

Gone to the Dogs: Big Party Splits over Animal Health Bill

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On Tuesday, 14 March, the House of Commons voted by 476 votes to 63 in favour of a ban on the cosmetic docking of dogs' tails, but with exemptions for working dogs. A later amendment introducing a total ban then failed by just nine votes (267 votes to 278).

All three major parties allowed free votes, votes that revealed considerable divisions within their ranks, with each party failing in one of the votes to achieve a 'party vote' (the phrase used for situations in which at least 90% of MPs vote in the same lobby). This short briefing paper details the divisions on both the free and the later whipped votes.

Free votes

Table 1 shows the divisions amongst the three main parties on each of the two free votes.

1. Party splits over the Animal Health Bill

	Partial ban				Total ban			
	For		Against		For		Against	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Lab	304	98	5	2	236	77	71	23
LD	55	96	2	4	26	45	32	55
Con	108	65	57	35	7	4	164	96

The first vote saw Labour almost entirely united in favour (304 to 5), as were the Lib Dems (55 to 2).¹ The Conservatives, however, split more, with just over a third of Conservative MPs (57) voting against the measure, compared to 108 who supported.

The second vote then saw the Conservatives almost completely united in opposition, 164 voting against a total ban, with just seven supporting,² whilst the other parties split. Labour split 236 votes to 71, with the no lobby including no fewer than eight Cabinet ministers – Hilary Armstrong, Margaret Beckett, Alistair Darling, Patricia Hewitt, John Hutton, Alan Johnson, Ruth Kelly and John Reid. As well as Beckett, the Secretary of State at DEFRA, the vote also saw the Government minister, Ben Bradshaw, voting against the amendment he had just moved.

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¹ The five Labour MPs were Kevin Barron, Lindsay Hoyle, Jane Kennedy, Fiona Mactaggart and Austin Mitchell voting against, whilst the two Lib Dems were Jeremy Browne and David Laws.

² The seven were David Amess, Sir John Butterfill, John Horam, Andrew Rosindell, Lee Scott, Theresa Villiers and Ann Widdecombe.

But by far the biggest split occurred amongst the Liberal Democrats: 26 MPs supported a full ban, while 32 opposed it. The split within the party is shown in Table 2.

2. Liberal Democrat voting on a total ban

Support of a total ban	Against a total ban
Norman Baker	Danny Alexander
John Barrett	Alan Beith
Colin Breed	Jeremy Browne*
Annette Brooke	Malcolm Bruce
Paul Burstow	Sir Menzies Campbell
Lorely Burt	Alistair Carmichael
Dr Vincent Cable	Nick Clegg
Edward Davey	Tim Farron
Lynne Featherstone	Don Foster
Mike Hancock	Andrew George
Dr Evan Harris	Sandra Gidley
Paul Holmes	Nick Harvey
Martin Horwood	David Heath
David Howarth	John Hemming
Simon Hughes	Chris Huhne
Mark Hunter	Paul Keetch
Susan Kramer	Charles Kennedy
John Leech	Norman Lamb
Willie Rennie	David Laws*
Dan Rogerson	Michael Moore
Bob Russell	Lembit Opik
Adrian Sanders	Dr John Pugh
Sarah Teather	Alan Reid
Steve Webb	Paul Rowen
Stephen Williams	Sir Robert Smith
Phil Willis	Andrew Stunell
	Jo Swinson
	John Thurso
	Mark Williams
	Roger Williams
	Jenny Willott
	Richard Younger-Ross

Note: * Browne and Laws were also against even a partial ban.

This is hardly a new phenomenon. It has long been true that some 'moral' issues have the potential to split the Liberal Democrats (or even their precursor parties) in a way that they rarely do the other parties.³ In the 2001-2005 Parliament, there were even sharper divisions – the party splitting right down the middle – over hunting and smacking. And in the 1997 Parliament, the party had split deeply over, for example, gun control, hunting (again), euthanasia, and sitting hours. Pointing it out led the Lib Dem Chief Whip to write to the *Guardian*, calling the complaint that Lib Dems 'sometimes' vote in different directions on free votes

³ See our earlier paper 'Solidly against Labour: Liberal Democrat Voting in the House of Commons, 2001-2005'

'most odd'. 'Isn't that just what's supposed to happen when it's a free vote?' he asked.⁴ Indeed it is - although the difference is that whereas free votes tend to cause the other parties to splinter, they can often produce deep splits within the ranks of the Lib Dems.

Whipped votes

The rest of the Bill's Report stage was then conducted on what appeared to be a normal whipped vote basis, producing minor rebellions in each of the three main parties. Ann Widdecombe was the only Conservative MP to oppose a Conservative backbench amendment that would have made it mandatory for inspectors to issue improvement notices to those warned of animal welfare offences. Then, two Labour backbenchers – David Drew (who had served on the Bill's Standing Committee) and John McDonnell – voted in favour of a Conservative new clause in the name of Mark Pritchard that would have banned the sale of endangered animals on the internet. Finally, two Liberal Democrats supported a Conservative amendment reducing the time limit for minor animal welfare offences, but increasing the maximum sentence for the worst crimes, while the rest of their party voted against the amendment.

⁴ 1 January 2005.