

What Happens if the British Parliament Votes No to America's War on Syria?

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

There has been an epidemic of outrage in the United Kingdom over the last few days, most of it coming from the great and not so good. The original cause was the alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria. With no hard evidence as to what the attack involved and who was actually responsible, our leaders had no hesitation in blaming President Assad, and suddenly we were awash with demands for 'intervention', military of course, as if the West hadn't been intervening from the start.

We'd all agree that any use of chemical weapons is outrageous. It's also against international law. President Obama calling for Assad to be 'punished' was in itself outrageous, considering how much punishment is due for acts committed by the US around the world, including the suspected use of chemical weapons in Iraq. But David Cameron was fair bursting with outrage: over the use of chemical weapons (by Assad of course); by the stance of Russia and its refusal to name Assad as the villain; and by the fact that there was little or no chance of getting the UN to pass a Resolution authorising military action against Assad. We had, he insisted, a 'moral duty' to act without a UN mandate. But to respond to this crisis militarily without such a mandate is both illegal and immoral.

They were all at it - Tony Blair, still trying to be a world leader and calling loudly for intervention; Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, talking about "brutal dictators getting away with it", but never mentioning all the brutal dictators the West has supported over the years; Attorney General Dominic Grieve trying to prove that an air strike on 'humanitarian grounds' was permissible without UN approval. And none of them admitting that using violence to halt violence would only make matters worse.

In his eagerness to get out the guns Cameron clearly has little understanding of the meaning of 'moral'. And even less understanding of and regard for international law. But missiles and bombs are always attractive to men in power, so attractive that the fact that using violence is fundamentally immoral slips out of sight. As does the fact that international law is actually the result of years of patient work to codify what we know to be moral behaviour.

But others voiced their doubts. Questions were raised about the legality and the 'evidence', particularly the evidence when people looked back 10 years. They remembered the rhetoric, the constant speeches about WMDs, removing Saddam Hussein and the sinking realisation that we were going to invade Iraq regardless. Cameron decided to recall Parliament for a debate on the matter. Treading in Blair's footsteps, he could do no less.

And MPs email boxes were flooded with messages from the public, expressing their own outrage. Not again, they wrote, not again. One MP said she had received 500 emails and only 30 were in favour of military intervention.

So Parliament debated all through the afternoon and the evening, and then came the moment when the cat was truly put among Westminster's pigeons. Cameron lost the plot and the vote. Angry faces and accusations all round, the Education Secretary screaming at those Conservatives who had voted against the government. But history had been made. Many back-bench MPs must have suddenly felt stronger and more hopeful for the future. And I went to bed and slept, my soul much lighter than it had been for days.

The next morning the mood was still angry, but now the outrage was over the 'shameful' vote. The government had to acknowledge that, just as the majority of the public was against a military intervention, so Parliament had voted. But they didn't like the result and they were queuing up to say so. Among them was Lord Paddy Ashdown, ex-leader of the Liberal Democrats. "Call me an old warhorse if you wish but I think our country is greatly diminished this morning," he said, himself diminished by the [Independent](#) who called him Mr Ashdown. "The special relationship with the US is seriously damaged, and Britain is now more isolated. Why do we even need armed forces any longer, in these circumstances?" Good question, Paddy. We certainly don't need forces that are there simply to invade other countries. They are, or should be, there to defend this country, no less and no more. Anything else costs too much, in blood and ruined lives.

He went on to say, "I have never felt more depressed or, I am bound to say, ashamed... ". No, Paddy. I am not a gung-ho patriot but I love this little patch of earth, its hills and valleys, woods and fields, moors, mountains and fens. And I am deeply ashamed of the damage and suffering that the UK has brought upon other peoples, most recently in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. I am ashamed of our arms trade. I am ashamed of our appalling history of torture, ashamed that the UN Committee on Torture is still not [satisfied](#) with the UK's attitude towards the UN Convention Against.

There was a procession of grandees voicing the same opinions, the shame, the disgrace, the humiliation. The UK would no longer be a leader on the world stage; but "reduced to the rank of third-rate nations". We had let down, even betrayed the United States, though why we should follow the US into illegality I fail to see. We had destroyed the 'special relationship', a relationship that has little meaning for most British and American people. It can provide a fig leaf for the US at times like this, making it look as though they are leading a 'coalition' rather than acting as an out-of-control rogue state. In all other respects the traffic of this relationship is very much one way, to America's advantage.

Mostly the chorus was that 'we have lost our standing in the world'. *Our* standing, mind you. Not the country's standing but *ours*. All these self-important, self-opinionated little men were suddenly looking at a future of being sidelined, not being asked for their opinions, not being able to swan around the world telling everyone else what they should do; a future, heaven forbid, of not being automatically taken to the VIP lounge at airports, staying at the top hotels and being offered Italian villas for their summer holidays. The UK must, by any means possible, remain at the top table.

But Parliament had voted No to military intervention, and that was that. The best the poor losers could come up with, after Obama announced that Congress would get a debate, but not until September 9th, was to suggest Parliament could re-run the debate and vote again.

And there was something else to be seen in all this outrage that Britain would not be taking military action. None of these people said anything along the lines of “We must double our diplomatic efforts to help solve this crisis”.

Comment pieces and letters in the press showed a different view. We are a small country, people were saying, and we’ve had our day. We don’t need to feel important. And in our present financial situation we can’t afford it. People knew, even if Cameron was refusing to see it, that military action is never limited. Missions always creep. They looked at how much Iraq and all the other ventures have cost us, in money, in resources and in lives. People don’t really care that much about ‘our standing’, not even in Scotland. But what has Scotland to do with it? Well...

For trans-Atlantic readers: Scotland became joined to (I hesitate to use the words ‘united with’) England when the Scottish king James VI inherited England’s throne after the death of Queen Elizabeth I. England already had Wales and Ireland by conquest. James VI became James I, left Scotland for England, never to return, and set about forcing four separate nations, with their own cultures, languages and history, into what eventually became the United Kingdom. The scars are still with us.

Ireland finally got most of her territory back and Wales, after long and active campaigning got enough devolved power from Westminster to form the Welsh Assembly. Scotland managed to get its own Parliament which gives it more power than the Welsh Assembly to take decisions on Scottish affairs. And now a sizeable percentage of the population wants independence. A referendum will be held next year. Westminster doesn’t agree and takes every possible opportunity to make the case for Scotland remaining part of the UK. There are good reasons why Scotland should regain its independence. There are as many good reasons why it should remain within the UK and, where Westminster is concerned, two very, very large ones.

First, there are still reserves of oil and gas (with all the revenue that creates) in the North Sea, that would lie within Scottish territorial waters if Scotland became independent. Second, on the west coast of Scotland lies Faslane, home to the UK fleet of Trident nuclear missile-carrying submarines. Trident – the biggest toy in the government’s box. Trident, the UK’s ‘independent’ nuclear defence; except, as most of it comes from the US and it cannot be used without US consent it isn’t really independent. Nor is it of any use where defence is concerned. Many senior military figures regard it as a waste of both money and space, an unwanted leftover from the Cold War days.

But for politicians it is irresistible. It confers so much illusory power and prestige. It gives us a seat at the top table. All the grandees and senior politicians can make believe they are world leaders, helping to form the major decisions that will govern the world. They must stop Scotland from becoming independent because the Scots would toss Trident and its submarines out of Faslane, and there is realistically nowhere else around our shores the government can put it, for the English and the Welsh don’t want it either. Trident would have to be scrapped.

So what with people like Ashdown talking about losing ‘our standing’ in the world because of Parliament’s ‘shameful’ vote, and the referendum only a year away, here was an opportunity not to be missed. Step forward Scottish MP Alistair Darling, ex-Chancellor to ex-Prime Minister Gordon Brown, with a brand new [reason](#) why Scotland should remain within the UK. An independent Scotland, he said, would lack clout on the international stage when

dealing with crises like Syria. Why Scotland would want to interfere with Syria or anywhere else was not explained. And small countries are quite capable of contributing to humanitarian aid. It is only 'important' nations like the UK which think that such contributions should include missiles and guns.

Would Scotland, with a population of 5.3 million, want to exercise influence over the rest of the world? I don't think so, and certainly not in the way Darling means. Scotland, small though it is, has given much to the world through the expertise of its inventors and engineers. James Watt took a small English invention and developed it into the steam engine that was the real start of the Industrial Revolution. Where would we be without John Logie Baird, inventor of the first television (and later, the first colour TV)? Artists, writers, scientists, doctors, surgeons and many others - Scotland has a rich history of subtle influence devoid of bullying, bragging and military 'solutions' to human problems.

No. The Scots can walk tall enough without wanting or needing to interfere in other countries' affairs. As can we all.

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