

Why “Change UK” Loves War

Symon Hill exposes the ‘moderate’ party’s blood-soaked militarist voting record

By [Symon Hill](#)

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The “Independent Group” of MPs has now launched itself as a political party under the name “Change UK.”

Given its support for capitalism, corporate power, Nato and Trident, a more accurate name might be “Keep Things Pretty Much The Same UK.”

The group likes to be described as “moderate” and “centrist.” It says something about the state of British politics that its views are considered moderate.

When it comes to issues of peace and war, almost all of its members have consistently voted in favour of the more militaristic of any two options placed in front of them.

Of Change UK’s 11 MPs, four were in Parliament at the time of the invasion of Iraq in 2003: Ann Coffey, Make Gapes, Chris Leslie and Joan Ryan. They all voted for it.

Ryan was a teller for the “Ayes.” Gapes later described the establishment of the Chilcot inquiry into the war as a waste of public money, attributing it to “hysterical” prejudice against Tony Blair.

In 2011, Parliament was again asked to vote for a new war, this time in Libya. Ryan had lost her seat in 2010 (she re-entered Parliament in 2015) and Heidi Allen was not elected until 2015.

But the other nine MPs who were later to become Change UK willingly followed David Cameron and Nick Clegg in voting to bomb Libya.

There was a success for the peace movement two years later, when the Commons voted against bombing Syria after the Labour leadership accepted pressure from the public and party membership to resist yet another call to war.

To be fair to the Labour MPs who later joined Change UK, they all joined Ed Miliband in voting against immediate bombing, with the exception of Angela Smith, who abstained.

Of the Tories who later signed up for Change UK, Anna Soubry voted for bombing Syria in 2013, but Sarah Wollaston deserves some credit for resisting the Tory leadership and voting against (and Allen was not yet an MP).

However, in November 2014, all nine of the then MPs who were later to form Change UK voted for yet more bombing of Iraq, supposedly against Isis (in practice meaning areas

controlled by Isis, full of innocent civilians).

In 2015, Allen was elected to Parliament for the first time, while Ryan returned after a five-year absence. They were therefore able to join their future Change UK colleagues in December that year in voting to bomb Syria.

Gavin Shuker deserves credit for being the only future Change UK MP to vote against bombing Syria at this point.

On July 18 2016, the Commons debated the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system. In the course of the debate, Theresa May was asked if she would use Trident to kill hundreds of thousands of people. May replied that she would if she “had to.”

The Prime Minister did not explain in what conceivable situation she would “have to” kill hundreds of thousands of people (the figure is an underestimate — Trident would kill millions). But all future Change UK MPs joined her in the division lobby.

The only exception was Chuka Umunna, who was absent but made his support for Trident renewal clear.

Parliament’s next major vote on military action should have been in April 2018, when May sent the RAF to bomb Syria again. But May displayed contempt for Parliament by not even asking them to vote on the bombing (she could well have lost such a vote, given that opinion polls showed only around a quarter of the British public supported it).

In short, nearly all Change UK MPs have always voted for the more militaristic of any two options (unless their party policy is against it, as with then Labour MPs in 2013).

The only two exceptions I can find are Wollaston, on Syria in 2013, and Shuker, on Syria in 2015. If I have missed any evidence that goes against this conclusion, please let me know and I will be happy to apologise and make a correction.

Allen claims that Change UK is the “natural home” of Remain voters. There have been calls for a united “pro-Remain” slate in the European elections.

It is vital that none of us — whatever our views on the EU — fall for the idea that Brexit is the only issue that matters.

Left-wing, pro-peace Remainers and left-wing, pro-peace Leavers need to work together.

Thankfully, pro-Remain parties on the left, such as the Greens and Plaid Cymru, have rejected any idea of an alliance with Change UK.

Then again, it seems unlikely that Change UK would want an alliance with anyone on the left or with parties that are anti-Trident and anti-Nato.

Militarism should be seen as a key political issue in Britain. It is a class issue. The poorest people are targeted for military recruitment. They are brutalised through military training before being sent to kill other poor people elsewhere in the world and are then often dumped back into poverty in Britain when they return.

This is all done in the interests of ministers, generals, arms dealers and other members of

the ruling class.

This is sustained by the everyday militarism that has seen the introduction of initiatives such as Armed Forces Day and the ploughing of £50 million of public money into expanding cadet forces in state schools — just as other youth services are being cut.

This is before we even think about the indirect fuelling of war through the arms trade and the supply of military training to regimes such as Saudi Arabia.

After years of being called an “extremist,” Martin Luther King decided to accept the description. The issue, he said, is not whether we are extreme or moderate, but what we are extreme or moderate about.

I suggest we should be willing to be extremists for peace. While Change UK are constantly described as moderates, their voting record makes clear that they are extremists for war.

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Symon Hill works for the Peace Pledge Union, which includes members of several parties and none, and both Leave and Remain voters. This article is written in a personal capacity.

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