

David Cameron has created a new vision of Conservative foreign policy, one which is far happier to intervene to stop suffering and expounds a bigger, and more liberal, view of Britain's interests in the world

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Tim Oliver and Matt Beech contend that the Conservative Party changed its philosophical approach to humanitarian intervention during its years in opposition. David Cameron and William Hague have articulated views of humanitarian intervention that bridge the gap between more traditionally realist Conservative views of humanitarian intervention, focused on order, sovereignty and a narrow conception of Britain's interests, and a more justice-centric view of foreign policy which includes consideration of questions of justice and war for humanitarian ends.



The recent parliamentary vote on intervention in Syria has provided column writers with much to talk about when it comes to the Conservative Party and humanitarian intervention. The rebellion of 30 Conservative MPs against the government whip, and the subsequent failure of the Coalition to secure a majority in favour of the option of military action against Syria, is not an isolated incident. When we look at the wider historical relationship between the Conservative Party and the idea of humanitarian intervention, the rebellion of only 30 Conservative MPs becomes far more surprising.



Our [article for Parliamentary Affairs](#) seeks to show how this change has come about, and to use international relations theory to help understand the change in a broader context. In particular, the debate within the English School of international relations theory was felt to be particularly useful. We feel its debate between order-centred views of the world, which prize state sovereignty, and justice-centred views, which place the emphasis on individual rights, reflects the wider political discussion over such interventions very well, and enables us to conceptualise the debate in a new and interesting way.

The Conservative party has traditionally cleaved to a more order-centred view of international relations, as we seek to demonstrate with our brief history of the Major governments' reaction to the unfolding civil war in Bosnia in the mid-1990s. Douglas Hurd's public dismissal of the 'Something Must Be Done Club' is reflected as a general scepticism about whether it was right for Britain to be involved in the Yugoslav Civil War in the speeches of a great many Conservative parliamentarians, and in the memoirs of ministers. The apparent lack of a direct British interest in Bosnia was tied with other traditional Conservative foreign policy themes in building the case against intervention which was articulated by many Conservative backbenchers. Yet even in this conflict we find the seeds of a future shift in policy for the Conservative Party. In particular, Sir Patrick Cormack MP advanced the argument in Commons debates that there were British interests at stake in Bosnia, because Britain's interests were wider than its borders – that they included a general interest in the stability of Europe. This move into a wider conception of order paves the way for a shift that accelerates as the party responds to the Blair governments' humanitarian interventions.

We contend that the Conservative Party changed its philosophical approach to humanitarian intervention during its years in opposition. Early on in this period, Conservative support for such interventions – as in Kosovo and Sierra Leone – was articulated in terms of the British national interest. But, with the election of David Cameron as Conservative Party leader in 2005, a deeper philosophical change can be detected in the party. Both Cameron and William Hague, as Shadow Foreign Secretary, have articulated views of humanitarian intervention that bridge the gap between more traditionally realist Conservative views of humanitarian intervention, focused on order, sovereignty and a narrow conception of Britain's interests, and a more justice-centric view of foreign policy which includes consideration of questions of justice and war for humanitarian ends.

This fusion of traditional Conservative foreign policy and newer ideas about intervention can be seen in the intervention in Libya. On the one hand, Britain was a leading player in advocating a war with Libya to remove Colonel Gaddafi from power and was a key player in the coalition that was assembled to do so. British diplomatic and military assets were deployed in the name of a specifically humanitarian intervention, and a Conservative Prime Minister laid out a clear, justice-driven view of why the war with Syria was necessary. Cameron did not shrink from doing so in a bold and clear way, both domestically and internationally. The criteria he established as a threshold for going to war even echo, quite clearly, those that Blair established in his Chicago speech of 1999.

On the other hand, the Conservatives have demonstrated their restraint in this area in other ways. Whilst Britain's intervention in Libya was dramatic, it was restrained in scope by a wider desire to bring Britain's public finances back into balance, which in turn had led to reduced budgets for the armed forces. More philosophically, the National Security Strategy and the Strategic Defence and Security Review had both omitted any meaningful discussion of Britain's place in humanitarian interventions and had instead focused on preventing conflicts from emerging in the first place. There is also a considerable community within the Conservative parliamentary party that remains sceptical about the value of humanitarian interventionism – as was seen over both Libya and Syria.

Yet the articulation of a more justice-centric view of the world has accelerated since the war in Libya. William Hague's July 2012 speech in the Hague on "International Law and Justice in a Networked World" is as clear an articulation of this world view as any one could hope for. His specific call for justice to cross borders; for sovereignty to be downgraded, in essence, in pursuit of wider humanitarian goals. The formal theme of the speech was focused on international criminal law, but his language can be readily appropriated for wars in the name of humanitarian causes.

This brings us back to where we began – with Syria and the 30 Conservative rebels. The evidence we submit through our journal article shows that they are keepers of an older Conservative tradition, sceptical of the use of force for justice-led concerns. Lobby journalists may laugh at Michael Gove's rounding on rebellious MPs after the vote, but we contend that not only is his view of humanitarian intervention sincerely held, it is also increasingly the fore within the Conservative party. Of course, much will depend on the future leadership of the party as to how well this change beds in. But for now, we argue that Cameron has created a new vision of Conservative foreign policy, one which is far happier to intervene to stop suffering and expounds a bigger, and more liberal, view of Britain's interests in the world. The defeat over Syria may only be a temporary reverse of this trend.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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