

# Conservative backbench opposition to international aid: is it driven by hard Euroscepticism?

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## Abstract

This paper considers the opposition within Conservative parliamentary ranks to the decision of the Cameron administration to ring fence spending on overseas development aid (ODA) or international aid. Using documentary analysis from a range of parliamentary debates and divisions in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, the paper pieces together the arguments against legally enshrining spending on international aid at 0.7 percent of Gross National Income (GNI) made by Conservative parliamentarians. We define each Conservative parliamentarian as either aid *critics* (voted or spoke out against the 0.7 percent target); aid *sceptics* (abstained and did not publicly speak out for the 0.7 percent target); and aid *advocates* (those who voted and spoke out for the 0.7 percent target). We then consider the overlap between hard Euroscepticism (i.e. Brexit) to see the extent to which issues of national identity may explain hostility towards international aid spending.

**Keywords:** British foreign policy; international aid, overseas development, national identity, Euroscepticism.

## **Introduction**

The approach of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010 to 2015 to international aid policy represents a conundrum. Although the Liberal Democrats had a long standing commitment to increasing international aid spending, the coalition position was largely due to the conversion of the Conservatives in this policy area. This is significant as the policy approach of the Conservatives, as the dominant party in the coalition, defied expectations, as the assumptions that exist within the academic literature would have suggested that international aid spending should have gone down. The following factors drive these assumptions. First, centre-right governments tend not to prioritise international aid spending. The percentage of GNI devoted to international aid was 0.51 when Labour left office in 1979 and 0.57 when they left office in 2010, but it was 0.27 when the Conservatives had left office in 1997. That is because centre-left administrations are driven by notions of equality, rights and humanitarianism which justify intervening to alleviate global poverty, whereas centre-right administrations view this as an interference within the economies of both donor and recipient countries (Chaney, 2013). Such assumptions are also prevalent within the comparative literature (Therien and Noel, 2000; and Therien, 2002). Second, periods of economic downturn create budgetary constraints, squeezing out international aid provision (Tingley, 2010 and Dang *et al*, 2013; Heinrich *et al*, 2016). Finally, electoral support for international aid spending tends to exist in an abstract sense—it is desirable, but domestic poverty reduction should take

precedence—i.e. support is wide but not deep, and politicians have incentives (due to the need for re-election) to respond to such voter preferences (Van Heerde and Hudson, 2010; Hudson and Van Heerde, 2012; Henson and Lindstrom, 2013).

All of these factors suggest that spending on international aid should have gone down as a percentage of GNI, and yet international aid spending was ring fenced in the austerity measures that were implemented after 2010 (the only other department to be ring fenced was Health) (Heppell and Lightfoot, 2012). The level of spending increased dramatically after 2012 when the figure was £8,766 billion (0.56 percent of GNI) to the 2015 figure of £12.240 billion (0.72 percent of GNI) (Lunn and Booth, 2016). By doing so the UK became the first G8 country to hit the international aid target of 0.7 percent of GNI (this target was reaffirmed at the G8 summit of July 2005 and had originally been identified as a target back in 1974). Only four other nations met the target before the UK and have a higher GNI percentage—Sweden first reached it in 1974, Norway in 1976, Denmark in 1978 and Luxembourg in 2000 (Booth, 2014). Alongside increasing spending to hit the target, the coalition introduced the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act of 2015, which ensured that future governments would be placed under a legal obligation to spend 0.7 percent of GNI on international aid. This was significant as it made the UK the first member of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) to enshrine the 0.7 percent target in law (Manji, 2016).

Despite the creation of a cross party consensus between the Conservative leadership and Labour and the Liberal Democrats, criticism of international aid prioritisation began to emerge from three groups: first, from UKIP, whose official line of ‘charity begins at home’ (Jones and England, 2015) was expressed in more offensive terms by Godfrey Bloom MEP, when he spoke of wasted resources going to ‘bongo bongo land’ (Mason, 2013); second, from sections of the print media whose negativity meant that international aid was also presented from a narrow domestic perspective at the expense of the needs of recipient countries (Cawley, 2015). The *Mail on Sunday* was at the vanguard of this and they encouraged public support for their petition calling for the Government to ‘stop spending a fixed 0.7 percent of *our* national wealth on foreign aid’ – this passed the threshold for qualification leading to a debate within Westminster Hall by the Petitions Committee in June 2016. The third group which openly criticised international aid prioritisation was the backbenchers of the Conservative Party. Former International Development Secretary, Andrew Mitchell, a keen proponent of the 0.7 percent target, would later admit that it became a ‘running sore’ and a ‘focus’ of anti-Cameron ‘discontent’ (Ashcroft and Oakeshott, 2015: 279, 284).

Our paper examines those that opposed the 0.7 percent commitment within the PCP. The first section of the paper uses documentary analysis (i.e. parliamentary debates and divisions) to identify their arguments—both from a policy making and political strategy perspective. In the second section of the paper we position each

Conservative MP as being either aid *critics* (voted and spoke out against), aid *sceptics* (abstained and did not speak for); or aid *advocates* (voted for and spoke out in favour).

We also aim to identify the correlation between being an aid critic and hard Euroscepticism (i.e. Brexit) and whether aid critics faced constituency level pressures from UKIP that may explain their hostility.

### **The Case against International Aid Prioritisation on the Conservative Backbenches**

Conservative critics on the backbenches have crafted their opposition to the 0.7 percent commitment on international aid around two broad questions: a) is it effective from a policy-making perspective and b) is it sensible from a political or electoral perspective?

In terms of whether it constitutes effective policy making, those who are critical of the 0.7 percent commitment have four strands to their critique. The first strand relates to international comparisons. For example, Philip Davies was keen to emphasise how Germany was spending only 0.38 percent of GNI, and the United States was spending only 0.19 percent of GNI and yet they were 'both wealthier' than the UK (HC Deb, 12 September, 2014, Col. 1183). Building upon this theme, Davies wanted to know why the UK had 'increased' their level of international aid expenditure just as 'other countries had reduced the proportion they spend on aid' (HC Deb, 12 September, 2014, Col. 1168). Rather than other countries following the

lead that was being set by the UK Government, Davies argued that 'they are using our increased spending as an excuse to reduce theirs' (Davies, HC Deb, 12 September 2014, Col. 1168). David Nuttall sought to embarrass Cameron at Prime Minister's Questions by asking when 'other members of the G20 plan to meet' what Nuttall dismissed as an 'arbitrary target' (HC Deb, 13 September 2013, Col. 699).

The second strand to their critique focuses on the relationship between input and outcomes. For example, why was the emphasis on the amount the government was spending, rather than the effectiveness (or results) of the policy? Davies captured that traditionalist Conservative opposition to targets by critiquing the relationship between spending targets and policy achievements under the previous Labour administration vis-à-vis truancy. Davies noted that Labour ministers believed that the expenditure increases in themselves represented progress i.e. 'truancy had got worse', but 'that did not matter because they had spent £1 billion extra on tackling it' (HC Deb, 12 September 2014, Col. 1227). Davies concluded that if the policy of increasing international aid provision was succeeding, then 'those countries will have been able to sort themselves out and therefore we will be spending less'. By implication, success would invalidate the need to 'fix a high amount of money for aid in perpetuity' and that legislative action to compel spending remaining at 0.7 percent of GNI was 'an acceptance that assistance will fail [and] that it will not turn around a country's fortunes or deal with the causes of poverty' (HC Deb, 12 September 2014, Col. 1168).

Boasting that a spending target has been achieved should not be the aim of policy formulation explained Peter Bone, as he demanded that the government realised that 'we should not set targets for overseas aid', rather we 'should give what is *required*' (HC Deb, 12 June 2013, Col, 564). Edward Leigh extended this theme by arguing that 'we should be judged not by how much we spend on something, but by the value for money of what we *achieve*' (HC Deb, 12 September 2014, Col. 1181). In addition to debates about what was required and what was being achieved, Bone also raised doubts about the UK's ability to provide over the longer term, asking 'if we are in a recession, as we have been, does the 0.7% commitment mean that the amount of overseas aid will go down?' (HC Deb, 13 July 2012, Col. 548).

The third strand to this part of their critique would relate to concerns about waste, inefficiency and even allegations of corruption. Here some Conservative backbenchers argued that the growth in the international aid budget ran hand in hand with increasing misuse of funds. Leigh concluded that 'when we have a departmental budget' which is 'awash with money and is growing all the time' this raises concerns about 'money being wasted' (HC Deb, 3 November, 2014, Col. 611). Nuttall focused on his concern about the lack of efficiency in a target-driven, rather than results-driven, policy approach. He cited research that has 'shown that of 20 countries in receipt of UK aid 10 had shown little or no improvement in the amount of political, economic and press freedom they enjoyed and five actually enjoyed less freedom' (HC Deb, 6 November 2014, Col. 974). David Davis questioned why international aid

should be directed at nations such as India or China (Chorley, 2012), whilst fellow defeated leadership rival, Liam Fox, argued that ‘countries need to earn the support from the British taxpayer’ after it was revealed that £200 million had been spent on international aid for Tanzania, despite international criticism of their democratic procedures (Blair, 2016). Former Cabinet Minister, Owen Paterson, could not understand how, when the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had declared the Tanzania election as ‘not valid’, DfID could keep ‘carrying on spending the money anyway’ (Morris, 2016). On the misuse of tax payers’ money, Matthew Offord complained that ‘our money is going to some causes’ that electors ‘would be ashamed of’ (HC Deb, 13 June 2016, Col. 271). Offord complained that when such misuse does occur, ‘despite being presented with evidence’ of ‘behaviour that contravenes aid agreements’, DfID ‘takes no remedial action’ (HC Deb, 13 June 2016, Col. 271).

The fourth and final strand of their critique on policy making would relate to whether it is ideologically consistent with Conservative thinking. The most obvious ideological objection relates to its interventionist mentality. Davies was particularly strident on this. He argued that the government could not campaign ‘to stop welfare dependency at home’ and breaking the assumption that some had of ‘waiting for their next handout from the state’, and then do the exact opposite vis-à-vis international aid’ (HC Deb, 12 September 2014, Col. 1236). Davies implied that DfID was ‘entrenching welfare dependency abroad’, arguing that they are ‘saying to countries “it doesn’t matter what you do with your governance or what you spend your money



on; we will keep handing over the cheques come what may''' (HC Deb, 12 September 2014, Col. 1236).

Alongside critiquing whether it is sensible in terms of policy making, Conservative backbench critics have also raised concerns about whether international aid prioritisation amounts to a sensible political strategy. They did not accept the Cameron argument that international aid prioritisation contributed to the detoxification of the Conservative brand by showcasing their compassionate thinking. Quite the reverse. They felt that international aid came at the expense of their constituents. They would argue that their constituents did not share in the modernisers' belief that international aid should be protected at the expense of other spheres of governmental activity.

Gerard Howarth described it as a 'question of priorities' noting that in his constituency he was 'yet to meet any of our people in the streets who think that this target should be a priority' (HC Deb, 4 November 2014, Col. 5). He related this to the democratic process arguing that 'elections are about priorities' and that parties place before the electorate their 'different priorities'. He argued that legally enshrining 0.7 percent of GNI on international aid meant that one departmental area was being given 'special treatment' over other policy areas, such as health care or education, which were 'undoubtedly of concern' to the electorate. He claimed that ring fencing future

spending on international aid was 'an attempt to limit the choices available to the people in a general election' (HC Deb, 4 November, 2014, Col. 4).

Stewart Jackson extended that argument about prioritisation and the decision to legally obligate successor governments to spend 0.7 percent of GNI on international aid. Speaking as an advocate for his constituents he asked why the government was seeking to 'hypothecate into the future' when 'in every other domestic area, including important areas such as literacy, social care and cancer, they set their face against such hypothecation?' (HC Deb, 12 September 2014, Col. 1228). James Gray embraced this theme by asking 'why should spending on overseas aid be written in law, but not the National Health Service?' (12 September 2014, Col. 1170). Davies located the debate about prioritisation within the wider context of national austerity, arguing that to increase spending so significantly and to protect future spending when 'we have no money' and we have to 'cut spending everywhere' is 'completely and utterly ridiculous' (HC Deb, 12 September 2014, Col. 1228). Chris Chope cited findings from the 2012 British Social Attitudes Survey on what were the priorities for voters, noting that 41.9 percent identified health care; 30 percent said education, and only 0.5 percent responded with international aid' (HC Deb, 5 December 2014, Col. 597).

However, when it came to alternative prioritisation the issue of defence spending seemed more important to aid critics than health care, education or any other area of domestic expenditure. Indeed, in the lead up period to the 2015 Strategic

and Defence Review, the Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, made a 'less than subtle grab' for the 'foreign aid budget in an attempt to add it to the defence budget' and, although the manoeuvre failed, Fallon did so because he had the backing of a 'number of Conservative backbenchers' (Dorman et al, 2016). This was the reaction to the brutal treatment to which the Ministry of Defence was subjected when Cameron first entered office. As he was ring fencing international aid spending Cameron publicly criticised the Ministry of Defence for being 'too big, too inefficient' and for 'spending too much money' (HC Deb, 19 October 2010, Col. 798). This factor, alongside the modernisers' belief that there were 'no votes in defence or foreign policy' (Seldon and Snowdon, 2015: 490) explained Cameron's reluctance to maintain UK defence spending at the NATO set target of 2 percent of GDP between 2010 and 2015, (although he u-turned on this after the General Election of 2015) (Dorman et al, 2016). In the first year of the coalition, this placed him on a collision course with Fox, as Defence Secretary (2010–11), who was compelled to implement an 8 percent cut in defence spending (Kirkup, 2011).

Speaking of the so called development/defence 'trade off' (Seldon and Snowdon, 2015), Adam Holloway concluded that it was 'completely crazy' that a 'deeply indebted nation' was ring fencing international aid spending, when they were failing in their 'first duty' by 'cutting defence spending' (HC Deb, 12 September 2014, Col. 1204). Howarth, formerly a junior minister in the Ministry of Defence (2010–12), questioned the argument that the international aid prioritisation equated to influence.

Describing international aid as ‘soft power’, as opposed to the ‘hard power’ of military capability, he argued that ‘if one walks with a big stick, one can speak softly, but what we are doing is losing that big stick’. He warned Parliament that we ‘should not confuse that humanitarian exercise with hard power—the ability to fight’ (HC Deb, 4 November 2014, Col. 6). The imbalance in prioritisation between protecting international aid spending and cutting spending on the armed forces irked Howarth, who placed that choice within the context of meeting soldiers from his constituency. Howarth asked ‘how can I look a soldier in the eye’ [in his constituency] and say:

‘Thank you for your service in Afghanistan, where you put your life on the line, were shot at, had your vehicle blown up, and you survived. I am sorry we’re having to make you redundant, but the good news is I’ve got a lot more money for overseas aid?’

(HC Deb, 4 November 2014, Col. 6)

### **International Aid and Hard Euroscepticism**

Backbench Conservative critics have doubted the electoral rationale for international aid prioritisation. Their concern was that subsuming the Conservatives within a cross party consensus with Labour and the Liberal Democrats, was (1) not a vote winner, and (2) created opportunities for UKIP to exploit. Those fears were substantiated by findings from a YouGov-Chatham House survey in the lead up to the 2015 General Election. Only 30 percent of the electorate approved of the current level of international aid spending, and 54 percent agreed with the position of reducing

spending on aid abroad and increasing domestic spending (given the economic constraints). That 54 percent figure increased to 62 percent amongst known Conservative supporters, while a further increase to 87 percent existed amongst known UKIP supporters. Given the assumption that the Conservatives might already be vulnerable to UKIP (notably on the issue of immigration), the concern was that UKIP might be able to appeal to Conservative voters who opposed aid spending (Bailey, 2014).

Having considered the arguments used by backbench critics of aid prioritisation, it is worth analysing what other characteristics unite (or do not unite) such Conservatives. To achieve this we identified which Conservative parliamentarians in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament were aid *critics* i.e. voted against the government across a range of divisions during the passage of the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act of 2015; those that were aid *sceptics* (abstained from voting); and those that were aid *advocates* (voted for). We supplement this method by exploiting parliamentary speeches, and television and print media interviews, during the passage of the above legislation and other numerous public interventions that relate to the 0.7 percent target. From this we determined that 190 Conservatives were pro aid (61.7 percent of the PCP); 94 were best defined as aid sceptics (30.5 percent), and 24 were aid critics (7.8 percent).

If we update existing academic research, profiling the ideological composition of the 2010 to 2015 PCP, then we know the following about the European ideological divide. A total of 71 members were either pro-European (i.e. proactively argued the case for the benefits of EU membership) or agnostic (do not publicly comment on the EU explicitly); 156 were soft Eurosceptics (i.e. they accepted the principle of continued membership but opposed further integrationist objectives, and actually advocated renegotiated membership terms); and 81 were hard Eurosceptic rejectionists (i.e. they were willing to make the case for exiting the European Union) (Heppell, 2013, see also Lynch, 2015). In table one—below—we have cross referenced our research findings on international aid to those that already exist vis-à-vis European Union membership.

**Table 1**

The PCP and Attitudes toward international aid

Variable	Pro-Aid	Sceptics	Critics	Total
Vote Share	190 (61.7%)	94 (30.5%)	24 (7.8%)	308 (100%)
Hard Eurosceptic	39 (48.2%)	23 (28.4%)	19 (23.5%)	81 (100%)
Soft Eurosceptic	106 (68.0%)	45 (28.9%)	5 (3.2%)	156 (100%)
Agnostic	45 (63.4%)	26 (36.6%)	0 (0.0%)	71 (100%)

From this the following conclusions can be drawn. The relationship between hard Euroscepticism and international aid spending is more complex than might be assumed. The majority of pro-aid sentiment was located within the Cameron-like soft Eurosceptic faction (106 members out of 190 pro-aid Conservatives). Those who were the outright critics of the 0.7 percent commitment were disproportionately hard Eurosceptics—19 out of 24 of them—but the critical observation is that nearly half of all of the 81 hard Eurosceptics (39) chose to vote for, and/or speak out for, the 0.7 percent commitment. Of those 24 critics, two of them were Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless—who were elected as Conservatives in May 2010 but both chose to defect to UKIP in 2014. The other intriguing aspect when we look at the known aid critics is the fact that two of them are Davis and Fox. After Cameron was succeeded by Theresa May, Davis was appointed Secretary of State in the newly formed Department for Exiting the European Union and Fox was made Secretary of State in the newly established Department for International Trade. As Fox had earlier bemoaned what he called the ‘spraying around’ of aid, (Sculthorpe, 2016) and Davis had dismissed Cameron’s ‘arbitrary target’ as ‘nonsense’ (Simons, 2012), the promotion of known aid critics to key Cabinet posts might have an influence on future policy direction.

## **Conclusion**

Our paper provides a detailed overview of opinion within the PCP towards international aid spending and the 0.7 percent commitment. It showcases that 61.7

percent of the PCP (or 190 members) were willing to vote in favour of legally enshrining the 0.7 percent commitment, and that a further 30.5 percent (94 members) were unwilling to vote against it, even if they may have had reservations. It also shows the level of outright opposition to international aid spending and the 0.7 percent commitment in the period 2010 to 2015 was remarkably small, thus suggesting that Cameron was relatively successful in converting his colleagues to this cause. However, it also demonstrates that whilst the soft Eurosceptic (and ultimately remain) grouping (156 strong) tended towards supporting the 0.7 international aid commitment—68 percent in favour and only 3 percent against—Cameron found gaining the approval of the hard Eurosceptic faction harder. Amongst those that would form the basis of Brexit Conservatives a lower level of support for the 0.7 commitment was evident (at 48 percent), but more significantly it was hard Eurosceptic or Brexit Conservatives which formed the basis of the rebellion against the 0.7 percent commitment. Although only 7.8 percent of the PCP (24) openly opposed international aid prioritisation, those that did were also overwhelmingly hostile to the European Union.

This is relevant both in terms of Brexit and the change of leadership. Brexit raises a complex range of policy questions vis-à-vis international aid, and the future viability of the 0.7 percent commitment. One scenario in which this could occur is if there is a post Brexit economic downturn. The need to find further expenditure cuts



could mean that international aid prioritisation is abandoned and the commitment to 0.7 percent spending could be reversed (Barber, 2016).

This raises the further question as to how committed to the Cameron aid legacy his successor, Theresa May, actually is. Anders noted that she had ‘rarely taken a stand on aid related issues’ and there she had ‘managed to avoid voting’ (i.e. abstained) on ‘any of the half dozen measures relating to enshrining the aid budget at 0.7 percent of GNI’ (meaning she is defined as a sceptic in table one) (Anders, 2016). She is said to be ambivalent on the issue – leading to newspaper reports of Cameron pleading with her to sustain his aid legacy (Slack, 2016). Under May the overriding policy question is how the £1.4 billion of aid spending that is currently channelled through the EU should be utilised post Brexit. This provides clear scope for deployment or reprioritisation (Anderson et al, 2016)—targeting aid more towards the poorest countries and communities—and a rethink in terms of aid effectiveness.

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