

Leaving the Tories, joining Labour: Notes on floor-crossers since 1997

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Robert Jackson is the fourth Conservative MP to defect to Labour since Tony Blair became Leader of the Labour Party in 1994, and the third since the 1997 election. Alan Howarth defected to Labour in October 1995, Peter Temple-Morris left the Conservatives in November 1997 to sit as an Independent One Nation Conservative, before joining Labour in June 1998; and Shaun Woodward switched from Conservative to Labour in December 1999.

Few of these defecting MPs were especially rebellious prior to changing parties. Alan Howarth, for example, had begun to cast a handful of votes against the Conservative whip on disability issues prior to his defection, but his voting remained essentially that of a Conservative loyalist.¹ Similarly, despite voicing criticisms of his party occasionally, Peter Temple-Morris's voting behaviour prior to switching parties was basically that of a loyalist Conservative backbencher. In the period from the 1997 election to his defection, he cast not a single dissenting vote against the Conservative Party line. Prior to his defection, Shaun Woodward had cast just one vote against the Conservative Party whip in the two and a half years that he was in the Commons as a Conservative MP.²

Robert Jackson's revolts against the whip since 1997 have been similarly limited, and have been largely confined to criticisms of the Conservative higher education policy. In June 1997 he defied the party whip (along with 21 other Conservatives) to vote for amendments to the Government's devolution legislation; he then defied William Hague's leadership by supporting both the Second and Third Reading of the Education (Student Loans) Bill. He also rebelled over the issue of social security support for asylum-seekers in November 1999.³ Since 2001, he has defied the Conservative whip on just three occasions. He was the only Conservative to vote in favour of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill on 17 October 2001. And, more recently, in January 2004, he was the only Conservative MP to vote in favour of the Second Reading of the Higher Education Bill, which introduced top-up fees. He also supported the Government during the Bill's Report stage in March 2004.

The real difference often comes in voice not vote. Because most of the attention was (understandably) concentrated on divisions within Labour's ranks, the scathing nature of Robert Jackson's attack on his frontbench during the Second Reading of the Higher Education Bill went largely unreported. But in it he claimed that MPs were 'duty bound' to address the funding gap in the universities, and attacked Howard's opportunism:

The time will soon come when the electorate will ask whether the Conservative party is once again a serious party of Government ... when that

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¹ Details of Howarth's voting are given in P. Cowley, 'Crossing the floor': representative theory and practice in Britain', *Public Law*, Summer 1996, p. 222.

² See P. Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions: Parliamentary Voting Under Blair*, London, Politico's, 2002, Appendix 2.

³ See Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, pp. 194, 206.

time comes, I believe that the way they have chosen to handle this issue will be remembered and will be held against them.⁴

The exception to this is Andrew Hunter, who resigned the Conservative whip, announcing he would be attempting to stand as Democratic Unionist Party candidate at the next general election. Hunter has a much more rebellious record – especially on issues relating to Northern Ireland. During the 1997 Parliament, he was the second most rebellious Conservative MP, casting 26 dissenting votes against the party line on Northern Ireland alone, and 47 in total.

There is also a post-defection difference. Despite leaving the party, Andrew Hunter, however, has generally stuck to the Conservative frontbench line, apart from on Northern Ireland issues. But after switching to Labour, Howarth, Temple-Morris and Woodward became solidly loyal Labour MPs. If one of those ever-present Martians had landed and examined the recent voting records of Alan Howarth, Peter Temple-Morris and Shaun Woodward (although we can surely assume that any Martian visiting Earth would have better things to do), they would find nothing to indicate that they had ever been anything other than loyal Labour backbenchers. The same presumably will be true of Robert Jackson in what remains of his time in the Commons.

⁴ HC Debs, 27 January 2004, c. 230.