

Conservatives in Unity Shocker: Conservative Backbench Rebels, 2001-05

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Robert Jackson's recent defection to the Labour Party masks the fact that Conservative backbench dissent virtually halved during Michael Howard's first year as Tory leader.

Moreover, at no point in the Parliament has Conservative dissent been common. The first three full sessions of the Parliament saw just one division in twelve witness Conservative backbench dissent. And when there were rebellions, they averaged just three MPs in size. By contrast, over the same period, Labour backbench rebellions have occurred in roughly one in five divisions, involving an average of thirteen Labour MPs.

By 21 Jan 2005, there had been 95 occasions since 2001 when at least one Conservative MP defied the party line. But of these, the majority occurred under IDS's leadership. 70 of the rebellions occurred whilst IDS was Conservative Party leader, during which rebellion was running at approximately one rebellion every ten votes.[†] Since IDS's defenestration, however, there have been just 23 revolts, approximately one rebellion every 20 votes.

By the end of the second session of the Parliament, 61 Tory MPs had rebelled against their party line at least once (40 having done so by the end of the 1st session, and a further 21 doing so at some point in the second session). But just 28 Conservative MPs rebelled in the whole of the third session.

Just nine Conservative MPs have rebelled under Michael Howard who did not do so under IDS. Virginia Bottomley, Nigel Evans, David Heathcoat-Amory, Eric Forth and John Taylor rebelled at some point during the third session, whilst the recent Conservative rebellions on the Second Reading of the ID Cards Bill just before Christmas 2004 added a further four new names to that list – Angela Browning, Henry Bellingham, William Cash and Damian Green.

But few Conservative rebels are regular rebels. Out of the 70 rebellious Tory backbenchers since 2001, 38 (54 per cent) have cast only one or two votes against their party line by 21 January 2005.

The table below lists the 15 most rebellious Conservative MPs. They include one husband-and-wife pairing (Andrew Mackay and Julie Kirkbride). Had Ann Winterton not lost the Conservative whip between 26 February and 31 March 2004 – for ill-judged joke about Chinese cockle-pickers – during which she cast two votes against the Conservative frontbench line - they would include two such teams: Mrs Winterton has cast five votes against her whip, which puts her just outside the top 15; her husband sits joint-sixth. The most rebellious also includes two members of the 2001 intake, Andrew Turner and Andrew Rosindell (along with Bob Spink, who returned in 2001, having been first elected in 1992).

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[†] There were an additional two rebellions between the 2001 election and IDS becoming leader.

Below these 15, come two Conservative MPs who voted against their party line on five occasions (Mrs Winterton and Nick Gibb), four who have done so on four occasions (Messrs. Baldry, Curry, Leigh, and Robathan), and 11 who have done so on three occasions. This last group includes Andrew Hunter (but counting only those occasions before he resigned the party whip on 2 October 2002) and Robert Jackson (similarly only counting votes before he crossed the floor on 15 January 2005). And below them are 21 Tory MPs who rebelled twice and 17 who did so once.

But even the most rebellious Conservative MPs have rebelled infrequently. The most rebellious of all is the ex-Cabinet Minister, Douglas Hogg, who once declared that 'every vote is a free vote'. He would probably be even more clearly out in front of the rest of the pack were it not for his boycott of deferred divisions. But it is a sign of the difference between the behaviour of Conservative and Labour MPs that even the most rebellious Conservative MP would not make it into a league table of the most rebellious Labour MPs. There are 17 Labour MPs who have rebelled more often than Douglas Hogg. And the most rebellious Labour MP, Jeremy Corbyn, has rebelled on 114 separate occasions, more than three times as often as the most rebellious Conservative.

Most rebellious Conservative MPs, 2001-Jan 2005

| Rank | Name | Number of votes cast against the party whip, 2001-03 |
|------|--------------|--|
| 1. | D. Hogg | 35 |
| 2. | R. Shepherd | 31 |
| 3. | B. Spink | 22 |
| 4=. | P. Bottomley | 13 |
| 4=. | A. Mackay | 13 |
| 6=. | A. Turner | 11 |
| 6=. | N. Winterton | 11 |
| 8=. | J. Kirkbride | 10 |
| 8=. | B. Mawhinney | 10 |
| 10=. | K. Clarke | 8 |
| 10=. | J. Gummer | 8 |
| 10=. | A. Rosindell | 8 |
| 13. | E. Taylor | 7 |
| 14=. | P. Lilley | 6 |
| 15=. | J. Wilkinson | 6 |