

## INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS: WHAT IS PARLIAMENT'S ROLE, AND WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

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Treaties and other international agreements can be wide-ranging and complex. They concern everything from trade to security, and have a significant effect on citizens' day-to-day lives.

But the mechanisms for parliamentary involvement in scrutinising and approving these important agreements are widely considered inadequate. Various proposals have now been made to reform the system, and to give parliament a more substantial role.

International treaties and other agreements are vital policy tools in a world where many problems and solutions cross borders. But the UK parliament has limited involvement in them, which is increasingly considered inadequate. Parliamentary committees such as the Commons <a href="Public Administration and Const">Public Administration and Const</a>

International agreements once largely concerned tariffs and war. But as the world's challenges and opportunities have become increasingly interconnected, these agreements have become far more wide-reaching and now have a major impact on daily life. For example, trade agreements may affect food standards, healthcare provision or environmental protections; non-trade agreements can have significant privacy or human rights implications.

Advocates for greater parliamentary involvement in international agreements point to the democratic deficit inherent in making these types of policy decisions without legitimation by parliament. As with <u>broader arguments</u> about the importance of scrutiny for high-quality decision-making, critics also point out that scrutiny provides transparency, and may help governments to sharpen and improve their policies. Some international agreements also long outlive a single government, even in their negotiation phase alone, so cross-party consensus may be beneficial.

Governments, by contrast, tend to argue that negotiations require flexibility, and that government control allows negotiators to respond to changing circumstances without having their hands tied by parliament.

In both the United States and the European Union, the legislature is consulted before and during negotiations. Negotiators have noted that needing to pass an agreement through the legislature can, in fact, strengthen their hand in negotiations. And the vast majority of countries now give their parliaments a role in approving at least some finalised international agreements.

International agreements are currently negotiated and signed under the royal prerogative – powers formally held by the monarch but delegated to ministers.

- power as the Commons instead, the government simply has to lay a statement setting out its position and can then ratify regardless.
- CRAG has recently been supplemented by some <u>non-binding government commitments</u> on free trade agreements, for example on making time for debates on negotiating objectives or signed agreements. However, the informality of these commitments leaves their status in doubt.
- CRAG has <u>widely been called</u> unfit for purpose, both because its scope is relatively narrow, and because the powers it contains are relatively weak. Notably, CRAG applies only to treaties which require ratification. This means that some types of treaties a