

# Prologue

29 August 2013 is a date that should remain long in the memory of all serious students of foreign policy. That night, David Cameron became the first Prime Minister in 150 years to lose a vote in the House of Commons on an issue of military deployment. Not since Parliament's denouncement of Lord North's continued campaign in the American Revolutionary War has a prime minister suffered such a defeat.<sup>1</sup>

## The Syrian civil war

The topic of debate was the authorisation for military airstrikes in Syria against the dictatorial regime of President Basher-Al Assad in response to his use of chemical weapons indiscriminately against both rebel forces and civilians. For two years, Britain, like the rest of the world, had watched as Syria descended into one of the bloodiest civil wars of recent times, prompted by similar pro-democracy protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. Demonstrators called for the overthrow of the Syrian Government in the Arab Spring of 2011.

The UN Security Council was in deadlock and there appeared little western appetite to intervene. Peace talks between the conflicting sides had stalled and in a parliamentary debate, led by the Foreign Secretary William Hague, a proposal to arm the rebels had been met with strong opposition.

In the summer of 2012 in response to the Syrian regime's threats to use chemical weapons on rebel forces, President Obama issued a red line warning of US intervention should such weapons be used. This warning was ignored as the civil war continued to be waged through conventional means.

On 21 August the Assad regime used chemical weapons on three separate sites in the rebel-held areas of Ghouta and Damascus, killing at least 350 people. Images of dead children being held by their weeping mothers and the bodies of whole families caught in the wave of chemicals were beamed around the world on television and across social media.

In response the UN Security Council met in an emergency session and agreed to send a formal request for permission to be granted by the Syrian

regime for UN weapon inspectors to inspect the sites of the chemical weapon attacks. The Arab League also held an emergency meeting on 27 August in Cairo, in which it condemned the attack by chemical weapons, accusing Assad of being behind it. The League called for 'the international community to take the necessary measures' against the Syrian Government, stopping short of endorsing military intervention in Syria.<sup>2</sup>

The 'red line' now having been crossed, President Obama found himself under pressure both internationally and domestically from hawkish members of Congress to act, despite public opinion in America being divided about intervention. From 21–27 August, Obama entered into a series of talks with key US allies discussing the possibility of building an international coalition for airstrikes.

### Cameron to action

David Cameron's position on Syria was clear. For some time he had been the leading voice on the international stage calling for intervention, and a resolution of the Syrian civil war. He had raised previous concerns about the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime; such concerns fell on deaf ears. The Prime Minister had already pledged to offer Parliament a vote on the matter. The question therefore was not if he would recall Parliament, but when.

On Wednesday 27 August he returned early from his holiday in Cornwall to chair a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC). Later that day he formally asked the Speaker of the House to recall Parliament, a week before it was due to return from its summer recess.

For many the decision to recall Parliament appeared to point to a US timetable and was not one of Cameron's own making. Cameron faced three obstacles when it came to securing parliamentary approval: his backbenchers were largely sceptical; his coalition partners the Liberal Democrats, were traditionally opposed to interventions; and the Labour Opposition leader, Ed Miliband, was under pressure from his own party to break with the tradition of consensus in foreign policy matters regarding British intervention. The Prime Minister had to cement cross-party support while at the same time attempting to build an international consensus with other countries for intervention through the EU, NATO and the UN to the tune of what was now effectively an American timetable.

Earlier the same day, the three party leaders, Prime Minister David Cameron, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, and Leader of the Opposition Ed Miliband met to discuss possible intervention in Syria, a fact later leaked to the media. All were in initial agreement on intervention, with Miliband stressing that the Government needed to demonstrate that it had exhausted all possible diplomatic efforts before doing so. Cameron had already drafted a resolution for the UN. However at 5.15 p.m. Cameron received a phone call from Miliband, who informed him that he could now not support the Government until the publication of the UN weapons inspectors' report. He also warned that if the Government pushed forward with its tabled motion his party would have to oppose it.<sup>3</sup>

Miliband's volte-face was the first time in modern day British politics the established convention that the Opposition Front Bench supports the Government on military intervention would be broken.

## The House of Commons debate: the Government's case

### Government motion on military intervention in Syria

Despite Labour's public refusal to support the Government, Cameron pressed ahead for the vote on 29 August, tabling the Government motion:

This House:

Deplores the use of chemical weapons in Syria on 21 August 2013 by the Assad regime, which caused hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries of Syrian civilians;

Recalls the importance of upholding the worldwide prohibition on the use of chemical weapons under international law;

Agrees that a strong humanitarian response is required from the international community and that this may, if necessary, require military action that is *legal, proportionate and focused* on saving lives by preventing and deterring further use of Syria's chemical weapons;

Notes the failure of the United Nations Security Council over the last two years to take united action in response to the Syrian crisis;

*Notes that the use of chemical weapons is a war crime under customary law and a crime against humanity – and that the principle of humanitarian intervention provides a sound legal basis for taking action;*

Notes the wide international support for such a response, including the *statement from the Arab League on 27 August* which calls on the international

community, represented in the United Nations Security Council, to 'overcome internal disagreements and take action against those who committed this crime, for which the Syrian regime is responsible';

Believes, in spite of the difficulties at the United Nations, that *a United Nations process must be followed as far as possible to ensure the maximum legitimacy* for any such action;

Therefore welcomes the work of the United Nations investigating team currently in Damascus. *Whilst noting that the team's mandate is to confirm whether chemical weapons were used and not to apportion blame, agrees* that the United Nations Secretary General should ensure a briefing to the United Nations Security Council immediately upon the completion of the team's initial mission;

*Believes that the United Nations Security Council must have the opportunity immediately to consider that briefing and that every effort should be made to secure a Security Council Resolution backing military action before any such action is taken. Before any direct British involvement in such action a further vote of the House of Commons will take place.*

Notes that this motion relates solely to efforts to alleviate humanitarian suffering by deterring use of chemical weapons and does not sanction any action in Syria with wider objectives.

This House further notes that such action relates solely to efforts to deter the use of chemical weapons and does not sanction any wider action in Syria.<sup>4</sup> [author's emphasis]

## **Change in the Government motion and concession**

On the morning of the vote in an appeal to both rebel Tory backbenchers and the Opposition, Cameron amended the Government motion at the last minute to include a qualification that British military intervention would only take place if sanctioned by the authority of a UN Security Council Vote. The new amended motion also conceded that MPs would now only be voting on the principle of military intervention and that a further vote would take place after the UN inspectors' finding.

This left many MPs confused. No. 10 that morning had been briefing that there would be one vote on the motion and now they were being told that there would be two. Many felt that this concession undermined the importance of the vote, and they would later remark in the debate that there was little point in having a debate and voting if they would be brought back the following week to do the same again, when more information would be

available. The question on every MP's lips before the debate had even started was 'Why couldn't the Government wait for further developments and all the facts?'

## The legal case

On the day of the vote the Attorney General, as instructed by the Prime Minister released a two-page summary of his legal advice given in Cabinet. This also happened prior to the parliamentary vote on military intervention in Libya. The UK's case for intervention rested on the Syrian Government committing war crimes, in this instance in breach of the customary international law prohibition on chemical weapons.<sup>5</sup> As with its Libyan Intervention, the UK would seek a resolution of the United Nations Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, being the right to protect civilians in Syria on the grounds of humanitarian intervention. The Attorney General's advice stressed that any intervention would be qualified as being 'necessary and proportionate', striking specific targets with the aim of 'detering and disrupting any further attacks'.<sup>6</sup>

## Intelligence

The Government also published to the media a letter from the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) describing preliminary assessments of who the Committee believed to be behind the chemical weapons attack. The letter stated that:

There is no credible intelligence or other evidence to substantiate the claims or the possession of CW by the opposition... We also have a limited but growing body of intelligence which supports the judgement that the regime was responsible for the attacks and that they were conducted to help clear the Opposition from strategic parts of Damascus.<sup>7</sup>

Against this background, the JIC concluded that it was highly likely that the regime was responsible for the chemical weapons attacks on 21 August.

In opening the debate in the Commons, David Cameron was quick to point not only to the JIC's intelligence report, but additionally to the countless pieces of evidence streamed over social media, informing the House:

the evidence that the Syrian regime has used these weapons, in the early hours of 21 August, is right in front of our eyes. We have multiple eye-witness accounts

of chemical-filled rockets being used against opposition-controlled areas. We have thousands of social media reports and at least 95 different videos – horrific videos – documenting the evidence.<sup>8</sup>

He stated that the use of chemical weapons was not in contention: ‘even the Iranian President said that it took place’.

## **The difference between Syria and Iraq**

No single MP could dispel the lingering shadow of the recent war in Iraq from the chamber that evening. Nearly every MP addressed Iraq in some shape or form, with personal anecdotes or views. An observer could have been forgiven for thinking that they were witnessing a debate about the failures of Government policy in Iraq rather than the impending airstrikes on Syria.

The Prime Minister was keen to address the issue directly and early on in his speech. He strived to make clear the differences between the current matter and the 2003 invasion, when he said:

I am deeply mindful of the lessons of previous conflicts and, in particular, of the deep concerns in the country that were caused by what went wrong with the Iraq conflict in 2003. However, this situation is not like Iraq. What we are seeing in Syria is fundamentally different. We are not invading a country. We are not searching for chemical or biological weapons. The case for ultimately supporting action – I say ‘ultimately’ because there would have to be another vote in this House – is not based on a specific piece or pieces of intelligence. The fact that the Syrian Government have, and have used, chemical weapons is beyond doubt. The fact that the most recent attack took place is not seriously doubted...

The differences with 2003 and the situation with Iraq go wider. Then, Europe was divided over what should be done. Now, Europe is united in the view that we should not let this chemical weapons use stand. Then, NATO was divided; today, NATO has made a very clear statement that those who are responsible should be held accountable. Back in 2003, the Arab League was opposed to action; now, it is calling for it...

The President of the United States, Barack Obama, is a man who opposed the action in Iraq. No one could in any way describe him as a President who wants to involve America in more wars in the Middle East, but he profoundly believes that an important red line has been crossed in an appalling way, and that is why he supports action in this case...

I remember 2003. I was sitting two rows from the back on the Opposition Benches. It was just after my son had been born and he was not well, but I was determined to be here. I wanted to listen to the man who was standing right

here and believe everything that he told me. We are not here to debate those issues today, but one thing is indisputable: the well of public opinion was well and truly poisoned by the Iraq episode and we need to understand the public scepticism.<sup>9</sup>

Ed Miliband, as Labour leader, also wanted to make clear that this vote would not be like the one made ten years previously:

I am very clear about the fact that we have got to learn the lessons of Iraq. Of course we have got to learn those lessons, and one of the most important lessons was indeed about respect for the United Nations, and that is part of our amendment today.<sup>10</sup>

## Labour (amendment) motion on intervention in Syria

Ed Miliband went on to propose the following:

This House expresses its revulsion at the killing of hundreds of civilians in Ghutah, Syria on 21 August 2013; believes that this was a moral outrage; recalls the importance of upholding the worldwide prohibition on the use of chemical weapons; makes clear that the use of chemical weapons is a grave breach of international law; *agrees with the UN Secretary General that the UN weapons inspectors must be able to report to the UN Security Council* and that the Security Council must live up to its responsibilities to protect civilians; supports steps to provide humanitarian protection to the people of Syria but *will only support military action involving UK forces if and when the following conditions have been met:*

1. The UN weapons inspectors, upon the conclusion of their mission in the Eastern Ghutah, being given the necessary opportunity to make a report to the Security Council on the evidence and their findings, and confirmation by them that chemical weapons have been used in Syria;
2. The production of compelling evidence that the Syrian regime was responsible for the use of these weapons;
3. The UN Security Council having considered and voted on this matter in the light of the reports of the weapons inspectors and the evidence submitted;
4. *There being a clear legal basis in international law for taking collective military action to protect the Syrian people on humanitarian grounds;*
5. *That such action must have regard to the potential consequences in the region, and must therefore be legal, proportionate, time-limited and have precise and*

*achievable objectives designed to deter the future use of prohibited chemical weapons in Syria;*

6. That the Prime Minister reports further to the House on the achievement of these conditions so that the House can vote on UK participation in such action.<sup>11</sup> [author's emphasis]

The Labour opposition to the Government motion rested on three factors, the first being one of timing, the second that of due international process, and the third, the consequences of such an intervention.

## Timetable

Parliament was due to return from recess the very next week on 2 September. Many MPs therefore interpreted Cameron's decision to recall Parliament as a sign that airstrikes on Syria were imminent. The Prime Minister's concession of a second vote tied to the findings of the UN weapons inspectors, which would take two weeks, confounded such a timeframe. Sceptical MPs reading tabloids briefed by No. 10's Press Office concluded that the Government would press for a second vote by the end of the weekend.

Dame Joan Ruddock MP typified feeling in the House when she said, 'My reading of his motion tells me that everything in it could have been debated on Monday. I believe that this House has been recalled in order to give cover for possible military action this weekend.'<sup>12</sup>

## International process and legality

The legality for intervention as stated by the Government rested on a vote in the United Nations Security Council on the right to protect civilians. However neither Labour's nor the Government's motion mentioned the approval of a UN Security Council Resolution being mandatory for intervention. Instead just that the Security Council merely had to take a vote on the matter.

Cameron, in his statement, had also conceded that it would be 'unthinkable to proceed if there was overwhelming opposition in the Security Council'. Yet China and Russia had by this point already vetoed four separate UN Resolutions on Syria, and had expressed the view that they would do so again on any resolution involving military intervention.<sup>13</sup>



Deadlock, therefore, already existed in the Council, a fact which may well have influenced MPs. Would a majority of members vote for the Resolution despite knowing the likelihood of it being vetoed? One Labour MP remarked that in light of the rushed timetable the UN Resolution merely reflected Cameron 'going through the motions'. This concern Miliband appeared to share, stating:

I have heard it suggested that we should have 'a United Nations moment'. They are certainly not my words; they are words which do no justice to the seriousness with which we must take the United Nations. The UN is not some inconvenient sideshow, and we do not want to engineer a 'moment'. Instead, we want to adhere to the principles of international law.<sup>14</sup>

## The consequences of intervention

The crux of Miliband's speech in opposition to the Government motion focused on the idea that 'evidence should precede decision' and not vice versa. What should be weighed up is the argument 'for why the benefits of intervention and action outweigh the benefits of not acting'. This was entirely characteristic of Ed Miliband as a thinker and academic not disposed to making rash decisions but instead to carefully weighing the pros and cons, and after painstaking thought, coming to the decision he felt was correct.

A view held strongly by many on the Labour backbenches that evening was that any military intervention would undermine the possibility of the Geneva II peace talks, the consequences being summed up rather aptly by John McDonnell MP:

Military intervention is more likely to undermine the potential for peace talks. Hawks within the Assad regime will be even more intransigent and defiant. The opposition – the so-called rebels – will have no incentive, because they will believe that the US and, yes, the UK and others will be on their side and that they can achieve a military victory. Military intervention would also alienate Iran and the Russians – the very people we look to now to bring Assad to the negotiating table.<sup>15</sup>

Other concerns of MPs raised in opposition to the Government motion included the possibility that intervention would push Russia and Iran into publicly supporting the Assad regime and further arming him. Another fear was that

intervention would lead to a proxy war between Russia and America being fought in Syria.<sup>16</sup> Opposition to the motion coalesced around the suggestion that any intervention risked making the situation worse, increasing the loss of lives, and escalating the conflict.

## The vote

At the division a large proportion of MPs from all parties did not decide which voting lobby to enter until the last minute. Many sat patiently through the debate waiting to be swayed by the various arguments. The vast majority of Opposition Labour MPs believed that victory for the Government was inevitable. However, for them it was important to get their opposition to air-strikes on record.

Many MPs were therefore shocked when the tellers announced that the Government's motion was defeated by 285 votes to 272, an opposition majority of thirteen. Thirty Conservative MPs and nine Liberal Democrat MPs rebelled against the Government. A long silence in the chamber turned to loud jeering with backbencher Labour MPs shouting for the Prime Minister to resign. Other MPs sat listening cautiously for the Opposition Amendment's result, which was defeated by 332 votes to 220 with a Government majority of 112.

The evening effectively ended in a political stalemate, with the Government and Opposition each rejecting the other's motion. However Cameron losing by such a small margin demonstrated more than a simple setback. It was a disastrous defeat, with many advocates against intervention pointing out that it had been Cameron's to lose. Regardless of Labour opposition, he should have been able to muster the votes to pass the Government's motion. Something had gone terribly wrong.

Cameron could have forced another vote, which is after all the Prime Minister's prerogative. What he chose to do next is at the heart of why this vote matters. Cameron chose to back down and accept defeat stating 'that it is clear that Parliament does not want intervention, I will act accordingly'. Ruling out a second vote laid the issue of UK involvement in intervention in Syria to rest. However it did far more than that: it marked the resigning by a Prime Minister of his greatest foreign policy power, that of military deployment, to Parliament.

Battered, bruised and humiliated, Cameron as Lord Paddy Ashdown referred to him was a 'broken-backed Prime Minister'.<sup>17</sup> The outcome symbolised for

many the great diminution in the role of the Prime Minister in foreign policy since 2003. How did this happen? And, more importantly, why?

## Timing and whipping

The decision to recall Parliament from recess a week early clearly had an impact on the outcome of the vote. Was it decisive though? Certainly the rushed timetable for pushing through a vote for UK intervention was reflected in the Government's whipping operation itself. The Government simply did not have enough time to prepare its case and get the votes it needed with MPs and whips fractured, both as to policy and geographical location. Government whips were passing notes and sending texts to MPs urging loyalty to the Government throughout the debate and right up until the division was called.

Sir Menzies Campbell, former Leader of the Liberal Democrats and a member of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, provides an account of the vote which underlines the importance of its timing:

Why did it happen? Bouncing people, people just straight off the beach at Torremolinos or somewhere more aesthetically pleasing, not really having assimilated what the hell was going on. Not knowing what was happening, and the whips not getting back on time. I mean Douglas Hurd used to have a view that difficult things happened in August. It's quite interesting because some of the worst of Bosnia was in August, and it was August, 1990 when Margaret Thatcher went after the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam. There may be some structural or calendar influence reason for some of these things. People came back without having following this stuff in detail, without the whips being properly organised, a sense of being bounced, and quite a strong manner of complacency. Put all these together and you have problems.<sup>18</sup>

Another sign of the sheer disorganisation and shoddiness of the Government whipping operation was that eight Government ministers missed the vote, as well as two whips and two ministerial aides. Justine Greening, Secretary of State for International Development was discussing aid policy with Mark Simmonds, the Foreign Office Minister for Africa, in the House when the vote took place. Both claim to have missed the vote due to not hearing the division bell, later sheepishly apologising. For anybody who has worked in the House the loud division bell is hard to miss. One would think on such an important international vote as this the relevant Secretary of State and ministers would be seated

on the front bench. Kenneth Clarke, Minister without Portfolio and a Tory grandee with a strong interest in foreign affairs similarly missed the vote, offering personal reasons.

Despite a three line whip, a further thirty-one Conservative and fourteen Liberal Democrat MPs were absent. No pairing arrangement had been permitted. If these MPs had voted the outcome would most likely have been different.<sup>19</sup>

Lord Tom King, former Defence Secretary under John Major supports Campbell's analysis: 'The whole thing was an absolute classic summer recess cock-up, these things always go wrong in August and September when people are away, and the whips don't know what people are thinking, they rush back, and we were all over the place.'<sup>20</sup>

Former Defence Secretary, Dr Liam Fox takes a different view. He believes Cameron was damned if he did and damned if he didn't recall Parliament: 'At the time there was a lot of speculation about the Americans' imminent wish to act, and if we had not had a debate in the House of Commons and the US had acted all hell would have broken loose. With people saying why we were not consulted? I don't think it was something that the Prime Minister could have won either way.'<sup>21</sup>

Similarly if intervention was voted on before the summer recess in July, Alistair Burt, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, argues that it may not have made much difference:

I think if a similar vote had been held at the end of July before Parliament left, I think it would have probably had the same answer. Certainly a vote on overt support for military action would have had the same response, whether we had got a first vote just giving the Prime Minister the opportunity to consider that as an option, well maybe that would have been carried at the end of the summer. But there were plenty of colleagues who voted for the Government who would have not voted for a motion a week later, saying now we want to authorise a strike.<sup>22</sup>

## A red line

The notion of a red line on chemical weapons left MPs and many international allies confused. It was an awkward halfway house that seemed to reflect a desire to be seen to be doing something while avoiding any deep commitment, a point

Lord Malloch-Brown, former Deputy UN Secretary General and Foreign Office Minister, supports:

If you want an example of policy made out of the White House or No. 10 red lines around chemical weapons was a good example of it. Nobody in the region understood this red line. It was a tragic incident but a lot of innocent civilians have been lost by other equally brutal weapons. You're either going to draw a line around civilian casualties or you are going to draw a line about the Syrian regime's broader brutal occupation strategy. To pick off chemical weapons was seen as frivolous political strategy by leaders who hoped they could avoid a deeper commitment.<sup>23</sup>

## The coalition

Another factor contributing to the defeat was the unique nature of David Cameron's Government. In 2010 he did not gain a parliamentary majority and entered into coalition with the Liberal Democrats. This decision had left many Conservative MPs dissatisfied, questioning whether Cameron's Government was truly Conservative. This has offered opportunities for opposition over a whole swathe of issues, Syria included. Phillip Cowley referred to the 2010–15 Parliament as the most rebellious there has ever been.<sup>24</sup> This is ultimately down to a number within the 2010 Conservative intake who feel that they were elected on the Conservative manifesto and not the Coalition Agreement, and also have little personal loyalty to Cameron. Syria represented for many of them another opportunity to embarrass the Prime Minister and reject the course he wanted Britain to pursue. Their objections fell into two categories: the first, the legacy of Iraq and general belief that it should not fall to Britain to intervene, something Daniel Kawczynski, MP for Shrewsbury, argued in his contribution to the debate: 'Why cannot our allies in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait, take military action? Why does it fall on us yet again?'<sup>25</sup>

The second objection was scepticism about the urgent moral imperative to intervene in Syria, particularly when other conflicts demanded more urgent action. Many Tory MPs alluded to the difference between the clear moral imperative in Libya and the situation in Syria. David Davis, MP for Haltemprice and Howden, offers such a view: 'When the Prime Minister wanted to take military action in Libya, most of us supported him because there was a clear

moral imperative: if we had not acted, tens of thousands of lives would quickly have been lost. That clear moral imperative does not stand in the action we are countenancing.<sup>26</sup>

However the impact of hardened regular Tory rebels on this particular vote as mentioned earlier could be overstated. John Redwood MP pointed out in a blog at the time that the Syria motion brought out surprising rebels in Fiona Bruce MP, Tracey Crouch MP, Anne Marie Morris MP and Phillip Lee MP, all of whom are often considered 'loyal representatives' of the centre of the Conservative Party.<sup>27</sup>

## The role of the Deputy Prime Minister

The decision to have Nick Clegg wind up the debate instead of the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, may also have had an impact on the size of the Conservative revolt. Hague has since referred to the vote as the worst moment of his time as Foreign Secretary.<sup>28</sup> Describing whether Hague would have been more effective in closing, Alistair Burt says:

I know that he was extremely affected by the vote and everything else. Whether it would have been different if he himself had taken the debate, that is if he had wound up instead of the Deputy Prime Minister I don't know. Maybe he would have taken that as more of a personal rebuff, certainly I think there was a handful of votes that he might have been able to sway, that was not possible for the Deputy Prime Minister to sway, no aspersions to Nick Clegg at all but it wasn't his field, it wasn't his area, and he did the job of bringing Liberal Democrats into the vote.<sup>29</sup>

This is a view that is also supported by former Home Secretary, Charles Clarke: 'The Tories could have won it, even by the trivial decision they took that morning to replace William Hague with Nick Clegg in doing the wind-up speech. Nick did a completely hopeless wind-up speech, and apart from being hopeless didn't address the Tory backbenches who were the people who either failed to vote or voted against and turned it over.'<sup>30</sup>

William Hague is however adamant that it is the prerogative of the Deputy Prime Minister to wind up a debate, for the Prime Minister, on a major national issue, if he would like to do so. He concedes that in the Coalition Government he ranked number three while Nick Clegg ranked number two. It was therefore his choice.<sup>31</sup>

## The Opposition

Cameron should have been able to scrape through a majority by relying on enough of his own backbenchers and his coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, to pass the Government's motion. However failure of the vote can also be blamed on the decision of Ed Miliband to oppose it, an unprecedented breach of the historical parliamentary convention that the Opposition front bench does not oppose Government motions on military intervention.

Why this happened is a matter of considerable debate which is likely to continue. Some argue it reflected nothing but cynical political opportunism. Others consider Miliband took a moral stand which had a real impact on the direction of foreign policy.

As we know the three leaders met and held discussions on Tuesday 27 August and agreed that the use of chemical weapons could not be ignored and that military action if limited, could be justified to stop further use of chemical weapons. It was also felt such action would not trigger wider involvement in the civil war and was legal.<sup>32</sup>

What then, changed for Ed Miliband between that meeting and the following night, when he asked for a second vote on military action to follow? That is a question that many MPs found themselves asking on the day of the vote. Many felt that Labour's Opposition amendment offered nothing that wasn't already in the Government's motion. As Sir Malcolm Rifkind, MP for Kensington, put it:

The Leader of the Opposition has said that he might be able to support military action of the kind that the Government are contemplating. He has put in his amendment a list of the requirements, virtually all of which, as far as I can tell, appear in the Government's own motion. Why can he not, therefore, support the Government's motion, in order that this House could speak with a united voice to the world on this matter?<sup>33</sup>

Sir Menzies Campbell certainly takes a similar view when discussing the Lib Dem account of Miliband's conversations with Nick Clegg and David Cameron:

In the end I voted with the Government because the motion was essentially that we should go to the UN and see if we could get a resolution, and if we get the report from the inspectors and support from the Security Council then we'll have a chance to vote again. All one was doing was imposing the UN upon the procedure that is why for the life of me I could not understand Ed Miliband, about whom there is a lot of bad feeling between Cameron and Clegg about Miliband, because their version of events show that they talked to him, and

every time he raised some point, they said fine, including at the very end the whole question of a second vote. So what was Labour's amendment about? It was about opposing for the sake of opposition, and you can't help thinking that was really looking behind the front bench then in front of the Commons and public.<sup>34</sup>

Hague, who was privy to much of the discussion in the meeting, believes that the Opposition were almost determined not to vote for whatever the Government put forward, because 'what we put forward in the end was pretty much what they were asking for'.<sup>35</sup>

The answer may lie in the internal politics of the Parliamentary Labour Party. One backbench Labour MP told me, 'the Labour party was as divided if not more divided than the Tories over Syria.' Labour's motion therefore offered its own members a way to unite both sides of the argument with a compromise amendment. This however did not do enough to stop the polarising views of those in favour of the Government's position and those opposed. One disgruntled senior political adviser to a Shadow Cabinet Minister remarked to me that 'Miliband's position was a complete betrayal of Labour's ethical foreign policy and Blair's policy of liberal intervention.'

Insiders report that the real split was between Shadow Foreign Secretary, Douglas Alexander and Shadow Defence Secretary, Jim Murphy over supporting the Government's motion. Jim Murphy, who favoured intervention, after the vote argued on his blog that the result actually indicated a parliamentary majority for intervention, writing:

The unusual thing about Thursday's vote is that most MPs voted for an in principle policy of not ruling out military action in the future. The Labour policy attracted 220 votes and the Government motion won the support of 272, meaning that of the 550-odd MPs who voted 492 supported a version of conditions-based potential use of UK military force if very tight criteria had been met. Just a minority of MPs in all parties opposed any military action in all circumstances for reasons of conscience or concern. Yet that is where our country ended up.<sup>36</sup>

Douglas Alexander however did not share such a view, believing the only way to a resolution of the Syrian civil war would be a negotiated political settlement.<sup>37</sup> Alexander's position won the day, as may be surmised from Miliband's late night U-turn and the demotion of Jim Murphy to Shadow Secretary of State for International Development two weeks later.<sup>38</sup>



Was it simply then about political opposition? Lord Malloch-Brown, a former Foreign Office Minister in Government with Alexander supports this case: 'I think it was political as anything else. It was looking for some way to square the circle, a way of sounding tough and appalled at what was happening while at the same time making sure you weren't being positioned as the Chamberlains of the situation. This was just a politically neat way of doing nothing and dressing it up as meaningful action.'<sup>39</sup>

Alistair Burt agrees, arguing that opposition to the Government's motion may have simply been a clever option particularly when intervention lacked a popular will:

Well the perception on our side, as I'm sure you know, is that he made an agreement with the Prime Minister because he understood what the circumstances were, and when he went back he was talked out of it, which is within his prerogative as Leader of the Opposition to do. I think his colleagues argued that there is no popular opinion for this, there is no popular will, and maybe there is a cleverer option for an opposition. Clearly it's obvious that certain members of the Shadow Cabinet were unhappy about the decision and where it left foreign policy.<sup>40</sup>

One backbench Labour MP believes this option reflected Douglas Alexander's Brownite approach of strategy over vision, whereby on any given issue he would establish where he didn't want to be and where the public was on the issue, and then move towards the public, rather than deciding a stance on an issue and trying to convince the public of its merits. This argument was echoed by another former Labour Minister who served in the Brown administration, stating that Douglas Alexander 'manages to cloak the thing with a spurious philosophical consistency but completely spurious'.

Labour's position was certainly bolstered by a lack of public support for intervention. After twelve years of military conflict with the UK campaign in Afghanistan winding down and many still feeling burned by Iraq there was no public appetite for intervention in Syria. A *Daily Telegraph* poll reported on the morning of the vote that only 11 per cent of the British public supported becoming involved in a war in Syria,<sup>41</sup> while a YouGov poll found that the public opposed a missile strike two to one; with Labour voters there was a 54–26 split opposing strikes.<sup>42</sup>

The fallout from Iraq for many Labour MPs who had voted for it, or even been in Government at the time, made it impossible to ignore the sense of déjà

vu. There was considerable mirroring of the 2003 event: a rushed United States-led timetable; suspect or incomplete intelligence; a lack of clear strategic objectives; and an endgame without any consideration of what that might be. For Miliband it offered a chance to present himself as what he would hope to be: 'a post-Iraq Prime Minister'.<sup>43</sup> This in itself may have been too much of an opportunity to ignore.

What became apparent to anyone who watched the debate was that it was perhaps the most honest and open discussion MPs have had in the chamber about the misconceived notion of the invasion of Iraq ten years before, as much about deconstructing the failures of the invasion of Iraq as discussing intervention in Syria.

### The use of intelligence

For many MPs the politicisation of intelligence in the 2003 Iraq debate made it harder for the bare assertions of the Prime Minister and Joint Intelligence Committee, as the former Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw painfully conceded in the debate:<sup>44</sup> 'I simply make the point, which is widely shared across the House, that one of the consequences of the intelligence failure on Iraq has been to raise the bar that we have to get over when the question of military action arises.'

It is a point shared by his former Cabinet colleague, and then Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon that in the shadow of Iraq, the public will always be sceptical about intelligence and its use: 'I think though part of the same issue in a modern, pluralistic, democratic, information-hungry society, the days in which you can say to the population this is sensitive intelligence we can't tell you how it's been obtained. I'm not sure you can do that any longer, any more can a court decision be simply accepted.'<sup>45</sup>

### The strategic objectives

Another factor in Cameron's defeat was the clear failure to outline a defined strategic goal. What did he mean by military intervention? Was he talking about airstrikes, and if so at what targets? Would he commit ground troops? Who else would be involved in this military campaign? Did this mean establishing a no-fly zone as earlier proposed? All these lingering questions existed and David Cameron in the debate did little to demystify the idea of intervention. If MPs,

peers and even former Chiefs of the Defence Staff didn't have an idea of what was intended how could the public?

Admiral Lord Mike Boyce, former Chief of the Defence Staff to Tony Blair, raises some of the most important questions about the lack of strategy being shown by Cameron at the time:

There are a whole heap of questions to which the Government didn't seem to have any answers. Starting with that, if you want to fire a shot across someone's bow, which was what the expression was at the time – if you're firing a shot across someone's bow be aware of what you want your second shot to do. If you were to ask the Prime Minister/Government what the second shot would do, they had no idea...

As far as I can see – and no one I have spoken to since – had the faintest idea of what the consequences of what we were going to launch into were...

Well there is capability there, but people need to be aware of what they are about to go into – the second shot argument for Assad. If Assad, after the first rap across the knuckles, had said 'Go away, I'm not going to listen to you, you don't frighten', what was the next step? Nuke him? What was the next action to be taken? Put boots on the ground? Start a no-fly zone? What was the assessment of the attrition we would take if we tried to set up a no-fly zone? He's got air defences that make Libya look like a prehistoric kindergarten, or even Iraq in the '80s and '90s. Syria has got a very sophisticated capability, so how would you actually impose a no-fly zone without taking quite a lot of attrition, which I suspect people wouldn't want to do? Boots on the ground is a joke. Who is the opposition to the regime in Syria? Who is the opposition today?<sup>46</sup>

Field Marshall, Lord Michael Walker, another former Chief of the Defence Staff makes a similar point about the general ambiguity of military plans:

I don't think the military knew what he had in his mind when they produced various suggestions which they said was not a good idea. I mean air power on its own without any understanding wasn't going to do it. Again what Cameron, my personal view, is what Cameron was up to was coming up with a plan that would support the United States and anybody else who was up for this as an international coalition presenting a united front to Syria and the Assad regime.<sup>47</sup>

In the chamber, the Prime Minister refused to offer specifics regarding targets or outline his strategy further than this rebuff: 'I do not want to set out at the Dispatch Box a list of targets, but it is perfectly simple and straightforward to think of actions that we could take relating to the command and control of the use of chemical weapons, and the people and buildings involved, that would indeed deter and degrade.'<sup>48</sup>

The only excuse for Cameron's evasion can be that if the Government had won the vote, further details would have been provided in the second vote after further consultation with the USA. However, for many members the vagary over strategy only opened the Government motion up to further criticism. It may have been an unfair charge but for appearance's sake it looked like Cameron was in effect asking for a 'blank cheque' as Angus Robertson an SNP MP put it.<sup>49</sup> It reminded many of the sort of blank cheque that MPs had given to Tony Blair a decade before.

## Aftermath of the vote – what happened next?

### **British foreign policy is irrelevant?**

Cameron's defeat in the Commons was quickly interpreted by all media outlets as a blow to President Obama and the 'special relationship'. A number of journalists reported the results showed his personal weakness and was 'a measure of Britain's increasing isolation from its allies – both inside the European Union and now with Washington.'<sup>50</sup> Cameron's private assurances of Commons approval and the shock defeat damaged his credibility in the eyes of the Americans. One of the leading advocates for intervention in Syria was now effectively sidelined by Parliament. Lord Ashdown said at the time that in fifty years of trying to serve his country he had never been so ashamed or depressed at the outcome of a vote.<sup>51</sup>

On 30 August, the day after the vote, the USA stated that the Commons rejection of intervention did not change US plans for possible intervention and America would continue to seek an international coalition for intervention. Similarly President François Hollande reiterated French support for intervention with the USA, unfazed by the vote in the House of Commons.<sup>52</sup> The fear for many in the Foreign Office and Government was that the US and France would go it alone sidelining Britain to irrelevancy in western policy towards Syria.

This view was reinforced by a comment made by President Vladimir Putin's official spokesman Dmitry Peskov on 5 September at the G20 Summit. Peskov stated in response to the vote, 'Britain is a small island nobody pays any attention to.'<sup>53</sup> David Cameron responded by offering a reminder of Britain's great accomplishments which didn't go far enough to fully disarm the stinging truth and the lingering insecurity raised by the comment.

President Obama conceded to Congress a vote on Syrian military intervention, though constitutionally a President is under no obligation to do so. The White House hoped to appease many of the sceptics in Congress, who inspired by the House of Commons rejection of intervention, would attempt to do the same. The vote was to be just as tight, with many on both sides of Congress undecided.<sup>54</sup>

US Secretary of State John Kerry flew to London to meet with William Hague on a tour of European capitals to whip up support for western intervention. Congress was set to vote at the end of the week. During a press conference Kerry was asked if there was any way for intervention now to be avoided. He stated as an aside that if Assad gave up all of his chemical weapons by the end of the week he might avoid attack, pointing out that it was unlikely that he would do this.<sup>55</sup>

## A deal

Then something rather strange happened. A few hours after Kerry's press conference the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov endorsed Kerry's call for Syria to hand over all chemical weapons.<sup>56</sup> The next day the Syrian Government admitted to having chemical weapons and stated it would agree to hand them over and become a signatory to the international convention banning their use.

This was presented by both supporters for and against intervention as a huge diplomatic coup and breakthrough in the conflict. For the more cynical minded this was political spin. Obama halted the vote in Congress on military intervention while Kerry flew to Russia to work out a framework agreement, with Lavrov mediating between the international community and the Syrian Government.

A document was signed on 14 September, which required the Syrian Government to become a signatory to the Geneva international convention banning the use of chemical weapons, to provide a full list of such weapons it currently possessed, and to permit the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) access to sites to decommission and destroy weapons. Syrian moderate rebel forces and the regime agreed a ceasefire in certain areas so OPCW inspectors could have access to identified sites and a date was set for the destruction of all weapons and material by the first half of 2014.<sup>57</sup> This deadline was extended numerous times to account for the logistics of removing the chemical weapons in an active war zone and, at times, a lack of cooperation

from Assad's regime. For the work of its inspectors, the OPCW would receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

William Hague believes the deal reflected the leverage Russia does have over the Assad Regime: 'Russia was very anxious to avoid military action in Syria, and so as far as one can see, insisted to the Assad Regime that they enter into this program of disarmament overseen by the OPCW.'<sup>58</sup>

For parliamentary opponents of intervention in Syria, the diplomatic solution and UN led destruction of Syria's chemical weapons programme was only possible because of parliamentary opposition to the Government. Diane Abbott, Labour MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, said it was one of the few times in her career where individual MPs had impacted on a foreign policy decision. Ed Miliband felt able to tell voters that he stopped a rush to war in Syria.<sup>59</sup> The narrative also suited No. 10 and the Foreign Office. Cameron could tell people that his Foreign Secretary was at the heart of the agreement that saw Assad relinquish his chemical weapons. It was a win-win scenario in terms of both sides being able to claim credit and save face. It is also a falsehood.

### **Assad's continued use of chemical weapons**

This agreement had little to do with ending the Syrian civil war, which at the time of writing rages on through conventional means. Obama's red line on chemical weapons has failed. In May 2014 reports emerged from French intelligence and from the British newspaper, *The Independent* claiming that on 11 and 18 April, chlorine gas canisters packed in barrel bombs were dropped and detonated in the Syrian town of Kafr Zita, near the city of Hama, and again on 21 April in the village of Talmenes.<sup>60</sup> Opposition rebels reported that the gas was used during fierce fighting with regime troops when they appeared to be losing control of the strategic town of Khan Sheikhoun. While chlorine is not listed as a banned chemical weapons agent due to its wide range of industrial uses, as a weapon of war it is prohibited under the 1925 Chemical Weapons Convention.

The OPCW investigated and confirmed in its report in June 2014 that the attacks took place. The UK Foreign Office in a statement issued attributed blame to Assad: 'The systematic and repeated use of chlorine in northern Syria and the consistent reports from witnesses of the presence of helicopters at the times of the attacks leave little doubt as to the Assad regime's culpability.'<sup>61</sup>

Since the attacks in April there has been no parliamentary debate on the issue, nor has any Member raised a point of order or publicly on the record in

Parliament stated that the Syrian Government is in breach of the deal signed in September 2013. A year later the OPCW on 4 September 2014 confirmed in their report that it had successfully destroyed 96 per cent of Assad's chemical weapons programme but could not give a date for completion of the total destruction of Assad's weapons.<sup>62</sup>

The picture on the ground tells a different story. *The Financial Times* and *Washington Post* reported in October 2014 that there had been more chlorine gas attacks, this time in the rebel-controlled Jobar district of Damascus by regime forces.<sup>63</sup> As one Syrian opposition activist put it, 'This whole story of the regime destroying its chemical weapons arsenal is nothing but a lifeline thrown by Russia to the Assad regime'.<sup>64</sup>

To add insult to injury, on 9 July 2014 the Foreign Office released a statement describing the historic role of UK companies in supplying Syria with chemicals which were later weaponised by the regime of Assad Snr in the years 1983–86. The exports included several hundred tonnes of the chemical dimethyl phosphite (DMP) in 1983 and a further export of several hundred tonnes in 1985; several hundred tonnes of trimethyl phosphite (TMP) in 1986; and a smaller quantity of hydrogen fluoride (HF) in 1986 through a third country. The Foreign Office stressed that these chemicals all have legitimate uses but conceded 'they can also be used in the production of sarin. DMP and TMP can also be used for the production of the nerve agent VX'.<sup>65</sup>

In truth the Assad regime has merely switched from using sarin to weaponising chlorine. The West distracted by the ever-growing threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has created the perfect opportunity for Assad to gain ground against moderate rebels through any means. The narrative that Assad's chemical weapons have been destroyed and Parliament stopped an overbearing executive rushing to commit the country to war is too seductive to dispel. To this day few MPs, if any, believe or know that chemical weapons are still being used in Syria. Their minds have drifted off to other issues: the economy, immigration, another international conflict, the rise of ISIS. Ultimately the lie suits the Prime Minister and his critics, they get to claim a great victory and he gets to save face.

## The loss and its consequences

The parliamentary defeat was a personal rebuff of David Cameron and a wider rejection of prime ministerial dominance in foreign policy.

Many MPs attributed the defeat to Cameron's hands-off 'chairman of the board' approach to all areas of the governance, which critics see as a theme of his premiership. It was this approach that saw the timing of the vote being misjudged, the whipping operation bungled, and Hague, the man who had dealt with British policy on Syria from the start, being benched instead of closing the debate.

The loss of control of a key area of foreign policy is an unprecedented failure but Cameron survived it, limping on. It is not considered a foreign policy moment on a par with that of the parliamentary rebuff of Eden in 1956 as a result of the Suez Crisis, or the Norway debate in 1940, since both of these led to the fall of the respective prime ministers of the day, and Cameron did not regard his defeat as a resigning issue. However, Syria has left its mark on Cameron and his premiership. It demonstrated why he will not be considered a great international statesman. Hague agrees that it was a damaging vote to British foreign policy although not a fatal one.<sup>66</sup>

The vote is considered by some as a victory for legislative restraint on the executive. For parliamentary critics of the growing influence of the executive in the foreign policy it offered a rebalancing, as Douglas Carswell, then a Tory MP, wrote in his blog:

For decades, our country has been run by a tiny, self-regarding mandarin in Whitehall. The sort of people who advise the National Security Council – which only the other day told us we had to strike in Syria...

Not for much longer. Parliament is now claiming powers that, thanks to a historic quirk, have given Downing Street the powers of a monarch. If the Commons insists it has the final say over going to war, it won't be much longer before Parliament wants confirmation hearings for senior mandarins and budget hearings.<sup>67</sup>

Crispin Blunt, another Conservative MP who voted against the Government, stated that he hoped the vote would 'relieve ourselves of some of this imperial pretension that a country of our size can seek to be involved in every conceivable conflict that's going on around the world'.<sup>68</sup>

The defeat alone did not weaken the Prime Minister's role; rather it was Cameron's concession after the vote. Tony Blair gave Parliament its first vote on going to war. Gordon Brown carried on supporting the convention pledging to enshrine it into law. David Cameron took it further, conceding the most power. In deciding to call off a second vote and declare that Parliament had spoken Cameron directly relinquished prime ministerial control of foreign



policy and in doing so admitted the imperilled state of the office in terms of foreign policy.

That night one could look back over the fifty years of the modern-day premiership, from the first term of Harold Wilson through to David Cameron's stance at the dispatch box and visualise the steady advancement of the Prime Minister's role in foreign policy come shuddering to a halt.

Wilson, Heath, Callaghan, Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown, Cameron. In analysing and understanding their personal contribution to British foreign policy we can better understand the growth and subsequent slump in modern prime ministerial dominance. Each Prime Minister has strived to control foreign policy against the backdrop of Britain's declining influence on the world stage, often facing opposition from their Cabinets, political party, Parliament and the general public.

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