

Government majority cut to 31 over ID cards

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The Government's majority was halved from 64 to 31 last night (13 February), as 20 Labour rebels defied the Government over a key aspect of its Identity Cards Bill. The Government won the crucial vote by 310 votes to 279, a majority of 31, more comfortably than had been expected.

The key vote saw the Government successfully overturn a Lords amendment that would have allowed people to decide whether or not to get an ID card when they renewed or applied for a passport after 2008. Some 308 Labour MPs backed the Government, along with one Conservative (Ann Widdecombe), the lone UUP MP (Lady Sylvia Hermon), Eddie McGrady of the SDLP and the Lib Dem Paul Keetch (who voted in both lobbies, either deliberately or by accident). The no lobby comprised 183 Conservatives, 60 Liberal Democrats (plus the double vote of Paul Keetch), six DUP (slightly under strength), five SNP, three Plaid Cymru, Richard Taylor, the KHHC MP for Wyre Forest, as well as George Galloway and Peter Law, both of whom voted against the Government on all five divisions last night.

The Government survived last night's votes not (as some civil liberties groups complained) because it 'bludgeoned' dissenters into submission but thanks to a number of key concessions that it made to the rebels. In the run-up to the votes, the Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, announced that ID cards would not be made compulsory until fresh legislation was brought forward before both Houses of Parliament. Then, during last night's debate, the Government accepted an amendment in the name of Frank Dobson which obliged the Government to report to the House of Commons every six months on the latest estimated cost of the ID cards scheme. These concessions meant that the Labour rebellions were confined to out and out objectors to the Bill. Of the 20 rebels on the key amendment last night, 18 had voted against the Bill on Second Reading. They were joined by Ian Gibson and David Taylor, who had abstained on Second Reading, but who voted against the Government on the key amendment last night, while Frank Cook, a rebel on Second Reading, voted for the Government last night. Meanwhile, David Winnick, the other Second Reading rebel, did not vote last night. Several previous opponents of aspects of the legislation – including Martin Caton, Michael Clapham, Neil Gerrard, and Andy Love – either abstained or did not vote last night, while Dennis Skinner voted for the Government.

13 February saw three further Labour rebellions, involving a total of just three MPs. Glenda Jackson and Robert Wareing were the only Labour backbenchers to support a related Lords amendment (Ann Widdecombe also supporting the Government for a second and final time). Later, Frank Field (the 21st Labour rebel of the evening) joined Glenda Jackson in supporting another Lords amendment that would have insisted that the Bill could not have come into force until MPs had approved a new report on the cost of ID cards. By the end of the night, Jackson found herself alone among Labour backbenchers when she supported one further Lords amendment, this time relating to the appointment of a National Identity Scheme Commissioner.

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Little did Glenda Jackson know it, but her vote at 10.30pm on the 13th February was the 400th Labour backbench rebellion against Tony Blair since he came to power in 1997.

The 20 Labour rebels on the key amendment:

Diane Abbott
Katy Clark
Jeremy Corbyn
Gwyneth Dunwoody
Mark Fisher
Paul Flynn
Dr Ian Gibson
Kate Hoey
Kelvin Hopkins
Glenda Jackson
Lynne Jones
Bob Marshall-Andrews
John McDonnell
Linda Riordan
Clare Short
Alan Simpson
John Smith
David Taylor
Robert Wareing
Mike Wood