

## **When Sheep Bark: The Parliamentary Labour Party since 2001**

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Throughout the 1997 parliament the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) was routinely discussed in terms that would have been unrecognisable to MacDonald, Attlee, Wilson or Callaghan. Backbench MPs were said to be trooping loyally (most said far *too* loyally) through the division lobbies. If the complaint used to be that Labour leaders were not in control of their party, after 1997 it soon became that they were too much in control. Labour MPs were routinely described as timid, gutless, sycophantic and cowardly. They acquired a reputation for excessive cohesion, excessive loyalty and an overall lack of backbone. They were variously described as sheep, poodles, clones, robots or – most bizarrely of all – daleks (Cowley, 2002: 37, 41, 96).

These phrases now seem distinctly old hat. Since the 2001 election the focus has instead been on how rebellious the PLP has become. At a remarkably hostile Prime Minister's Questions on 4 July Labour MPs began the Parliament making clear their opposition to reforms to incapacity benefit - an encounter described as 'Day One of the Intifada' (White, 2001; also see Sylvester, 2001). Several private meetings of the PLP have been similarly rumbustious.<sup>1</sup> More than 100 Labour MPs then voted against frontbench advice (albeit on a free vote) over the membership of departmental select committees (Cowley, 2001b). In May 2002 the Government was forced to back down over its plans for Lords reform in the face of backbench pressure (Cowley and Stuart, 2003a: esp. 192-193). February and March of 2003 saw two enormous backbench revolts over Iraq, followed by a series of rebellions over Foundation Hospitals, one of which reduced the Government's majority to just 17, the lowest on a whipped vote since 1997. And the issue of university top-up fees saw the Government forced into a series of retreats and concessions in a desperate bid to stave off their first Commons defeat.

How did it come to this? This article examines the voting behaviour of Labour MPs from the 2001 election to the end of the second session of the Parliament. It has four substantive sections. First, it details the rebellions that have taken place so far, placing them in their historical context. Second, it identifies the most rebellious backbenchers, and discusses the changing behaviour of some MPs. Third, it examines the behaviour of the 2001 intake in some detail, to examine the effect of changes in Labour's selection procedures. Fourth, it examines the factional nature of the voting behaviour. We begin, however, with a short methodological note, explaining the nature of the data employed in the paper.

### **Methodology**

MPs are not of equal importance. In an important article on legislative studies in 1976, Anthony King noted that although commentators often talked about 'parliamentary control' as if Parliament was one entity, there were in fact three groups within Parliament who wanted to 'control' the executive – the Opposition frontbench, the Opposition backbench, and the Government's own backbenchers. Of these, it was the relationship between the Government's own backbenchers and the executive –

what he termed the ‘intra-party’ relationship – that was crucial. ‘As far as the Government is concerned, government backbenchers are the most important Members of the House’ (King, 1976: 16).<sup>2</sup>

Although the voting procedures in the House of Commons score highly in terms of transparency (Rekosh, 1995: 229-39, 294-5) - electors can see how their elected representatives have voted – one drawback of divisions in the Commons is that, unlike in some legislative chambers, abstentions cannot be formally recorded. The whips may formally sanction an absence from a vote, it may be accidental, or it may be deliberate. There is no information on the record that allows us to establish, at least not systematically, the cause of absences. We cannot therefore necessarily read anything into non-voting. For the purpose of systematic analysis over time, therefore, we have to rely on the votes cast.

The focus here therefore is on dissenting votes cast by Government backbench MPs; that is, those occasions when one or more Labour Members vote against their own party whip or the apparently clear wishes (sometimes implicit) of their own frontbench. This is the definition employed in earlier research (see for example, Norton, 1980: x). This article examines the votes cast by Labour MPs from the start of the Parliament in June 2001 to the end of the second session in November 2003. As in previous research, excluded from the analysis are mistaken or mis-recorded votes and votes on matters of private legislation, private members’ bills, matters internal to the House of Commons and other free votes.<sup>3</sup>

## **The rebellions**

There were 141 separate backbench rebellions by Labour MPs in the first two sessions of the 2001 Parliament: 76 in the first session (from June 2001 to November 2002), with 65 in the second session (from November 2002 to November 2003). These rebellions have ranged across the whole gamut of Government policy, but 11 issues (broadly defined) saw rebellions in which at least 15 Labour MPs cross-voted:

1. In July 2001 40 Labour MPs voted against the timetabling motion for a debate on the membership of select committees.
2. Throughout November and December 2001 there were 22 separate backbench revolts during the passage of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill. The largest saw 32 Labour MPs support an amendment to allow judicial review of the Home Secretary’s decisions to detain terrorist suspects without trial.
3. In January 2002 26 Labour MPs backed a backbench amendment to the NHS Reform and Health Care Professions Bill, opposing the abolition of Community Health Councils (CHCs).
4. There were three rebellions during the passage of the Education Bill, including one in February 2002 in which 46 Labour backbenchers supported an amendment moved by the former Health Secretary, Frank Dobson, on faith schools.
5. Throughout June and November 2002 there were 17 separate rebellions during the passage of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill. The largest, insisting on the education of asylum seeker children in mainstream education, saw 43 Labour MPs vote against their whips.
6. In June and October 2002 the Enterprise Bill saw two rebellions, the largest of which saw 24 Labour MPs support an attempt to compel the Office of Fair

Trading to take into account damage to the public interest and employment levels when determining competition policy on mergers and acquisitions.

7. The biggest rebellions of all came over the possibility of military action in Iraq, the largest of which saw 139 Labour MPs vote for an amendment that ‘the case for war against Iraq had not yet been established, especially given the absence of specific United Nations authorisation’.
8. The subject of firefighters’ pay and conditions saw rebellions during both the Local Government Bill and the Fire Services Bill; the largest saw 41 Labour MPs vote against their whips.
9. There were 20 rebellions throughout April, May and November against aspects of the Criminal Justice Bill. The two largest saw 33 Labour backbenchers vote against the abandonment of trial by jury in complicated serious fraud cases, or where there was thought to be a danger of a jury being interfered with.
10. There were nine rebellions during the passage of the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Bill that sought to establish Foundation Hospital Trusts. May saw the largest rebellion, when 65 Labour MPs defied their whips to back a Reasoned Amendment to Second Reading, and a subsequent revolt in November saw the Government’s majority cut to 17, the lowest since Labour entered Government in 1997.
11. In July 2003 15 Eurosceptic Labour MPs opposed a Government motion welcoming the draft Constitutional Treaty produced by the Convention on the Future of Europe.

These 11 issues between them accounted for 90 of the 141 rebellions. There were also an additional 51 smaller revolts covering a wide range of issues, including opposition to the war in Afghanistan, Sinn Fein’s access to facilities in the House of Commons, commonhold and leasehold reform, student finance, community care, licensing laws, social security, the suspension of elections and justice issues in Northern Ireland, reproductive cloning, Post Office closures, pensions, ministerial conduct, regional assemblies, the European Communities (Amendment) Bill and other European issues.

A total of 141 rebellions meant that there were rebellions by Labour MPs in 18.8 per cent of divisions. In *absolute* terms, this is clearly not a high level of dissent: it means that around one out of every five divisions saw a rebellion – no matter how small – by a Labour MP. The others see complete cohesion. But, given that party cohesion has been a marked feature of British parliamentary life since the end of the nineteenth century (see, for example, Lowell, 1926), this should not be surprising. Of more interest, therefore, is to view the rebellions in *relative* terms. How does this behaviour compare to the behaviour of government MPs in previous parliaments?

TABLE 1  
BACKBENCH REBELLIONS IN THE FIRST SESSION OF EVERY LABOUR  
GOVERNMENT, IN RANK ORDER

<i>Parliament</i>	<i>N</i>
<b>2001</b>	<b>76</b>
1974O	54
1924	52
1929	33
1997	16
1945	10
1966	9
1974F	8
1950	1
1964	0

Table 1 shows the number of backbench rebellions in the first session of every Parliament in which Labour has been in government, going back to MacDonald in 1924. You do not need to be a statistical whiz to spot the key finding: there were more backbench revolts in the first session of 2001 parliament (which is marked in bold in the table) than in the first session of *any* parliament when Labour has been in power. The comparison with the first session of the 1997 parliament is especially sharp: there were almost five times as many revolts in the first session of the 2001 Parliament than there were in the first session of the last. But there were also more rebellions in the first session of the 2001 Parliament than there were in the first session of the Parliament elected in October 1974, the Parliament in which backbench dissent was to reach its post-war height (Norton, 1980: 427-446).

TABLE 2  
 BACKBENCH REBELLIONS IN THE TWO SESSIONS OF ALL POST-WAR  
 GOVERNMENTS, IN RANK ORDER

<i>Parliament</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Rebellions as a % of divisions</i>
<b>2001</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>18.8</b>
1983	137	17.4
1970	135	16.2
1992	119	16.1
1974O	115	13.7
1987	111	12.3
1959	52	12.2
1979	64	7.8
1974F	8	7.3
1945	38	5.6
1997	35	5.0
1966	31	3.8
1950	5	2.1
1955	7	1.5
1951	2	0.4
1964	1	0.3

Table 2 extends the analysis, including the first two sessions of every post-war Parliament, covering periods of both Labour and Conservative Government. (We lack systematic data on periods when the Conservatives were in government before 1945 to enable us to extend the analysis back further). Again, the finding is fairly clear. A total of 141 revolts in two sessions is more than in the first two sessions of every post-war parliament.<sup>4</sup> As the Table shows, this remains true when the 141 revolts are expressed as a percentage of the number of divisions taking place. The rate of rebellion faced by the whips' office in the 2001 Parliament is higher than that faced by Government whips in any other post-war Parliament.

Yet here – as so often in life – size does matter. If each of these revolts consisted of a single MP, then the Labour whips could sleep soundly in their beds. Unfortunately for the whips, this is clearly not the case. The two largest Iraq rebellions were the biggest revolt against the whip since the mid-19th century, easily breaking all the modern records: the 110 Labour MPs who rebelled over agricultural rent reform in 1975 (Norton, 1980: 179-180), or the 95 Conservatives who voted against the post-Dunblane firearms legislation (Cowley and Norton, 1999: 93). To find a bigger revolt, you have to go back to the Corn Laws (see, for example, McLean, 1998). The rebellion in favour of a reasoned amendment to the Second Reading of the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Bill – which saw 65 Labour MPs cross-vote – was the largest against the Second Reading of a Government Bill by its own backbenchers since the Shops Bill in 1986 (Bown, 1990; Regan, 1990). And as the list above showed, there were also large revolts over faith schools, anti-terrorism legislation, immigration and asylum, community health councils and the fire service. Indeed, such was the frequency with which Labour MPs were rebelling that even some large revolts began to go unreported. A rebellion in mid-November 2003 saw 41 Labour MPs vote against their whip, but the revolt went almost entirely unreported in the media, as did a series of large revolts over the Criminal Justice Bill later in the month.

TABLE 3  
SIZE OF BACKBENCH REBELLIONS, 2001-2003

<i>Number of MPs voting against the whip</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>As % of revolts</i>
1-9	82	58
10-29	38	27
30-50	13	9
50+	8	6
Total	141	100

That said, as Table 3 makes clear, the majority of the rebellions since 2001 were considerably smaller than this. Over half consisted of fewer than ten backbenchers; just 21 (15 per cent) saw 30 or more Labour MPs break ranks. Whilst the Government may suffer a rebellion every five votes, it only suffered a large rebellion – of 30 or more backbenchers – roughly every 35 votes.

The mean size of the rebellions since 2001 is 14. In absolute terms, this is greater than the average size of backbench rebellions in every Conservative period of Government from 1945 to 1997, although this figure is partly distorted by two variables. The first is the overall size of the parliamentary party, which varies as a result of the electoral success of the party in government. Fairly obviously, governments that win landslides have more MPs than those that scrape in. The second variable is the size of the ‘payroll vote’, those MPs who are part of the government (broadly defined) and who are bound to support it in the division lobbies. This latter group has increased over time, with the result that similar sized parliamentary parties from the 1950s and 1990s would have very different numbers of backbenchers. As a result, the number of backbenchers during the post-war period has ranged from under 200 (in 1964, and the two Parliaments of 1974) to over 300 (in 1945).

TABLE 4  
 AVERAGE SIZE OF BACKBENCH REBELLIONS IN THE TWO SESSIONS OF ALL  
 POST-WAR GOVERNMENTS, IN RANK ORDER

<i>Parliament</i>	<i>Mean size of rebellion</i>	<i>Mean rebellion as % of backbench party</i>
1974F	35	19.0
1974O	23	11.7
1966	22	9.1
1997	21	7.4
1992	12	5.9
1950	13	5.8
<b>2001</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5.2</b>
1951	12	5.1
1945	14	4.6
1970	8	3.5
1983	8	2.9
1987	7	2.9
1979	6	2.8
1959	5	1.9
1955	4	1.6
1964	1	0.5

The Parliament of 2001 saw an average revolt of around 5 per cent of the backbench party, which (as Table 4) shows is the seventh largest in the post-war period. The contrast between the parliaments of the 1960s and 1970s and today is particularly strong.<sup>5</sup> The Parliament of 1966 saw rebellions that were – in relative terms – almost twice as large as those of 2001. The Parliament of February 1974 saw rebellions that were almost four times as large. Labour MPs may therefore be rebelling more often than they did in the 1960s and 1970s, but they are not (yet) rebelling in anywhere near the same quantity.

### **Who are the rebels?**

From the 2001 election to the end of the second session, a total of 197 Labour MPs voted against their whip.<sup>6</sup> This is more than did so in the whole of the preceding (1997) Parliament. It is also more than the number of Conservative MPs who did so in the whole of the 1992 Parliament under John Major (Cowley, 1999: 21). As a proportion of those MPs on the backbenches, 197 rebels means that almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of those who have been on the backbenches at some point during the Parliament rebelled. Of those who have been on the backbenches solidly since 2001, just over three-quarters (77 per cent) rebelled. Yet if we take a longer perspective, this is not an especially high figure. The 1987 Parliament saw 213 government MPs defy their whips in total, 165 of whom had done so by the end of the second session, and the Parliament of 1983 saw some 226 MPs defy their whips by the end of the second session, 13 more than the current parliament – and from a smaller parliamentary party as well (also see Norton 1978: 214; 1980: 435).

Most of the 197 did not rebel often: almost three-quarters (140) rebelled on fewer than ten occasions; just 25 voted against their party whip 20 or more times. The identity of the 25 most rebellious MPs (listed in Table 5) is unlikely to be a huge surprise to anyone with a passing knowledge of Westminster or the politics of the PLP. Jeremy Corbyn heads the list (with 87 votes against the party whip), closely followed by John McDonnell (79). There is then a sharp drop, down to three MPs with over 50 dissenting votes each (Jones, Sedgemoor and Marshall-Andrews), closely followed by another six with 40 or more dissenting votes.

TABLE 5  
 MOST REBELLIOUS LABOUR MPS SINCE 2001

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes cast against the whip since 2001</i>
Jeremy Corbyn	87
John McDonnell	79
Lynne Jones	57
Brian Sedgemore	53
Robert Marshall-Andrews	51
Alan Simpson	48
Harry Barnes	47
Kelvin Hopkins	47
Robert Wareing	47
Dennis Skinner	43
Neil Gerrard	40
Denzil Davies	38
Andrew Bennett	37
Alice Mahon	37
Diane Abbott	36
Jim Marshall	32
Mark Fisher	31
Llew Smith	29
Kevin McNamara	28
George Galloway*	27
Mike Wood	25
Kate Hoey	24
Glenda Jackson	24
Terry Lewis	24
Tam Dalyell	22

*Note:* \* includes only votes cast whilst in receipt of the party whip. Galloway only cast one vote – with or against the government – from his suspension from the PLP on 6 May 2003 (and subsequent expulsion on 23 October) until the end of the second session, and that was to participate in the anti-Foundation Hospitals vote on 19 November.

It is worth stressing that this means that even the most rebellious Labour MP only votes against the party once every eight votes. And – as the Table shows – Corbyn and McDonnell are exceptional in their behaviour, even when compared to some of the other more rebellious Labour MPs. Even Lynne Jones, the third most rebellious Labour MP (and the most rebellious woman), has voted against the party line 57 times, just once in every 13 votes. Even the rebels, therefore, are overwhelmingly ‘loyal’ in the division lobbies.<sup>7</sup>

The turnover caused by the 2001 election was the lowest at the end of any full-length Parliament since 1945 (Cowley, 2001a: 258). Just 38 Labour MPs (discussed in more detail below) were new to the Commons.<sup>8</sup> This small influx of new MPs means that the changes in the PLP’s behaviour cannot have been caused by changes in its membership. For the most part, the PLP consisted of the same people as it did four years before – but behaving very differently. It is, however, possible to identify three explanations for the difference in behaviour.

First, there are all the ex-members of the Government sitting on the backbenches. After the reshuffle in 2003, this group totalled over 90.<sup>9</sup> It is not necessarily that ex-ministers have begun to vote against the Government out of bitterness at leaving government (although some be doing so), but that believing that their ministerial career is over gives them a freedom to act which is denied to others. Over half of this group (49) had voted against the Government by the end of the second session, although this leaves almost half who had not done so, and even many of the rebels are less rebellious than they sometimes seem. Many of the better-known ex-ministers have in fact been fairly selective in their rebellions (the most rebellious ex-Cabinet Minister, Frank Dobson, only voted against the whip nine times between 2001 and November 2003). If they have inflicted damage to the government, then it has usually been by voice as much as by vote.

Second, there is a large group of MPs who know that they are unlikely ever to get onto even the first rung of the ministerial ladder (at least under the present leadership). Of the huge 1997 intake, there were 75 who have not received even the lowest of government positions after six years in Parliament. Of these, all but 11 (85 per cent) rebelled between 2001 and 2003. Of course, some – John McDonnell or Bob Marshall-Andrews, for example – were never likely candidates for ministerial office. But there were 27 MPs from the 1997 intake who were on the backbenches for all of the last Parliament without rebelling once, but who have begun to do so since 2001. They include the much-maligned Helen Clark, who (as Helen Brinton) became synonymous with excessive loyalty, but who voted against the party line five times between 2001 and 2003.

Third, partly as a result of the two factors listed above (what one senior whip described as ‘the dismissed and the disappointed’), and partly simply because of the passage of time, the overall number of MPs to have defied the whip climbs ever-upwards. The number of MPs to have rebelled against the Government at least once rose steadily from 77 at the end of the 1997 session to 133 by the end of the last Parliament. Just over 20 rebels then left at the 2001 election, lowering the total temporarily, but it had reached 122 by the end of the first session of the 2001 Parliament and to 197 by the summer recess in 2003. Once an MP has rebelled once,

he or she is much more likely to rebel for a second time (and then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth, and so on). And so with each new rebellion, the number of likely rebels for any subsequent rebellion increases.

Largely unnoticed, the Government attempted in the much-maligned reshuffle of 2003 to ameliorate all three of these problems. Back into government came some ex-ministers – such as Chris Mullin or Bridget Prentice – thus sending out the message that resurrection is possible. Into Government also came a group of 1997 loyalists – such as Nick Palmer or David Stewart – who might otherwise have come to the conclusion that they had no chance of ever making it even slightly up the greasy pole. And third, into government came a handful of MPs who had rebelled very occasionally – such as Jackie Lawrence or David Borrow – in order to show that sporadic rebellion does not of itself result in an eternity in darkness. The much publicised cock-up in the changes at the top of Government therefore distracted attention from the (much better thought through) changes at the lower levels.

But there is a limit to the extent to which these problems can be ameliorated in this way. Promoting rebellious MPs can create resentment from overlooked loyalists. Promoting one MP into government almost always means sacking another. There is therefore an obvious limit to the number of ex- or would-be-ministers who can be brought into government, without simply creating more disgruntled ex-ministers in the process. The only way round this is to try to create more governmental posts. Although the Government has been criticised for doing exactly this – by increasing the number of PPSs (see for example *The Guardian*, 5 August 2003) – the recent increases were in fact minute when viewed in long-term perspective (cf Alderman and Cross, 1966) and the tactic can anyway only bring in a very small extra number of MPs. For the most part, therefore, these problems will just continue to get worse the longer the Government is in office.

### **The 2001 intake**

Complaints about the behaviour of MPs have been fuelled in recent years by the changes to the procedures used by Labour to select its parliamentary candidates (Shaw, 2001). For example, the pamphlet from a group of senior parliamentarians called Parliament First, *Parliament's Last Chance*, complained of the increasing centralisation of political parties, and the resulting decline of the independent-minded Parliamentarian (2003: 6, 26). The accusation is a simple one: Labour's ruthless Head Office weeds out dissenting voices. All those who might think for themselves and cause the whips sleepless nights are blocked, with the result that only Blairite clones make it to the Commons.

It was difficult to test this argument in 1997, because the scale of Labour's victory meant that it won many constituencies that were widely assumed to be safe Conservative seats, with the result that the very large 1997 intake included MPs who had not been properly vetted by the Party's HQ (Cowley, 2002: 11). The 2001 intake, however, constitute a good test case for the effects of Labour's selection procedures, because in 2001 there was very little change in the number of seats held by each party, and so nearly every new Labour MP inherited his or her seat from a retiring Labour incumbent. As a result, they had all been vetted properly; and the party hierarchy had plenty of warning about its new MPs.

The 40 new Labour MPs (including the two by-election entrants) are listed in Table 6. Of the 40, 23 had voted against their whip by the end of the second session in November 2003. This constitutes 58 per cent of the 2001 intake. (By the end of the second session of the last Parliament, by contrast, just 19 per cent of the 1997 intake had rebelled).

Notwithstanding the difficulties with abstentions (noted above), because of the extremely high profile of the issue we also looked at those who were absent from one or more of the Iraq votes, where there would have to be an extremely good reason for an absence. In fact, this makes relatively little difference to the figures, since most of those who were absent have also cast dissenting votes at one point or other. Just three of the 2001 intake who have yet to cast a dissenting vote were absent from one or more of the main Iraq votes. James Purnell was absent from the votes on 26 February for personal reasons; Paul Daisley was opposed to the Government's position but was terminally ill and unable to vote but; and Mark Tami abstained once on 18 March.<sup>10</sup>

On whipped votes therefore, including abstentions on Iraq, 24 of these 40 MPs have defied the whips to date.<sup>11</sup> In itself, this is a fairly remarkable figure: just two years after their election, almost 60 per cent of the 2001 intake had already defied their whips.

We then took a wider view, and included two key free votes. First, the votes on reform of the House of Lords. The vote may well have been free, but the Prime Minister's preference for a 100 per cent appointed chamber was well known (see for example, McLean et al, 2003). Of the 40 members of the 2001 intake, just 16 backed the PM's preferred position. Second, we examined a key vote on the nomination of select committees held at the beginning of the Parliament (Cowley, 2001b), which again was free but where the known preference of many within the whips' office was to reject Robin Cook's reforms (Kelso, 2003). Of the 40, just over half backed the proposals.

TABLE 6  
THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE 2001 INTAKE

<i>Name</i>	<i>Cast rebellious votes</i>	<i>Absent over Iraq</i>	<i>Backed 100% appointed Lords</i>	<i>Backed Cook on select committee reform</i>
Vera Baird	•	•	•	•
Ian Lucas	•	•	•	•
Dai Havard	•	•	•	
Khalid Mahmood	•	•	•	
Kevin Brennan	•	•		•
Colin Challen	•	•		•
Parmjit Dhanda	•	•		•
Paul Farrelly	•	•		•
Hywel Francis	•	•		•
Mark Lazarowicz	•	•		•
Rob Marris	•	•		•
Ann McKechin	•	•		•
Albert Owen	•	•		•
David Heyes	•	•		
David Wright	•	•		
Anne Picking	•		•	•
Kevan Jones	•		•	
Iain Luke	•		•	
John MacDougall	•		•	
James Sheridan	•		•	•
David Hamilton	•			•
John Lyons	•			•
Chris Mole	•			•
Mark Tami	(•)	•	•	
Paul Daisley*		•		
Tom Harris			•	•
<b>David Cairns</b>			•	
<b>Tony Cunningham</b>			•	
<b>James Purnell</b>		(•)	•	
<b>Sion Simon</b>			•	
<b>Tom Watson</b>			•	
Chris Bryant				•
Andrew Burnham				•
David Miliband				•
Meg Munn				•
Jon Cruddas				
Wayne David				
Huw Irranca-Davies				•
Jim Knight				
John Mann				

*Note:* \* died on 19 June 2003.

Table 6 shows the behaviour of the 2001 intake across these various votes. There are just five MPs from the 2001 intake who (a) have not yet defied the whips on a whipped vote; (b) backed the PM's position on the Lords; and (c) rejected Cook's proposals on select committee reform.<sup>12</sup> These are marked in bold in the table: David Cairns, Tony Cunningham, James Purnell (notwithstanding his absence from one of the Iraq votes), Sion Simon, and Tom Watson.

If the aim of Labour's selection process was to ensure that only Blairite clones made it to the Commons, then it failed dismally. Over half defied the whips before the second anniversary of their election, making them roughly three times more rebellious than the 1997 intake had been. (It also makes them more rebellious in percentage terms than the group of ex-ministers discussed above). On 'free' votes they show no inclination to do as either the PM or the whips' office would like. The majority did not back the PM's position on Lords reform; the majority defied the known preferences of the whips over select committee reform. Just five – a mere 13 per cent – have not yet rebelled or defied either their whips or their Prime Minister.

It is, however, worth noting that this behaviour has its costs. Ten of the 2001 intake were promoted to Government in the first two years of the Parliament – nine as Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPSs) and one, David Miliband, as a Minister of State. Of these ten, none voted against the party line. By contrast, of the 23 who voted against the party whip none has made it into government, even at the lowest level. Of the five most 'super loyal' MPs identified above, four – Cairns, Cunningham, Purnell, and Watson – entered Government as a result of the reshuffle of 2003. The promotion rates are therefore: of the 23 who rebelled, none are now in government; of the 11 who did not rebel but who did not necessarily do the whips' or the PM's bidding on free votes, just over 50 per cent are now in government; of the five who did not rebel and who did both the whips and the PM's bidding on free votes, 80 per cent are in government.<sup>13</sup> This is unlikely to be coincidental.

### **Rebels with causes**

Richard Rose famously identified a classic distinction between factions and tendencies in political parties. The Conservatives were a party of tendencies – in which *ad hoc* groups of MPs (or others) joined together in temporary coalitions over specific individual issues. Labour, by contrast, was a party of factions, in which groups of MPs (or others) campaigned together over a range of issues (Rose, 1964). The Conservatives' classification as a party of tendencies is now disputed (see, for example, Heppell, 2002; Cowley and Norton, 2002). But what about Labour? To what extent are the rebels on each issue the same people?

TABLE 7  
NUMBER OF ISSUES OVER WHICH LABOUR REBELS DISSENTED, 2001-2003

<i>Number of issues</i>	<i>Number of rebels</i>	<i>% of rebels</i>
1	69	36
2	36	19
3	26	14
4	11	6
5	18	9
6	6	3
7	4	2
8	5	4
9	7	4
10	5	3
11	3	2
Total	190	102

To examine this, we first grouped the 121 individual rebellions into the 11 broad issue categories listed above, excluding the smaller, more idiosyncratic, rebellions. We then looked at the number of issues over which MPs rebelled (see Table 7). One of the phrases often used to describe MPs participating in a rebellion is ‘the usual suspects’. It is a phrase that many of the rebels dislike, believing that it is used to make light of their actions. To imply that those who oppose the Government are just the ‘usual suspects’ is to imply that their opposition is predictable, only to be expected, and should not therefore be taken seriously. It is a (doubtless deliberately) vague phrase, but if by it we mean rebelling over, say, three-quarters of the issues to see backbench dissent, then (as Table 7 shows) the ‘usual suspects’ comprise just 15 MPs. If we widen the definition as far as it can possibly go, to include those MPs who rebelled over 50 per cent of the issues that triggered backbench dissent (and by its very nature, ‘usual’ cannot mean less than 50 per cent), then we are still talking about just 30 MPs. These 30 are listed in Table 8. To avoid offending anyone, we shall avoid describing them as the usual suspects – but when there is a rebellion you can suspect they will usually be involved.

TABLE 8  
LABOUR MPS WHO REBELLED ON MORE THAN HALF OF MAIN ISSUES, 2001-2003

<i>Number of issues rebelled on (out of 11)</i>					
<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i>
Harold Best	Ronnie Campbell	Dr Ian Gibson	Neil Gerrard	Harry Barnes	Kelvin Hopkins
Bill Etherington	Michael Clapham	Kate Hoey	Alice Mahon	Jeremy Corbyn	John McDonnell
David Taylor	Harry Cohen	Diane Abbott	Bob Marshall-Andrews	Dr Lynne Jones	Dennis Skinner
Mike Wood	John Cryer	Andrew Bennett	Alan Simpson	Brian Sedgemore	
Michael Connarty		Llew Smith	John Austin	Robert Wareing	
Gordon Prentice			Terry Lewis		
			Jim Marshall		

There is therefore a hard core of rebels in the PLP, who participate in most serious rebellions, but this group numbers no more than 30. Around them, there is a much larger group of MPs who are willing to rebel but who do so less frequently, and less predictably. This latter group includes many who might be casually dismissed as ‘the usual suspects’, but whose voting is more discerning than this label implies – including Peter Kilfoyle (who rebelled over five issues out of the 11), Ann Cryer (five), Austin Mitchell (five), Gwyneth Dunwoody (four), Tam Dalyell (three) and Graham Allen (three).

## **Conclusion**

The 2001 election did not mark the point at which the PLP changed from being sheep to rottweillers – both because Labour MPs were not sheep before, and because they have not become rottweillers since.

The supposed spinelessness of the 1997 Parliament was always a myth. Although there were relatively infrequent rebellions in the last Parliament, there were still 96 separate backbench revolts, and (as Table 4 indicates) those that did take place were sizeable. For poodles, Labour MPs could bark loudly when provoked (see, for example, Cowley and Stuart, 2003b). Moreover, the growing restlessness of the PLP had begun *before* the 2001 election. The number of rebellions grew throughout the last Parliament, session-on-session (at least until the stunted, pre-election session of 2000-2001).

Rebellion therefore was on the increase before the 2001 election, and it has continued to increase since. The 2001 Parliament has seen the largest revolt since the middle of the 19th century and has seen more revolts than any comparable period of post-war government. The widespread impression that Labour MPs are causing trouble for their leadership is far from erroneous.

But it is wise not to exaggerate the changes that have occurred. There has been no collapse in party discipline. Cohesion remains the norm, dissent the exception. Most votes still see complete cohesion. Even when Labour MPs do break ranks, they do not usually do so in huge numbers. Things may be bad, but they are not as bad as they were in the 1960s or (especially) the 1970s. There may be lots of would-be-rebels, but they have yet to form into any organised resistance against the Government. The good news for the Government therefore is that although there are lots of MPs who are willing to rebel against it, it does not yet face any large-scale factional opposition on the backbenches of the PLP. The flip side of this, however, is that when it gets into trouble with its backbenchers, it cannot simply dismiss its problems as the result of the behaviour of the usual suspects – because there are not enough of them to cause it trouble.

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<sup>1</sup> The very first PLP meeting after the election, for example, saw criticism from several normally loyal MPs, such as Peter Pike (who spoke about conditions on council estates in his constituency) and Debra Shipley (who spoke passionately about the state of her local hospitals).

<sup>2</sup> He continued: ‘One discounts the disapproval of the other party; the disapproval of one’s own is harder to bear’ (King, 1976: 16). See also Hurd (1997: esp. 3).

<sup>3</sup> For example, excluded are the apparent (but incorrect) dissenting votes cast by George Howarth (Division 133, 15 January 2002), Paul Goggins (Division 170, 14 April 2003), and John MacDougall (Division 200, 15 May 2003).

<sup>4</sup> For the record, it also exceeds the figure for the Government of May 1929–August 1931, which saw 95 separate rebellions.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, when viewed as a percentage of the parliamentary party even the size of the Iraq rebellion becomes (just very slightly) less impressive. The largest Iraq revolt saw 34 per cent of the PLP vote against their whip. But in 1924, 73 Labour MPs – constituting 40 per cent of the PLP – voted against the MacDonald Government over the right of strikers to claim unemployment benefit. As a proportion of the parliamentary party, this still remains the largest revolt by members of the PLP.

<sup>6</sup> Of these, one (Ray Powell) has since died, one (Paul Marsden) defected to the Liberal Democrats, and one (George Galloway) has had the whip removed. By the end of the second session, this left 194 MPs sitting on the Government benches, and in receipt of the whip, who had rebelled.

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, because some of the more rebellious MPs are often refused leave of absence from the Commons as a punishment for their actions, some of them argue that they in fact cast more ‘loyal’ votes in favour of the Government than do some of the less rebellious MPs.

<sup>8</sup> This figure excludes Shaun Woodward, elected for the first time as a Labour MP in 2001 but who was first elected to the Commons in 1997 as a Conservative. In addition, Huw Irranca-Davies and Chris Mole both came in at by-elections since 2001.

<sup>9</sup> This figure includes those who were in the government (broadly defined) as PPSs.

<sup>10</sup> Tami had also once been in a dissenting lobby, albeit by mistake. On 26 November 2001, he was one of the first Labour MPs to arrive at the lobby to vote on introducing a new offence of religious hatred to the Committee stage of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill. One of the whips indicated that the Labour line was to vote against the clause, when in fact they were supposed to vote aye. Tami (along with Martyn Jones, who did the same) then had to cancel out their first vote by entering the aye lobby.

<sup>11</sup> Or 25, if one includes Paul Daisley, who would have done so had he been well enough.

<sup>12</sup> Extending the analysis to include other unwhipped votes – such as those over whether Gwyneth Dunwoody and Donald Anderson were to remain on select committees – makes no difference to the analysis. All five of the MPs identified here had voted to support the whips’ original nominations.

<sup>13</sup> The late Paul Daisley has been excluded from these calculations.