


David Cameron's Syria defeat was unexpected, but Prime Ministers are regularly forced to bow to Parliament's will

 democraticaudit.com/2013/08/30/david-camerons-syria-defeat-was-unexpected-that-prime-ministers-regularly-bow-to-the-will-of-parliament/

By Democratic Audit UK

2013-8-30

*David Cameron's defeat last night in the Commons on his motion on military intervention in Syria has been met with shock, and correctly seen as a very visible assertion of parliamentary power. **Dr Meg Russell** of the Constitution Unit at UCL argues that although such confrontations are unusual, it would be wrong to assume that parliamentary checks on government ambitions are the exception. In fact, they happen all the time.*



Both the Prime Minister, and President Obama were thwarted by Parliament. But how often does it get in the Government's way? (Credit: wikipedia, cc by 2.0)

Two things are unusual about yesterday's events. First, and most widely commented upon, they address the difficult and high-profile question of peace and war. Historically, the ability to deploy troops has been seen as part of the 'royal prerogative' – whereby the executive can act without explicit parliamentary consent. This came under particular pressure in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war, when Robin Cook (Leader of the House of Commons) and Jack Straw (Foreign Secretary) persuaded Tony Blair that he should not proceed without the clear support of MPs. The result, on 18 March 2003, saw ['the largest \[vote\] against the whip by government MPs since the beginning of modern British politics'](#) – 139 Labour MPs defied the whip – but the Prime Minister still managed to win the vote with Conservative support. Subsequently there has been pressure to entrench a convention that parliamentary consent is required for the deployment of troops, with reports from [one parliamentary committee](#) and [then another](#).

Gordon Brown, and subsequently the coalition, have been sympathetic to such calls, but – as the second of these reports explores – the issues are complex. In 2011 David Cameron sought parliamentary approval for action in Libya, which was forthcoming – but only after the event. This sparked calls from a [third committee](#) to clarify the situation. But in short, a rejection by the Commons of such a proposal is unprecedented in recent times – at least because it has so rarely been asked the question. A [useful briefing](#) by the House of Commons Library documents how Commons debates on earlier conflicts – including Suez and the Falklands war – were generally taken without a substantive vote.

The other thing that is unusual is for a government to have to back down so publicly, on any kind of policy, in the face of parliamentary opposition. But this is not unheard of, including under the coalition. Most obviously, Nick Clegg's [Lords reform proposals](#) were withdrawn when it became clear that he faced certain defeat in the Commons on the necessary programme motion. Earlier, the coalition's Health and Social Care Bill had been withdrawn for a 'pause', due to resistance – particularly from the Liberal Democrats. Tony Blair also faced problems, notably being forced to implement a ban on fox-hunting that he did not himself support, and being pressured into a free vote on a total ban on smoking in public places, leading to a reversal of government policy.

All of these events took place in the very public arena of the House of Commons. What is more routine is for government to withdraw proposals following [defeat in the House of Lords](#). As I document in my [recent book](#), a key consideration for ministers in deciding whether to accept a Lords defeat is what the Commons will bear. When there is clear resistance from government backbenchers (as Brown faced over his proposals to detain terror suspects without charge for 42 days), plans are usually dropped to avoid possible Commons humiliation.

But this leads to the key point – which is that the real power of parliament is primarily exercised behind-the-scenes, through ministers considering what MPs are prepared to accept, and only putting proposals that they know will achieve support. When it comes to legislation, which is the topic of one of our [current projects](#), a huge amount of effort in Whitehall goes into developing parliamentary 'handling strategies' to think through what will prove controversial in both the Commons and the Lords. This is very explicit in the Cabinet Office's own [guide to making legislation](#) which also states that if 'the Government expects to be defeated on a non-government amendment, it may wish to pre-empt a defeat by tabling a concessionary amendment' – in other words to avoid a defeat by changing its policy before the vote. It is through these subtle and private mechanisms of communication that parliament's primary power is felt. Indeed among our case study bills there was one – the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Bill – that the Prime Minister was said by his whips' not to want, but which was introduced due to pressure from Labour MPs. It is the job, in particular, to keep in touch with parliamentary opinion through informal chats in corridors and tearooms, and ministers do the same in private meetings with MPs. If these mechanisms are working confrontations can be avoided, but parliamentary power is being exercised nonetheless.

Returning to the events of yesterday, what therefore appears to have gone wrong is communication inside the Conservative party. It is obviously more difficult for whips to keep on top of opinion during a parliamentary recess, and this can only have exacerbated the problem. What is more surprising is that when things started to look difficult the government didn't strike a deal with the opposition so that both sides could support one resolution – the words of the [government resolution](#) and the [Labour resolution](#) were strikingly similar. But does this mark the start of a new period of confrontation between government and parliament? Probably not. A smart government is in constant dialogue with parliamentarians, and when necessary trims its ambitions to avoid public splits. If Cameron didn't know that before, he certainly knows it now.

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