



HeadsUp Forum # 39

www.HeadsUp.org.uk

Foreign Affairs...Are we making a difference?

(7 March – 25 March 2011)

With significant developments in international affairs hitting the headlines in the second week of the forum - namely the Japanese earthquake and crisis in Libya - the discussions were taken in interesting directions. This gave forum users the opportunity to reflect on comments that had been posted before these events and develop their arguments in line with them.

Nine decision-makers took part in the forum. They came from a variety of backgrounds: Westminster, the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, the European Parliament, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and an international NGO.

The decision-makers supporting the forum were:

- **Bob Ainsworth MP** – MP for Coventry North East, member of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee
- **Lord Boateng** – former British High Commissioner to South Africa
- **Alistair Burt MP** – MP for North East Bedfordshire, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office
- **Patrick Harvie MSP** – Member of the Scottish Parliament for Glasgow
- **Vickie Hawkins** - From international NGO Medicins Sans Frontieres
- **Andrew Millar** - from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office
- **Jim Murphy MP** – MP for East Renfrewshire, Shadow Secretary of State for Defence
- **Dr Charles Tannock MEP** – the UK Conservative Foreign Affairs spokesman in the European Parliament
- **Rhodri Glyn Thomas AM** – Chair of the European and External Affairs Committee in the Welsh Assembly

www.headsup.org.uk is a safe, online space for under 18s to debate the political issues important to them. **Young people** share viewpoints with their peers and **decision-makers** up and down the country. Through the forums, HeadsUp develops **young people's** political awareness and promotes active citizenship so they can play an effective part in the democratic processes that affect them.

HeadsUp enables **politicians** to consult with **young people**, to find out their ideas, experiences and opinions. There is ample background information to prepare **young people** for the debates, as well as **teachers' notes** and activities.

Foreign Affairs...Are we making a difference?

Forum Summary

There were 3,674 visits to the website throughout the course of the forum, with 417 unique posts from 119 HeadsUp users.[∞]

The forum was initially split into four threads which focused on current issues in debates around international affairs. These subjects were also felt to be areas that young people often had strong opinions on. They were:

- **International Aid** - Does the UK spend enough on aid? Does aid sometimes do more harm than good?
- **Conflict in Afghanistan** - Have British troops made a positive difference to life in Afghanistan?
- **Nuclear Weapons** - Are nuclear weapons still needed to keep global order or should we be spending that money elsewhere? Is it possible to have a world free of nuclear weapons?
- **Our Allies** – Who are our allies? How much support should we get from other countries before going to war?

As there were major developments in international affairs taking place whilst the debate was live we decided to add another thread to the forum which allowed users to discuss the crisis in Libya as it unfolded:

- **What's happening in Libya?** - What do you think about the UK and other countries joining together to try and protect Libyans from Colonel Gaddafi and his supporters?

The general themes and directions of the debate are highlighted in the following pages, along with specific ideas given by forum users.¹

[∞] Includes: young people, moderators, teachers and decision-makers.

¹ All quotes are direct and unamended.

Government spending on foreign affairs during the recession

There were strong opinions amongst HeadsUp users about the ring-fencing of the international development budget and continued high spending on defence during the economic downturn. Young people generally felt that more money should be spent in the UK rather than abroad.

In the discussion on nuclear weapons, the vast majority of young people expressed support for a nuclear weapons-free world and called for a ban. The most common reason young people gave for getting rid of nuclear weapons, aside from the damage that they may cause when used, was that having them diverts money away from other priorities, for example education and the economy. This was seen as particularly wrong in a period of economic recession:

i think that nuclear weapons should be banned everywhere because the world would be a better place

Even though we have the money to renew our nuclear weapons, we don't want to add on our military debts, we need the money to fix the economy, we don't want the TAX and VAT to rise

We should get rid of our nuclear weapons, and instead spend the money on other things, like helping people in poverty.

I think we should be spending money on other things like hospitals and schools rather than nuclear weapons! ... I thought Britain was supposed to be saving money not spending it!

remember the situation our country is in- a recession- and then take into account the huge amount of money nuclear weapons cost- their security and buying them.

The money spent on developing new nuclear weapons was seen as even more irresponsible, as young people believed it was unlikely that they would ever be used:

Why do we need nuclear weapons? We haven't used them and at the moment they are usually used just to threaten countries. they are not actually put into use.

Every year we spend billions of pounds on a missile we plan to not use ... Whats the point?

Similarly, much of the debate around international aid focused on the feasibility and appropriateness of sending vast amounts of aid money to other countries, when Britain itself is in a recession. Many young people thought that whilst sending money to poorer countries was worthwhile, we shouldn't spend too much money on overseas aid and should instead focus on lifting our own country out of debt:

From my point of view it is brilliant that we(Britain) are giving so much to LEDC's [Lower Economically Developed Countries], but i think it is not the right time to give masses of tax payer money to other countries because Britains debt is already in (dare i say) billions and i speak for all of us we certainly do not want to stretch Britain's troubles further.

I think that that is a good point and we should help poorer countries... We maybe need to stop giving out so much money though, because britain is in lots of debt

i think aid is a good idea but we shouldnt spend too much of the countrys money on it!

Well, even though I am all for giving aid and showing respect for other countries and doing the best we can to help those who need it, if education in our OWN country is being cut then maybe this should be prioritized over aid because we first need to help our own country first on pressing issues such as education. Especially with the recession

British money from the British tax payer should go to British people and British interests. When every house is warm and stable in the UK, when every road is smooth, when every train runs on time and is affordable and is in a better state, when our military are paid better wages and given better pensions and living in better homes than the low grade council boxes they currently inhabit, when there is no poverty in this country, then we could think about aid abroad.

Others opposed these views, however, arguing that we should continue to help poor countries as much as we can despite the recession:

I think that Britain should be helping LEDC countries because even though we are in a recession they are in a much worse position than us

It's understandable that during the current economic crisis people think that we shouldn't give so much money to foreign countries, but so many countries (LDCs) are in a worse off state than we are. Yes, the economy's in a bad state but we're getting better and money that we give to other countries is saving lives, it is needed so much more out there than it is here.

I understand that economically Britain doesn't have a lot of money to spend on itself (the Olympics doesn't help) but I personally couldn't live with myself if we just left people in need to die, whether from an act of God or otherwise...Sometimes, we need to forget about our problems, because there's always someone worse off.

Support for spending money on international humanitarian crises grew on the forum, however, when the Japanese earthquake occurred at the end of the first week of the debate. Many users wanted both the UK government and ordinary people to send aid to the Japanese people:

i strongly agree that we should send lots of aid to japan.

give money to japan to help them because they would do it for us!

Support for the war in Afghanistan

There was a mixed response amongst posters to the conflict in Afghanistan. Many felt that the presence of British troops in the country has had no positive impact on the situation there:

We have not really added anything crucial to Afghanistan. We have just intervened

i think we messed up. we went there intent on solving it and now , 10 years on and over 300 deaths, we havent done any thing significant

The wars that Britain has got into are not working out. They've been going on for years and we haven't seen any improvements- we're not winning are we? There must be other ways to solve the problems, surely the sides could come to some agreement. Unfortunately, it's unlikely that the Taliban will cooperate but we've got to try. Too many lives are being lost and will continue to be lost in these wars. tThere must be some other way.

Reasons for a lack of support for the UK's military operation in Afghanistan included the large financial cost of the war and a feeling that too many British troops are dying in Afghanistan:

I do not see why all our soldiers are dying in the war for what seems like no reason? We spend all our money on war which we could have been spending on health services or schools!

I think there is no point in fighting with Iraq and Afganistan because we are just killing thousands of troops and lots of money could be saved if we wernt fighting because we wouldn't have to send food and weapons over.

If you think how many times on the news we have looked, and seen that a soldier has died...You start to wonder - is it really worth losing 200 soldiers to help another country? Would it be better to withdraw, after all these years of fighting? Isn't it time to let the soldiers come home?

A significant minority of posters, on the other hand, voiced their support for British troops in Afghanistan:

I think they are doing a great job and are being very brave, as they could just be chilling at home, but they're not, they are fighting for us! Let's support them...

The military in Afghanistan and the government need our support because with the Taliban in control, they cannot survive. ... The USA and UK need to keep their military there to get the country back to normal, and get rid of the Taliban. Otherwise the people will be in much more danger than they are already. We need to stay there and support them.

A world free of nuclear weapons?

Although most HeadsUp users supported a complete ban on nuclear weapons, as the discussion developed some young people began to criticise the idea of a nuclear-weapons-free world:

You can't scrap all nuclear weapons. You could try, even if it was a universal law, places like Iran would probably continue developing them but in secret. It would be great if Nuclear weapons were scrapped but it wouldn't work.

This 'weapons free world' neforia is a dream! For every idealistic peacemaker willing to renounce their defence for a weapons free world there will always be warmongerers willing to exploit the others good intentions.

Posters then offered alternatives to a complete ban of nuclear weapons:

I think that nuclear weapons should be available in most countries but on strict guidelines. If this happens then people will be able to protect themselves when in wars or battle's but will only use these weapons in an emergency.

I think England should renew some weapons for protection. Because many countries in this world have nuclear weapons so if UK doesn't renew some; it doesn't make the world safer. Instead it put UK in danger?

We should have a few nuclear weapons for the countries protection but we shouldn't use it against someone.

When challenged about the lack of consistency on who is allowed to develop nuclear weapons, young people suggested that the UK should lead the way in abandoning nuclear weapons:

how can we tell other countries that they need to get rid of nuclear weapons without getting rid of OURs first.

It may be difficult to stop nuclear weaponry in other countries but we we have to do it first- we have to show that we're not planning to

metaphorically "stab them in the back" and attack them while their defenses are down.

Should the UK act independently in its international affairs?

Most of the posts on this topic concentrated on the advantages and disadvantages of the UK's relationship with the US. With a pending international decision on whether to intervene in Libya, discussions also focused on the importance of international agreement before embarking on a foreign military operation.

HeadsUp users were divided on the importance of the UK-US relationship. Half of the posts argued that the alliance brought benefits for the UK:

Britain has a good relationship with the US and that is a good thing because if the UK get into another war, the US will help us, just like we would help them.

Our relationship with the USA is really important as they are a very big, very powerful country and if we ever needed help from other countries, the USA would be the best candidate. We have already proved we can work together and we should build one that

Britain's relationship with the USA isn't as strong as it used to be but the USA is a useful allie because it is very rich and influential

But the other half were more cautious about the relationship:

Yes, the alliance with the US is agood thing because we can help each other out, but we can not allow the US to sway our judgements just because we are strong allies.

I think that we are vaunerable by being mates with the usa because all the terrorists will bomb us as well as the usa but on the plus side i think it makes us stronger and more safe.

Just because we are allies doesn't mean we have to do what they say, we are our own country.

Most agreed that having a broad range of allies was a good thing:

I think that the UK should make as many allies as possible because if our country goes into war in the future, we will have some countries on our side to help us. We can help them too.

I think that allies with other countries like the USA are needed as these are the more economically developed countries which can help us out more. Allies with the USA are good in the big economic problems/situations, but in the rather small situations I think that it is better having allies with the much nearer countries in Europe.

On the other hand, a number of other users strongly felt that the UK should act more independently in all international affairs:

the UK is an independent country and we should keep it that way, we dont want or need more countries helping us with what we can do over here already!

allies are very important but i think that britain being an independent country is more important than it having loads of 'friends'.

Two young people were even sceptical of the reasons behind any alliance:

'Alliances' is just a word used to denote the using of other nations for national interest, thats all it is, a raison detre for our/their own interest, if America had a rubbish economy and a negligible army we wouldnt have our 'special relationship', simple as

All the foreign embassy and diplomats in our country act like our countries are strong allies with theirs, but then the 'Wiki-leads' website showed how much the USA wasn't telling us about it's military work. Despite being allied, countries seem to have secrets from eachother, so what is the point of saying that we are allies?

As the discussions turned to the situation in Libya and the UK government's support of a no-fly zone over the country, posters commented on the necessity of international support in this circumstance. Most felt that the UK should have international support before it embarks on any kind of military campaign in Libya:

because the happenings in Libya aren't actually anything to do with Britain, we should have international support behind us before going any further, if we do. It is an international concern, not just Britain's, so it should be the World's decision whether or not to intervene further in another country's business.

In my opinion UK and other countries should stick together and defeat the horror that man has caused. We need to support the citizens and end their nightmare.

The general feeling on the forum was that the UK should intervene to help the rebels in Libya:

the ultimate idea will save the lives of many Lybians, and that is our human commitment, to help protect our and one anothers rights, especially the right to life and freedom to live freely.

Although the smartest thing to do is to not get involved in other countries problems but if only it was that simple. Only this is not a

*problem anymore, this is a dilemma that should get fixed quickly!
...Is getting involved early a good idea? – YES! Before it is too late! This
is a heart breaking choice but it seems this is the only option to end their
horror.*

Only one poster did not support an intervention, citing large financial costs as a reason:

*The problems are we are in an economic recession and we can't afford to
get into a war. It is not our war to fight- our soldiers could get killed- it
will be like the iraq war again and that went badly*

What was clear from this forum was that during a period of economic recession and when many sectors are facing spending cuts, these young people feel that the government should not be spending as much money on defence and foreign affairs as they are. This was a reoccurring theme across all the subjects, although not all HeadsUp users completely agreed with this. Most young people felt that the world would be a better place without nuclear weapons and without frequent intervention in foreign conflicts. It was felt that both money and lives could be saved without them. There was also a feeling that whilst it is important that the UK has strong alliances with countries such as the US, we should also retain our independence and not follow our allies in everything they do.

Political Context

When the coalition government came into power, foreign affairs were high on the government's list of priorities. Overseas aid is the only area protected from government spending cuts, and defence spending continues to take up a large portion of the overall budget. Foreign affairs dominated the headlines in the weeks that the forum took place. During the forum two major events occurred that were very relevant to the debate: the climax of an 'Arab Spring' of protests with Britain and a number of other countries intervening in Libya to protect civilians from Colonel Gaddafi, and the devastating Japanese earthquake and tsunami. The level of interest in the forum and the quality of posts shows how successful HeadsUp can be in providing young people with a platform to engage with important, current issues and the opportunity to feed their views into the political debate.

The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the decision-makers, young people and teachers who got involved in this debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings. Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

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