

We shouldn't focus solely on the Syria vote when assessing Parliament's power over military deployments

By Democratic Audit UK

*In August 2013, the House of Commons rejected a Government proposal to intervene in Syria following that country's regime's use of chemical weapons. The vote proved to be most consequential, with some arguing that it led to the United States ultimately withdrawing its proposals to lead the campaign against the Syrian tyrant Basha Al-Assad. **Louise Thompson** argues that the vote was very significant, but that the Iraq war vote of 2003 was just as significant – with the main difference being that the House assented to the then-Prime Minister's plans ten years earlier.*

On 30 August 2013 Parliament narrowly ruled out the UK's participation in military action in Syria in order to prevent and deter any further use of chemical weapons (285 -272 votes). Following the vote, David Cameron gave an assurance that he would stand by Parliament's decision, saying that that he believed in 'respecting the will of the House of Commons'.

The vote was important for Parliament. It was clearly representing not just the views of MPs, but also the view of the wider public. Opinion polls in the run up to the vote had found that they were sceptical about committing troops. It was also one of the rare occasions in which Parliament very publicly obstructed government action. The House of Commons was fulfilling a crucial safety valve function.

The Guardian described it as a 'momentous day for British democracy' and announced that Parliament had 'reclaimed the powers chipped away by successive prime ministers'. A few months later in the same newspaper, Anne Perkins went even further than this, describing it as a 'welcome resurgence in parliamentary power'. It is unlikely that a government will, for the foreseeable future, be able to commit British troops to wars using the Royal Prerogative. Providing there is time for discussion, the House of Commons will have the final say.

There is no doubt that the vote was imperative to the UK's stance on Syria. But it demonstrates two additional features of Parliament that merit discussion. Firstly, it said a lot about how we (and the media) think about the power of Parliament. Clearly, the Syria vote showed that the House of Commons has not only the capacity to say 'no' to the government; but that it can actually exercise this capacity, constraining the government and preventing it from taking military action. The Syria vote was a clear case of Parliament saying 'no' to the executive.

But Parliament doesn't have to say no in order to be powerful. We shouldn't therefore single this vote out from all of the others. Surely Parliament was equally powerful when it didn't say no? When it gave its assent to military action in Iraq after a ten hour debate in the Commons in March 2003 and when it voted in favour of action in



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Libya in March 2011, it was still exerting power. It was a positive rather than a negative expression of Parliament's authority, legitimising the commencement of military action. The convention thus already existed. What the Syria vote did was strengthen it, proving that the Government would listen to Parliament even if it said no.

Furthermore, if the Syria vote was actually sign of the 'resurgence' of parliamentary power in foreign policy, the starting point was actually the point at which the parliamentary precedent was set: the Iraq vote of 2003. Two years before the 2013 vote, the first Cabinet Manual was published by the Government. Here, it was confirmed that 'a convention had developed' that the House of Commons would debate military action before any troops were committed and that this convention would be observed at all times barring emergency action.

Secondly, Parliament's role in the ongoing instability in Syria didn't end with this vote. It continues today, with a focus on ISIS as well as on President Assad, but is much less well reported. The Defence Select Committee for instance recently published a report on the situation in Iraq and Syria, with its Chairman Rory Stewart criticising the 'strikingly modest' intervention from the UK in combating the threat from ISIS. Although its report was picked up by the mainstream media, it did not gain anywhere near the level of coverage of the earlier parliamentary vote.

Parliament's vote on possible military intervention in Syria was a crucial one, demonstrating for the first time that Parliament is able to exercise its newfound power over the government in defence and foreign affairs. The Commons has since voted yes to air strikes in Iraq; Syria remains the only occasion on which Parliament has said no. Although it was important, we should not focus solely on this when we consider Parliament's role in this important and often overlooked, policy area.

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This post is part of a series [Democratic Audit UK is running on Parliament's decision to reject military action in Syria](#), entitled '[Parliament and Syria: The Vote Heard Around the World](#)'

Note: This post represents the views of the author and not Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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