

Whips: 16 Rebels: 197

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Whips have been an essential part of parliamentary life since at least the eighteenth century. Confusingly, 'the whip' has two distinct meanings. In its written form, it is the document circulated weekly by party managers to their MPs to inform them of the coming business and the importance that the party attaches to it. In its human form, the whips are the party's business managers (see Box 1) and the written whip is just one of their many tools.

BOX 1 ABOUT HERE

Whips of all parties fulfill three main functions: management, communication and persuasion.

Management

The task of management is the longest-standing function of the party whips, deriving from the need of the government to secure a majority in votes (and, on behalf of the Opposition to try to keep that majority as small as possible). It includes the need to organize the business of the House, to liaise with the other parties through what are called the 'usual channels', and to keep backbench MPs informed and organized. For this reason, the whips were once described as 'more of a shepherd than a sheep dog' and as doing little more than 'serving to achieve cohesion among those who wished to be cohesive' (Norton, 1979, p. 13).

With around 300 votes each year in the Commons, there is no way that MPs can know all the details about each vote they cast, especially on the more arcane amendments, so they are 'grateful for what Paul Flynn MP called 'the sheepdog herding of the Whips who direct them safely into the lobby of righteousness and truth' (Flynn, 1997, p. 16).

No government would survive long without the effective management of its business and its parliamentarians. The need for good management, even when the government has a huge majority became clear in February 1999. During the passage of the Rating (Valuation) Bill, the Tory whips ordered their MPs to leave the Commons *en masse*. Labour MPs followed. Then, five minutes before the vote, '140 or so well-refreshed Tory MPs appeared on the horizon, like something from the film *Zulu*'. In the event the Government scraped through by a margin of 25, but only with the help of what the *Telegraph* described (26 February 1999) as 'a few, ever-indecisive, Liberal Democrats'.

Communication

The whips also constitute a channel of communication between the front and the back benches. As part of their management role, the whips need to inform backbench MPs of the leadership's plans. But whips also need to communicate the views of the backbenchers to the leadership, especially when discontent is brewing. They need to be the government's eyes and ears, monitoring feelings on the backbenches, warning the Government of any difficulties ahead. As one whip put it: 'We beg for mercy and grace and petition that policy without widespread support should no longer be pursued'.

Persuasion

It is the third function – that of persuasion – that attracts the most attention and the most criticism from outsiders. If an MP looks likely to deviate from the party line, then it is the role of the whips to persuade him or her back into the fold. Tales of the tricks used by the whips to ‘persuade’ MPs are legion. These include the infamous ‘Black Book’, in which Conservative whips used to keep details of the financial and sexual peccadilloes of their MPs – and Box 2 contains an example of the use that such information could be put to.

BOX 2 ABOUT HERE

But there is a danger that such stories exaggerate the power of the whips and draw attention away from the more mundane – and less salacious – parts of their job. The formal sanctions available to the whips are, and always have been, limited, especially if MPs rebel in numbers. One MP therefore famously described them not so much as ‘whips as feather dusters’, a description largely borne out by the experience since 1997. Before Labour entered Government there were claims that the Labour leadership would deal severely with dissident MPs, and that rebel MPs would have the party whip removed.

But throughout both the 1997 and 2001 Parliaments no Labour MP lost the whip as a result of his or her rebelliousness (Cowley, 2002). (George Galloway, for example, lost the whip because of what he said, not how he voted). Dissenting MPs did sometimes get snotty letters from the whips reprimanding them (Austin Mitchell once auctioned off one of his at a Party conference) but most rebellious MPs can live with snotty letters.

The whips’ main weapon is the power to persuade. As one senior whip put it: ‘Conversation, not coercion, is the keynote’. Much of the academic literature on the whips office therefore tries to play down the role of the whip as arm-twister, bully and Machiavelli all rolled into one – as personified by Michael Dobbs’ fictitious Francis Urquhart – stressing instead the more prosaic functions of the whips.

Yet in turn, this runs the risk of going too far in the other direction, portraying the whips as entirely toothless and feeble. The truth is somewhere in between. To be sure, the whips do far more than just force MPs into line; and even when it comes to trying to ensure cohesion, they achieve more by persuasion, diplomacy and appeals to loyalty than by threats or bullying.

But it would be wrong to under estimate the extent to which whips are willing to attempt to coerce MPs. The whips can (and do) make life less pleasant for the troublesome. They can (and do) deny places on the more prestigious select committees, deny time away from the House, deny time for overseas trips, deny promotion, deny better office space and so on. And – at times - the whips could also revert to good old-fashioned physical bullying (Cowley, 2002). There was, on the Labour side on the House, what one whip described as a ‘tradition of brutality’. Or as one new recruit to the Whips Office put it when told that he had to convince would-be rebels with intellectual arguments: ‘does that mean that we can’t beat people up anymore?’

Much depends on the nature of the individual whip concerned – with some being more cerebral than others – and on the nature of the MP concerned. Many of the older persistent rebels tend to be ignored by the whips. The whips can live with what they see as ‘the serial offenders’. What they had to do, one said, is to ‘make sure that that group does not get any bigger’. During one important vote,

as a previously loyal Labour MP went to vote against the Government, a whip was heard muttering, 'There goes another virgin'. The whips know that they can do little to influence the promiscuous; their task is to ensure the chaste remained unsullied.

Has it worked?

The problem is that – at least at one level – it doesn't appear to be working, with backbench dissent by Labour MPs clearly on the increase (Cowley and Stuart, 2004):

- A total of 197 Labour MPs voted against their whips in the first two sessions of the 2001 Parliament, from the 2001 election to November 2003
- The first two sessions of the 2001 Parliament saw more backbench rebellions than the first two sessions of any post-war Government, Labour or Conservative
- The rebellions over Iraq were the biggest revolts by Government backbenchers since those over the Corn Laws in the middle of the nineteenth century
- Despite its nominal majority of over 160, the Government only managed to pass its legislation on university top-up fees with a slender majority of five.

As Peter Osborne, put it in a scathing article for the *Spectator* (Box 3) in which he criticised the way that Blair undermined the whips office and argued that he was now paying the price: 'Tony Blair has achieved the impossible. Three years after winning a landslide majority of 160, he is forced to conduct his business as if he were leader of a minority government. This is failure of party management on a heroic scale'.

BOX 3 ABOUT HERE

Osborne's article makes some interesting points, but it is quite spectacularly wrong in places. For example, although the Conservatives have long used the whips office as a training ground for rising talent, this has never been the habit in the Labour Party before (Searing and Game, 1977). Indeed, one of the changes under Blair has been to try to 'blood' young talent in the Whips Office, before moving people into other positions – exactly the opposite of Osborne's complaint.

Moreover, Osborne's critique also fails to appreciate the extent to which the rise in backbench dissent is not caused by, or is the responsibility of, the whips.

In broad terms, there are now three groups of rebels on the Labour backbenches, described by one senior whip as the 'three dis's': the dissenters (those who have long opposed the government), the disappointed (those who think they ought to have got a job in government but haven't) and the dismissed (those who were in government but aren't any more). The size of these last two groups inevitably increases over time, getting worse the longer the government is in office.

Moreover, the policy decisions that have been taken by the Government since 2001 – and which have caused it so much trouble – have not been the responsibility of the Whips' Office. The three issues which have caused the largest rebellions were Foundation Hospitals, top-up fees and Iraq. In each case, the Whips' Office did make it clear – in advance – that getting the policies through the Commons would be extremely problematic but the leadership decided to continue with them nonetheless.

Iraq was a particularly difficult issue for the whips, because it was not possible for the government to use its normal tactic of negotiating the rebellion away, by offering concessions and amendments (as it had done frequently beforehand, and as it would be forced to do later in the Parliament over Foundation Hospitals and top-up fees).

Moreover, in the case of both top-up fees and foundation hospitals, the whips managed to create a majority for the legislation, by persuading Labour rebels not to rebel at the same time (Box 4), thus limiting the effect of the rebellions. Given that there were easily enough Labour MPs prepared to vote against both pieces of legislation to defeat them, this was quite an achievement.

And for all the rise in rebelliousness, the Government remains undefeated on whipped votes – the first government about which this can be said since Wilson's elected in 1966.

The real fear

But what really causes concerns within the Labour whips office is the prospects after the next election – assuming Labour win.

Given how widespread the habit of rebellion has become, the Government has recently struggled to enact key pieces of legislation whilst enjoying a majority of 161. How will it manage with a majority of, say, 61? To make matters worse, the most rebellious MPs sit for safer seats than the rest of the PLP, meaning that as the Government's shrinks, the rebels become a larger proportion within the parliamentary party. Echoing Norman Lamont's verdict on the Major years, one Labour insider has already described the possibility as 'office without power'.

A small majority would force Labour MPs to be more self-disciplined, with the result that there may be fewer rebellions, but those that do occur will be far more damaging, with the very real prospect of causing regular government defeats. The really tough work for the Government whips office may begin after the next election.

References and further reading

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Box 1

The Whips

The Government's Chief Whip in the Commons since 2001 has been Hilary Armstrong, and she heads a team of 15 other whips:

Deputy Chief Whip:
Bob Ainsworth MP

Comptroller:
Rt Hon Thomas McAvoy MP

Vice Chamberlain:
Jim Fitzpatrick MP

Lords Commissioners (Whips):
Nick Ainger MP
John Heppell MP
Jim Murphy MP
Joan Ryan MP
Derek Twigg MP

Assistant Whips:
Fraser Kemp MP
Charlotte Atkins MP
Paul Clark MP
Vernon Coaker MP
Gillian Merron MP
Margaret Moran MP
Bridget Prentice MP

The Opposition Chief Whip, David Maclean, has a slightly smaller team of 11 MPs under his command. There is also a comparable system in the Lords, headed on the Government side by Lord Grocott.

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Box 2

One way of persuading rebels into line

Somewhere in central London is a safe containing a brown envelope. Inside the envelope is a photograph. It shows a well-known politician, a tireless campaigner for 'family values', in what used to be called a 'compromising position'. He is naked. There are a number of women – also naked – in the photograph. It also includes a dog... The photograph has been taken out of the safe only once, when the MP at the centre of the picture had threatened to rebel over a piece of legislation. He was invited to the whips' office and offered a drink. Then he was tossed the envelope. He opened it, blanched, and spent the rest of his political career doing what he was told.

Source: Paxman, 2003, p. 165.

Box 3

Three criticisms of the Whips Office since 2001

The eviction of the Whips from No 12 Downing Street to make room for the Government's media unit 'was a humiliating state of affairs which immediately sent the message round Whitehall that the Chief Whip no longer counted'.

The Whips Office is no longer used as a training ground for future ministers – instead being filled up with 'dullards and plodders'.

The Power of patronage was taken from the Whips Office and drawn into Number 10, with the Chief Whip reduced to a 'harmless administrative drudge'.

Source: Peter Osborne, The Spectator, 17 January 2004

Box 4.*How to divide and conquer*

As the Health and Social Care Bill – containing the Government’s proposals for top-up fees - worked its way through the Commons, a grand total of 87 Labour MPs voted against it.

The parliamentary arithmetic of this was simple. It didn’t require any more Labour MPs to be prepared to vote against their whip over the issue: 87 would have easily been enough to defeat the Government. The problem was that they didn’t all do so together: the largest single rebellion against the Government over Foundation Hospitals saw 65 Labour MPs vote against their whips.

Exactly the same happened with top-up fees. In the largest rebellion against the Higher Education Bill 72 Labour MPs voted against the Government, reducing their majority to just five. But throughout the passage of the Bill a total of 82 – ten more, and easily enough to have stopped the legislation – voted against the proposals.

There were six Labour MPs who voted against the Government at the Report Stage in March 2004 who had not done at the Bill’s Second Reading in January. But they were more than counter-balanced by a larger group of 21 Labour MPs who voted against the Government at Second Reading but who then abstained (18) or voted with the Government (three) at Report Stage. And then at Third Reading, with most Labour rebels abstaining and with no chance of a Government defeat, four new MPs choose to vote against the measure for the first time.

If opponents of top-up fees had been able to persuade all of those who voted against to have done so together then, just as with Foundation Hospitals, the Government would have been defeated.