

UK government rejects Corbyn's demand for parliament to vote on war

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Prime Minister Theresa May's government has made clear that Britain's parliament will never again be allowed to prevent a planned military intervention, as it did when voting against an attack on Syria in August 2013.

May's defence in parliament yesterday of her refusal to recall parliament before the April 14 missile strike on Syria by the United States, France and Britain was framed to exclude any future vote prior to military action.

Parliament met to debate a motion proposed yesterday by Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn insisting that parliament "take back control" of military matters by passing a Military Powers Act requiring the government to seek MPs' approval before launching action overseas.

In the wake of the lies used by the Labour Party to railroad the British population into the disastrous invasion of Iraq, there is overwhelming opposition to a new military adventure. According to a recent YouGov poll, only 22 percent of the British population supports airstrikes against Syria.

Under these conditions, Corbyn is cynically and desperately seeking to prop up the tattered reputation of the Labour Party by claiming that it can serve as a check on the May government and its military adventures. Predictably, large sections of his own party—which represents the interests of the City of London no less than May's hated Tories—broke with him to support May.

Corbyn's emergency motion was accepted by speaker John Bercow after a three-hour debate Monday on Syria. This saw May face off criticisms of the legal and factual basis offered by the government for the Syria strike as a supposedly limited and humanitarian action to degrade the Bashar al-Assad regime's alleged chemical weapons capabilities.

In that debate, May was lent the open support of around 20 Labour MPs who spoke against their party leader and several others who supported the call for a parliamentary vote, while making clear that they would have voted in favour of the attack.

In his motion debated Tuesday, Corbyn centred almost

exclusively on re-establishing the convention of parliament voting on military action—accepted since 2003—rather than on the Syria strike itself.

In 2003, the Labour government of Tony Blair was forced to take a vote on war due to massive public opposition, but May has determined that this dangerous concession to popular anti-war sentiment can no longer be tolerated.

Corbyn denounced May for her "flagrant disregard" for the post-Iraq war convention that had also applied in Libya and Syria. "It's for this house to take matters into its own hands and back our control, as some might put it."

He drew attention to the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq War, which found that the intelligence on Iraq's alleged "weapons of mass destruction" was hyped-up, the process of identifying the legal basis for war was flawed and that the war was unnecessary, describing this as "a salutary lesson to all of us on the importance of there being total scrutiny of what goes on..."

The law Corbyn was proposing would codify this convention to let MPs ask whether any military action was necessary and legal, and what was the long-term strategy before it was taken.

Corbyn acknowledged caveats "in a case of overriding emergency," but said "it is very important that the House of Commons, as one of the oldest parliaments in the world, holds the government to account."

He concluded by piously hoping that all MPs would back the motion, but his appeals to the "Mother of Parliaments" fell on deaf ears.

Corbyn was barracked throughout from the Tory benches, so that Bercow had to repeatedly intervene and warn one that he may be asked to leave the chamber. And May's response was equally bellicose.

Corbyn had referred to a cabinet manual, drawn up by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, stating that military interventions should have prior parliamentary approval "except when there [is] an emergency and such action would not be appropriate."

May said that "exception" covered the action against Syria

and would do so in all conceivable cases except prior to a pre-planned formal declaration of war. Corbyn's proposed war powers act would make "small-scale" military interventions unviable, primarily because any debate would endanger UK and Allied troops and aid the enemy.

"Uncertainty" was "a critical part" of an operation's success.

May's claim that a parliamentary debate would have revealed "our detailed plans" was said with a straight face, despite US President Donald Trump tweeting his intention to attack Syria to the world in advance.

"Making it unlawful for Her Majesty's Government to undertake any such military intervention without a vote would seriously compromise our national security, our national interests, and the lives of British citizens at home and abroad," she said. "And for as long as I'm prime minister, that will never be allowed to happen."

May set out that her broader concern was in preventing a debate that might throw up awkward questions regarding the spurious basis on which not only the strike against Syria, but also mounting aggression against Russia is being taken.

Referring obliquely to the lies of the Blair government and the Bush administration regarding "weapons of mass destruction," she declared, "In the post-Iraq era, it is natural for people to ask questions about intelligence." However, the government had an obligation to protect its supposed intelligence sources—a reference to Islamist terrorist groups in Syria.

Parliament could never be allowed "access" to such intelligence, she declared. "The issue is not about taking parliament into the government's confidence. It is about whether our adversaries are taken into the government's confidence."

The ensuing debate was just as banal and reactionary as May's speech. Tory MP Andrew Bridgen drew laughter for suggesting that Corbyn would not authorise military action even if the Isle of Wight were invaded. Another spoke of an attack on Estonia.

The arch-right-winger Jacob Rees-Mogg denounced Corbyn for "upsetting our constitution merely to entrench inaction." But he pointedly questioned why Corbyn had not called for a motion of no confidence in the government. "The opposition fundamentally does not have confidence, or its leadership does not, to have made this decision," he said.

Corbyn did not answer. Instead, in his summation Corbyn suggested that Rees-Mogg was harking back to 1688—The "Glorious Revolution" that led to the expulsion of James II and the passing of the 1689 Bill of Rights, limiting Royal prerogative powers. It is possible for the Commons to move forward from 1688, Corbyn suggested.

The government did not agree. And neither did many of

his own MPs—who were just as insistent as May to end the charade of democratic accountability for war.

In her speech, May acknowledged the support she had on the Labour benches—speaking of "a tradition of support for military intervention on humanitarian grounds" in both parties. More direct still, she concluded her closing remarks by stating that the "mood of the House" was unquestionable: "We do have the support of the House—a clear majority of this House believe we did the right thing."

The vote proved her estimation to be correct. The government won the Syria debate by 317 votes to 256—a majority of 61. This meant that 54 Labour MPs—a fifth of the total—did not back Corbyn in his demand for a parliamentary vote, let alone in opposing military action.

Corbyn should be judged on the consequences of his political actions, not his words.

He wants desperately to restore the tattered reputation of Labour and the British parliament among workers and young people, the belief that it can be made to work, when the drive to authoritarianism is clear to see.

He continues to make personal declarations of opposition to war and promises to transform Labour in the interests of working people, while insisting on unity with MPs that are no less militaristic than the Tories.

Instead of routing the nakedly pro-war cabal in Labour's ranks, he allowed them a free vote on the Syrian airstrikes proposed by Tory Prime Minister David Cameron in November 2015. Sixty-six Labour MPs voted with the Tories then. Today, after Corbyn has made one retreat after another, including on NATO and the renewal of Britain's nuclear weapons, the self-same warmongers continue to back UK military aggression in the Middle East that threatens war with Russia.



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