

A damn close run thing: The voting on the Higher Education Bill

Based on lists provided by the Press Association, the following briefing paper is an early analysis of who voted against the Government over the Second Reading of the Higher Education Bill earlier today (27 January). A more detailed analysis will follow tomorrow.

A majority of five (316-311) is the lowest on a whipped vote since Labour came to power in 1997.

A total of 72 Labour MPs appear to have voted against the Bill.

This does not – as has been claimed – make it the largest revolt by Labour MPs since 1997. This rebellion is dwarfed by the larger Iraq revolts, the largest of which saw 139 Labour MPs vote against their whips.

But it is the largest revolt by Government MPs on domestic legislation since 1997 and the joint-largest revolt against the Second Reading of a Bill since 1945. It ties with the revolt on 1 April 1947 against the Second Reading of the National Service Bill, when 72 Labour MPs voted against and 30-40 abstained, and with the revolt on 14 April 1986 on the Second Reading of the Shops Bill, when 72 Conservative MPs voted against and 15-20 abstained.

Of the 72 rebels, all but three – Michael Connarty, Roger Godsiff, and Gavin Strang – had signed the ‘anti-top up fees’ Early Day Motion, EDM 7.

This leaves 69 Labour MPs who signed the EDM and who then voted against the Bill. However, immediately prior to the vote a total of 155 Labour MPs had signed the EDM (this excludes those who signed but then removed their names). That means that 86 Labour signatories – the majority of those who signed the EDM – did not vote against the Bill.

A very good guide to which MPs carried their opposition into the division lobbies was their past behaviour. In the first two sessions of the Parliament, there were 11 issues on which at least 15 Labour MPs rebelled. The table (below) shows the Labour signers of EDM 7, splitting them by the number of major issues over which they had been prepared to vote against the Government since 2001.* They range from the 16 who had yet to do so at all to the three (whose names will not be a surprise) who did so on all 11 issues.

MPs who then voted against the Government over the Higher Education Bill are marked in grey.

There is a strong relationship between past behaviour and voting over the Higher Education Bill. Of the 20 MPs who had rebelled over eight or more issues before the Higher Education Bill, all 20 voted against the Government. Of the 34 who had rebelled on between four and seven issues, 24 (71%) voted against. But of the 101 who had rebelled on three or fewer issues before, 25 (25%) voted against. The concessions offered by the Government and the pressure applied

* Because MPs are able to rebel multiple times on some issues, but only once on others, it makes more sense to split the MPs by broad issues rather than by the number of rebellions they have participated in. The 11 issues cover the major rebellions of the Parliament to date. For more information, see: <http://www.revolt.co.uk/The%20Usual%20Suspects.pdf>

therefore managed to deter few of the more hardened rebels, but did work with the more virginal.

Reports variously put the figure for abstentions at 18-24. As a ratio of votes to abstentions this is much more in line with past practice than the various surveys of MPs that were being carried out over the past week.

Notes

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This briefing note draws on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and is available from www.revolts.co.uk.

