

Interview: Tara McCormack

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This interview was conducted by the Remote Control project.

In this interview, Dr McCormack discusses the British military interventions in Libya, Iraq and Syria, the shift that these interventions mark away from the longstanding Royal Prerogative on war-making and how the use of remote warfare is effecting the democratic oversight of the use of military assets in conflict.

Q. In Britain, the power to declare war and deploy troops in conflict is one of the few remaining Royal Prerogatives. Recently, however, British military interventions in Iraq, Syria and Libya were all first put to a vote in the House of Commons. Did these cases mark a move towards greater democratic oversight of the decision to go to war in Britain?

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The Royal Prerogative (RP) is a set of (not fully defined) powers that used to belong to the Monarch but are exercised by the government and Prime Minister. In essence, the RP allows the Prime Minister to make a decision without consulting Parliament or even his/her Cabinet. The power to commit armed forces to a conflict is one important RP power. Since the end of the Cold War the RP has been seen to be increasingly problematic for a number of reasons to do with a decline in trust in government and broader problems of legitimacy.

The power to take the country to war has been seen as particularly problematic and during the 90s and 00s there were a number of Parliamentary debates and reports that considered this question of the Prime Minister's power to declare war without broader Parliamentary authorisation.

However, historically when Britain has gone to war, although Parliament has not voted on the decision it has been customary for some kind of debate to take place, often as the military action has begun. This was so for the Kosovo (1999) war. In March 2003, under pressure from a number of MPs, Tony Blair agreed to a vote on a motion about British military intervention in Iraq on the eve of the American invasion.

The Conservative Party pledged that if they came to power would make it a matter of course that Parliament would have a substantive vote on taking Britain to war, and this was done over the Libyan intervention and then Syria. The debate and vote to go to war in Syria received a great deal of media coverage and was reported on hour by hour as indeed was the vote to go to war and even the first military planes that flew.

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This new parliamentary convention on authorising military intervention is now well established. It is a very important convention as, in principle, this new parliamentary convention gives democratic authority and legitimacy to decisions to commit British armed forces to war.

However, at the same time there has been another significant trend in warfare, and that is that governments are increasingly using methods of intervention that are in essence 'off the books', for example the increasing use of special forces, or drones. Paul Rogers has called these modes of intervention 'security by remote control'. This is an excellent phrase as it highlights the way in which these methods of intervention allow governments to intervene militarily but without the clear lines of public and democratic accountability that more traditional methods entail.

Q. Why do you think there was this shift towards making the process of going to war more democratic under the Conservative Party?

The shift away from the Royal Prerogative (RP) has been an on-going process since the end of the Cold War for the reasons I mentioned in my first answer, in particular questions of trust and legitimacy combined with a number of observable changes in voting behaviour, e.g. falling voter turnout, increased voter volatility and so on. What we see from the mid-90s are a number of parliamentary debates and reports about what is perceived to be the problem of the RP in this context. Of course, the decision to take a country to war is something that is particularly problematic in a context in which there seems to be a loss of trust in the government.

I think that the reason why the Conservative Party made it an explicit pledge was not that Hague and Cameron (for example) were greater democrats than

Blair and New Labour, but because of this on-going debate within the political elite about the RP.

Q. Could the high financial, human and regional geopolitical costs of the Iraq War may have also contributed to the shift away from the Royal Prerogative?

I do think that the Iraq War has been significant in terms of British politics certainly. The Iraq War, the ‘dodgy dossier’ and Blair’s claims exacerbated the problem of trust and raised a question over British military intervention.

However, I do want to stress that the underlying dynamics behind the new parliamentary convention are pre-Iraq, e.g. loss of trust in government, as is clear from the debates and discussions in the House of Commons.

I think it is also worth remembering that many of our politicians have ‘mis-remembered’ the Iraq debate and the immense political support there was for this most disastrous intervention. Tony Blair did hold a debate and vote on the Iraq intervention (albeit on the eve of military action). There was strong support for the intervention. But there were some brave voices arguing against the intervention whatever the ‘evidence’.

It is easy now to blame Tony Blair and his ‘dodgy dossier’ for all the ills in British politics.

Q. So how is this use of ‘remote warfare’ affecting the democratic oversight of armed conflict in the UK?

I think that the shift towards what Paul Rogers has called ‘remote control warfare’ means that there is less democratic oversight of armed conflict in the UK. This is because methods of intervention such as the use of special forces,

drones and also cyber warfare are carried out with little public scrutiny or political debate.

It is not that information about these methods of intervention is impossible to find out, it can be found out through Freedom of Information requests, and sometimes Parliamentary questions and similar. However, compared to the very public political debate and media coverage about what might be called traditional modes of military intervention, there is very little public knowledge or scrutiny or indeed, crucially, parliamentary debate.

Q. Due to remote warfare often being highly secretive, public knowledge of the UK's use of this tactic may be limited. But is there any reliable data on the British public's views of remote warfare and the democratic oversight of this practice? For example, are there any opinion polls on the British public's attitudes to security, armed forces and democratic oversight?

That is a really important question. As far as I am aware this is not something that has been fully investigated yet but it is something that needs to be looked at.

There are polls and surveys that look at public attitudes to armed conflict. Basically, British people are reluctant to intervene militarily (the idea of the 'post-heroic' West is more or less true) in particular for 'wars of choice'. So for example, a [recent Gallup International poll](#) found that only 27% percent of British people would be willing to fight for their country. A [YouGov poll](#) found a minority in favour of Britain attempting to influence events around the world.

Interestingly, however, the YouGov poll has found that whilst the majority of people oppose sending regular troops to somewhere like Syria, 60% support

airstrikes or use of drones (note this is against ISIS not Assad).

This suggests that public perception is that intervention by remote control is less consequential than conventional intervention. However, I would suggest that this is not the case and that the consequences of warfare by remote control need to be more openly discussed.

Q. The Foreign Affairs Committee's (FAC) recent report on the 2011 Libyan military intervention acknowledged the presence of UK special forces currently operating in Libya, which is arguably a surprising move given the 'culture of no comment' surrounding UK special forces. Looking to the future, do you feel that this may offer some grounds for optimism or do you think that the erosion of the democratic oversight of Britain's military actions will continue?

Yes I noticed that and also that the FAC report specifically mentioned that this is not really publicly scrutinised. The thing about 'remote control warfare' is not that it is totally unacknowledged, information does come out in reports (such as the FAC report on Libya), FoI requests (the website Drone Wars is very good on this) but it is very limited. Compare, for example, the high level of debate and discussion given to Britain's decision to launch airstrikes on Syria, and of course the vote under the new Parliamentary Convention.

I just do not know the answer to the final part of the question, it depends on so many factors. Certainly it is something that I think is very important to get into the public realm as much as possible.

Tara McCormack is Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Leicester.

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Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

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