Diplomatic disaster that should have persuaded Cameron to fall on sword

Tom Richmond

WAITING GAME: Syrian children queue to collect a free meal in the northern city of Raqqa. The civilised world will have more blood on its conscience as the slaughter of the innocents continues.

WAR fatigue – and complacency on the part of David Cameron – led to Parliament vetoing British intervention in Syria, and President Barack Obama pulling back from the brink and delaying military action against Bashar-al-Assad's regime until Congress has given its backing.

As Cameron tried, and failed, to present his case to Parliament last Thursday, a supposed "joke" was being circulated amongst the political elite which read "Tony Blair says Syria can launch chemical weapons at the UK in 45 minutes". Hardly laughing material, it only hardened the resolve of Tory rebels and Labour opponents of war.

Yet it is naive just to blame Blair's legacy – and wobbly Ed Miliband's U-turn – for Cameron becoming the first PM to lose a parliamentary vote on military intervention since 1782 when MPs voted against further conflict in America during the War of Independence.

British voters, patriotic supporters of the Armed Forces, are heartily sickened of the "shoot first and think about the consequences later" foreign policy doctrine, an approach which left so many soldiers paying with their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they now only expect troops to be deployed sparingly and with purpose.

Even America's arch-hawk John McCain, the defeated 2008 presidential candidate, now says that the Obama war strategy, backed by Cameron until five days ago, lacks clarity.

It is why the game was up for Cameron in the Commons when he responded so lamely to this simple question by former actress and Labour MP Glenda Jackson: "What has convinced him that an action by the international community would cease the use of chemical weapons within Syria, a country where the combatants have accepted 100,000 dead, millions of refugees and the continuing action that is totally destroying that country?"

It was the question being asked around the country and the PM had simply not done his groundwork. Momentarily, he looked speechless. You could feel the life being sucked out of the PM's authority when he stood up and replied: "As I have just said, in the end there is no 100 per cent certainty about who is responsible; you have to make a judgment."

MPs did just that – and made a judgment which left the Prime Minister politically wounded because of his failure to grasp his brief, learn the haunting lessons of recent military history and get to grips with the seriousness of the situation after his mistaken suggestion that the Syrian rebels should be armed.

I'm surprised that it has not become a resignation question for the Tory leader, or Foreign Secretary William Hague. Many have lost their jobs over matters that were far less serious – or profound – in comparison to this diplomatic disaster. Perhaps it shows the extent to which the notion of ministerial responsibility has been sullied since Lord Carrington quit over the Falklands invasion, and the late Robin Cook's principled resignation over Iraq.

In many respects, I wish Parliament would show its independence, and ask such probing questions, far more frequently – whether it be in the field of foreign affairs or domestic politics. The governance of this country would improve as a consequence if MPs became more independent-minded following this liberating experience.

That said, parliamentary protocol is no consolation to those Syrian innocents being suffocated and burned to death by sarin gas – the assertion of US Secretary of State John Kerry – while Miliband tries to play politics by taking the credit for the Government's defeat.

Contrast his antics with his colleague Meg Munn, the Sheffield Heeley MP, who told MPs: "To those who are not persuaded by the need to relieve the humanitarian crisis and who say 'intervention has nothing to do with us; it will play into the hands of al-Qaida', I say that the reverse is true. We can and must intervene.

"There are clearly risks in not taking action; for more than two years we have not taken action. We should have been having this debate two years ago. We should have been doing something two years ago. Our delay has led to there being no good options."

As such, David Cameron deserves some praise for having the political courage to recall Parliament and put British intervention in a Syria to a vote while Miliband must question whether it was morally right to help defeat the Government when nerve gas is dropped on children. To their credit, the Lib Dems, and Paddy Ashdown in particular, did show a willingness to accept military action after their principled and steadfast opposition to the Iraq invasion.

However, it does not answer this question: what happens next?

I admit to having been lukewarm to the concept of intervention before seeing the harrowing BBC footage of the apparent aftermath of a napalm-like substance being dropped on a school in the rebel-held north as MPs went through the division lobbies. How can we look these innocents in the eye and say "sorry, you're on your own"?

And then I ask this: how can the targeting of military sites by cruise missiles prove effective unless such strikes are backed up by sufficient "boots on the ground"?

Perhaps this is the most important lesson of all. The policy of liberal intervention masked the decline of international diplomacy, and the Syria impasse means new ways will have to be sought to empower ineffective bodies like the United Nations.

Too many responses in recent years have been of the knee-jerk kind, hence why little credence was given to Tony Blair's stance at the weekend. "Intervention can be uncertain, expensive and bloody," he said. "But history has taught us that inaction can merely postpone the reckoning. We haven't paid the bill for Syria yet. But we will." At least he is consistent.

Yet this remark is symptomatic of a generation of leaders who seem incapable of keeping their options open – Mayor of London Boris Johnson now advocates a second Commons vote in the hope of getting the "right" result – and reinvigorating the neglected concept of diplomacy. Britain sitting idly by is just as hopeless as committing to military action.

Tragically, this change of mindset will be too late for Syria but someone, somewhere has to begin longer-term dialogue to prevent the whole Middle East going up in flames.

As the aforementioned Meg Munn said, the suffering in Syria is not new. The real shame is that any response is probably too late because of the two years of inertia and inaction which preceded the tumult of the past week.

To me, this failure of diplomacy and dialogue is a war crime in its own right which the whole civilised world now has to carry on its conscience. As the politicians pay the price for their inadequacies, the slaughter of the innocents continues and all we can offer, after a disastrous decade of military intervention, is more bombs. It's truly heartbreaking.

Body blow for Britain's reputation as trusted ally of US

Edward M Spiers

Edward M Spiers is Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of Leeds.

THE Government's 13-vote defeat that precludes the UK from military intervention in Syria is a historic event with huge international implications.

Several commentators, including Lord Ashdown, the former Lib Dem leader, have expressed fears that the vote has diminished the international standing of Great Britain; that it has damaged the so-called special relationship with the United States and that it has left the UK unable to act in response to chemical warfare.

Undoubtedly David Cameron and William Hague under-estimated the legacy of scepticism left by the Iraq war and suffered a humiliating defeat on a policy that they had promoted with passion and conviction both at home and internationally.

This will diminish the impact of British diplomacy whether in bilateral meetings or in the UN Security Council and the forthcoming G20 summit at St Petersburg this Thursday and Friday. Britain's reliability as an ally has been damaged; it may prove difficult to repair.

Of particular importance may be relations with the US. Britain, France and recently Turkey have urged the Obama administration to act upon his "red line" speech in August 2012, implying a possible military response should the regime of Bashar al-Assad use chemical weapons.

With outrage over the recent attack in Damascus now expressed by President Obama and his Secretary of State, John Kerry, the US may decide to act alone. If it does, it will act militarily, as Obama has indicated, in support of its "own interests" in the hope of deterring further recourse to chemical warfare.

Will this mean the end of the special relationship that has been the cornerstone of our foreign and security policies since the Second World War?

That relationship was crucial during the Cold War, when the US nuclear deterrent (part of which was based in Britain) underpinned the security of the UK and our Nato allies.

It was also a relationship that flourished under particular leaders – Macmillan and Kennedy, Reagan and Thatcher, and latterly Blair and Clinton before Blair and Bush. Underpinned by a sharing of intelligence, it often flourished in times of crisis: the Falklands War, Bosnia and Kosovo, and the military operations after 9/11.

While the Commons vote has damaged the special relationship, as reflected in Kerry's jibe about France being America's "oldest ally", the relationship has survived even worse problems: US opposition during the Suez crisis; Harold Wilson's refusal to support the US during the Vietnam war and America's invasion of Grenada in 1983.

So the relationship could recover, especially as Obama, who understands the political legacy of the Iraq war, is now following Cameron in seeking Congressional authorisation for military action. But the UK government's maladroit response to the Syrian crisis may have longer-term consequences; it could encourage the Obama administration (and possibly its successor) to give US interests in Asia far higher priority than those of its European allies.

Meanwhile the Syrian civil war will continue, with its 100,000 death toll, principally from conventional ordnance, growing and dwarfing the casualties inflicted by poison gas. Whether a US "shot across the bow" of the Assad regime proves successful or not, it underscores that both the Geneva Protocol (1925) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (1997) lack procedures for enforcing their terms.

Just as Mussolini's forces and the Imperial Japanese Army exposed the hollowness of the protocol in the 1930s, so the Syrian crisis is revealing the shortcomings of the convention. If the UN Security Council is either deadlocked by political disputes and a Russian veto, or is bypassed by pre-emptive US military action, or cannot act at all because Congress has blocked Obama, then talk about upholding international "norms" in a legitimate manner will remain just talk.

Let's raise a glass to some welcome candour

Andrew Vine

EVERY TUESDAY

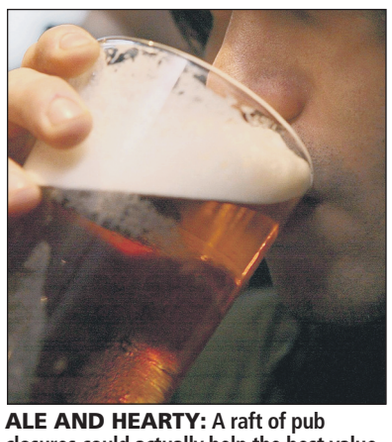
HERE'S a scenario that you might recognise. The Ratcatcher and Terrier isn't a pub you know, but it looks okay from the outside, and you decide to stop off for a quick one on the way home.

In through the door, and your heart sinks. It's gloomy, and where the carpet isn't threadbare, it's ever so slightly sticky underfoot. The seating needs re-upholstering and there's a faint whiff in the air of old cooking oil that's fried one plateful of chips too many.

Never mind, it's a nice day and there's a sign for a beer garden. We'll go out there. Up to the bar, which is even stickier than the carpet, behind which is a bloke in a shirt that was probably clean a couple of days before. He could do with a shave as well. He doesn't smile, or say hello, he just flicks his head upwards by way of asking what you'd like.

A pint of Old Mottled Walrus, please, and a glass of dry white wine. There isn't much change out of £10 and the barman doesn't say either "please" or "thank you". Ah, well. A quick look at one of the dog-eared menus, with a tomato sauce stain on it. It's the usual. This with chips. That with chips. Or you can go for chips on their own.

Out to the beer garden, which is something of a euphemism, because it's an unswept yard full of rickety old wooden furniture weathered to a dull grey colour that hasn't been cleaned of bird deposits. Nor have any of the overflowing ashtrays been emptied, or glasses and discarded crisp packets cleared away.



ALE AND HEARTY: A raft of pub closures could actually help the best value and most welcoming inns to thrive.

We'll clear a bit of space over there and sit down. Cheers, and a clink of glasses followed by twin grimaces. The beer is cloudy and has a metallic aftertaste. The wine is fit only for cleaning the bird dirt off the table.

Sound familiar? It should. My entirely fictional pub is drawn from life and grim experience, and it's a long way from the rosy collective image that is part of the national mindset.

That has the pub as a jolly, welcoming, comfortable home-from-home, full of chatting couples and laughing groups of friends, presided over by mine genial host who likes and welcomes his customers, as do the smiling and polite barmen and barmaids pulling pints of beautifully-kept foaming ale or serving platefuls of hearty, home-cooked grub.

Other ideals usually get painted into the picture as well. If the pub is anywhere rural, it will be half-timbered, with exposed beams spanning the low ceilings, have hanging baskets in the summer, a roaring fire in winter, and serve food produced by the local farmers having a pint at the bar, every meal cooked with flair by a chef who takes pride in his work.

If only this were so. Often enough, pubs both urban and rural are scruffy, overpriced clip joints where customers pay through the nose for surly staff, poor drinks, and cook-chill microwaved pap-and-chips of uncertain provenance which any self-respecting dog would turn down.

This is why the latest edition of the *Good Pub Guide* deserves a cheer for being candid enough to acknowledge that too many pubs offer indifferent food and drink, and as a result it expects up to 4,000 of them to close over the coming year. Odd though it seems for a publication that celebrates pubs, the guide welcomes such closures, and so should the rest of us.

Good riddance to them. Customers vote with their feet, and there's no earthly reason why they should go and sit somewhere that is less comfortable than their own homes, eat food that is inferior to anything they could cook themselves, and pay eye-watering prices for drinks they could buy in the supermarkets for half the cost, all the while being glowered at by Kylie behind the bar who's irritated at being interrupted whilst she's texting.

The silver lining to all those closures is that they will give the many long-established pubs in town and country alike that observe the highest standards in everything they do some much-needed breathing space, as well as clearing the way for what the guide estimates are 1,000 new pubs run by genuinely genial hosts, serving fairly-priced quality drinks and running kitchens that produce meals worth going out to eat, instead of culinary GBH.

More power to old and new alike as they strive for quality, and a renaissance in the pub trade that's to the benefit of us all.

Our collective ideal of what pubs should be – especially the oft-mythologised "local" – is all bound up with our sense of community and the social back-and-forth that makes it tick. We want them to be jolly and welcoming because they are places where we'd like to take our old friends and make new ones as well.

So if a coalition of newcomers and the good old pubs makes that ideal a reality, I'll raise a glass to it. And I'll raise another one if the Ratcatcher and Terrier and its ilk have had their chips.

TOMORROW: *Bernard Ingham*

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