

Not in Our Name: Democracy and foreign policy in the UK

Briefing 1: Parliament, Foreign Policy and Accountability

Foreign policy has traditionally been an area in which the British government has been able to act with little Parliamentary control. Yet the foreign policy decisions of British governments can have great effects, for good or ill, on the lives of millions. Globalisation has made British citizens more aware than ever of these effects. But Parliamentary scrutiny of British external policy does not seem to have kept pace with these new developments.

Over the past eighteen months, the One World Trust, the Federal Trust and Democratic Audit have undertaken an extensive study analysing democratic control and oversight of foreign policy-making in the UK. We have considered such fundamental aspects of external policy-making as the declaration of war, the signature of treaties, aid and development, relations with the European Union and arms-selling.

We conclude that there is a huge imbalance of power between the British Parliament and the British government in the area of foreign policy. History, administrative structures and political culture combine to ensure the continuing defence of the British Parliament to the British executive over the whole range of external policy.

We published the book *'Not in Our Name: Democracy and Foreign Policy in the UK'* in January 2006, which contains a range of recommendations on aiming to redress this imbalance. The most important of them are:

1. Reforming the Royal Prerogative

The royal prerogative allows the government to evade parliamentary accountability on such matters as waging war and signing international treaties. We argue for a War Powers Act, which would not prevent the government from acting quickly in an emergency, but would ensure that the royal prerogative is not a simple licence for government to act as it wishes.

2. Mainstreaming oversight of foreign affairs

European and international negotiations should be subject to Parliamentary scrutiny by the relevant specialist committees, not just by generalist committees interested in 'foreign affairs'. The expertise of the government and its ranks of advisers needs to be scrutinised by Members of Parliament with similar expertise.

3. Developing 'soft mandates'

Ministers representing Britain in EU and international negotiations should be subject to Parliamentary control of their negotiating position in these meetings. Before taking part in such negotiations ministers should engage in a continuous dialogue with the relevant select committee, ensuring Parliamentary input into the formative stages of foreign policy-making. This would give ministers a 'soft mandate' from Parliament while allowing for certain flexibility in negotiations.

We are currently consulting MPs and Peers on how to take these proposals further. If you are interested in more information on our recommendations or would like to discuss our proposals with us, please contact Claire Wren at the One World Trust to arrange a meeting (tel: 020 7766 3470; email: cwren@oneworldtrust.org).