

Democratic round-up: Parliament and Syria

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Prime Ministers don't often lose votes in the House of Commons. It is particularly rare when it comes to matters of war and peace. Last night, the House of Commons bucked the trend and voted against British military involvement in Syria. Here, **Sean Kippin** looks at the best pieces of news and analysis emerging from a seismic moment in recent parliamentary history.*



David Cameron and Barack Obama: constrained by the House of Commons? CC by 2.0

Last night, the House of Commons, in a highly unusual move, voted down two motions on the UK's potential military involvement in crisis-ridden Syria. The results of the votes have been described as a mortal blow to David Cameron, who becomes the first Prime Minister since 1782 (according to the [Daily Mail](#)) to lose a vote on a matter of war and peace in the House of Commons.

Parliament has no statutory authority over what the Government does with its armed forces, as we showed on Democratic Audit [yesterday](#), but in recent years, Parliament has been consulted each time the Government has proposed military action. [The Guardian](#) welcomes Parliament's resolve to say "no", and describe the decision to face down the Prime Minister as feeling as though a "page has turned in the way such challenges are being faced"

Over at [Speaker's Chair](#), Mike Robb describes events in the House of Commons as showcasing both the 'best and worst' of parliament, with the behaviour of some MPs immediately after the vote being out of keeping with the gravity and seriousness of the situation. Anthony Painter, writing on [LabourList](#) is less equivocal; he argues that the vote represented 'Parliament's nadir', and accuses the House of Commons of acting 'against its own apparent will', while lamenting that 'Parliament managed to damage its humanitarian principles, undermine [the] national interest, and remove some heat from a terrifying and brutal dictator'. He also points out that the Government rebellion over Syria was modest when compared with that which occurred over Iraq, which was precisely 100 larger.

On [The Conversation](#), Nottingham University's Professor Philip Cowley puts last night's vote into historical context, looking at the votes for and against military action in other conflicts. Until Iraq, rebellions over foreign policy – specifically over getting involved militarily – were modest in size. Now, with a more assertive Parliament and a more independent backbench, no Prime Minister can use the House of Commons as a rubber stamp for military

adventures. At [Conservative Home](#), the Editor Paul Goodman, looks at exactly what went wrong in the Conservative Whips Office, and offers this dysfunction as a part-way explanation.

The Telegraph's [Tim Stanley](#) argues that the Government's defeat represents a turning point for the British constitution, and even goes so far as to assert that 'things may never be the same again'. Stanley also says that this is an 'astonishing departure' from historical precedent, with Parliament trading up its 'watchdog' role in these matters in order to adopt a 'policy making' role, instead. Stanley's Telegraph colleague, the Tory MEP [Daniel Hannan](#), agrees, describing the events of last night as a 'beautiful moment' which 'restored the authority of Parliament' over the executive.

In the [Daily Mirror](#), Kevin Maguire describes the Prime Ministers defeat as "wonderful for democracy". Richard Pass, writing for the [Huffington Post](#), points out the disconnect between 'celebrating the triumph of democracy and freedom of speech through ignoring the cries of the Syrian people for exactly the same rights'. He argues that though the Government's defeat was 'good for democracy' domestically, it was 'bad for morality', with Britain's refusal to get involved in another Middle East conflict representing our 'turning a blind eye' to the murder of innocent people.

John Cassidy, writing for the [New Yorker](#), is willing to give one more 'cheer' to Parliament than the [Guardian](#) – offering the full complement of three – and argues that last night's events in the House of Commons may even change the political dynamic in Washington, with the White House hitherto showing reluctance to bring the legislative branch of the federal Government into play.

One person who may be wishing that Parliament wasn't brought into the decision making process is the Education Secretary, [Michael Gove](#), who reportedly shouted "disgrace!" at those of his Conservative colleagues who had taken a view different from his own.

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Sean Kippin is Managing Editor of Democratic Audit, and is one of two people responsible for DA's day-to-day management, website, blog and wider output. He has a BA in Politics from the University of Northumbria and an MSc in Political Theory from the LSE. He has worked for MPs Nick Brown and Alex Cunningham, as well as the Smith Institute think tank. He has been at Democratic Audit since June 2013, and can be found on twitter at [@se_kip](#).

