamber¹⁷. Indeed, in his opening statement, Cameron was eager to point out the differences between Iraq in 2003 and Syria in 2013¹⁸. That the Prime Minister attempted to head off Iraq comparisons so early on was a reflection of the debate's tone. MP after MP returned to Iraq and specifically to the abuse of intelligence that led MPs to vote to authorise that use of force. Bound up with this invocation of Iraq, the possibility of being drawn deeper into the Syrian conflict following a set of initial missile strikes was at the forefront of many MPs' minds. Their concern was no doubt fuelled by Cameron's seeming eagerness to involve the UK, which had been on display for many months prior.

The suspicions regarding intelligence and a rush to war were shared by the larger public, another important factor in the vote. Despite Cameron's sudden recall of parliament, opinion polls were commissioned and published before the Commons convened. The headline figures of the polls published over 26-27 August indicated strong opposition from the British public to military strikes¹⁹. Public opinion had long been sceptical of involvement. Even a more limited involvement, such as sending small

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¹⁶ P. LILLEY, *Parliament has finally woken up – because voters are keeping their MPs in line*, «The Spectator», 7 September 2013.

¹⁷ I. HARDMAN, *David Cameron attacks Blair's ghost in Syria debate*, «The Spectator», 29 August 2013. See also *Don't blame Cameron for the Syria vote, blame the ghosts of Iraq*, «The Washington Post», 30 August 2013.

¹⁸ Hansard 29 August 2013, Col. 1427-28.

¹⁹ YouGov poll, at <http://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/08/28/syria-and-shadow-iraq/>.

arms to anti-government troops in Syria had been consistently and strongly opposed by the public (as reflected in polls from March to August 2013). In the days immediately preceding the debate, UK media were consistently repeating this message, thus making it a crucial contextual variable. Moreover, a majority (61%) in the public felt that the government should only act if parliament agreed²⁰.

An examination of the Commons' debate itself reveals that public opinion was a salient issue to many MPs, who consistently referenced public opposition to military strikes. Cameron himself seemed to acknowledge this in his closing statement, following his defeat: "The British parliament, reflecting the views of the British people, does not want to see British military action"²¹. It is certainly not the case that the Commons simply followed the lead of the public: despite strong public opposition the vote was very close. And democratic leaders often ignore public opinion or lead by persuasion or manipulation²². Yet the mood of the public may have played an indirect role in this debate (Cameron may not have gone to the Commons if a majority of the public were supportive of military action). And it may have played a direct role in Labour's decision to not back the government's motion, perhaps to court public opinion.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that the Commons' influence in this case derived not from any deep structural shift in parliamentary authority, but rather from several mutually reinforcing conditions – highly politicised divisions within the Conservative party, Labour's introduction of a second motion, the failure of the Conservative leadership to manage their backbenches through a strong whipping operation in the rush to hold the vote, the spectre of Iraq and the intelligence failures of 2003, and public opposition to the military strike. These conditions may not converge again in the future in the UK, but they are consistent with research on the role of parliaments in foreign policy. This research suggests that parliamentary legal and constitutional authority, public opinion, a divided ruling elite, party factions, and leadership orientation and management can help parliaments, at times, to exert influence over foreign and security policy²³.

²⁰ YouGov poll, at http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/u1p66quql3/YG-Archive-Pol-Sun-results-270813-Syria-AM.pdf.

²¹ Hansard, 31 January 2013, Col. 1059.

²²S. KREPS, *Elite Consensus as a Determinant of Alliance Cohesion: Why Public Opinion Hardly Matters for NATO-led Operations in Afghanistan*, «Foreign Policy Analysis», vol. 3, no. 6, 2010, pp. 187-190; J. SCHUSTER and H. MAIER, *The Rift: Explaining Europe's Divergent Iraq Policies in the Run-Up of the American-Led War on Iraq*, «Foreign Policy Analysis», vol. 3, no. 2, 2006, pp. 223-244.

²³ See, for example, B. KESGIN and J. KAARBO, *When and How Parliaments*

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The Commons vote can help us better understand these factors, the role of historical lessons (e.g. Iraq), and how these conditions mix to enhance parliamentary influence in foreign policy. It is hard to project the long-term significance and consequences of this particular vote. It was certainly a moment that symbolised the potential power of the House of Commons to influence decisions on foreign and military policy.