

Hunting Away From the Pack: the vote on the Hunting Bill on 16 November 2004

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The outcome of the vote on the Hunting Bill on 16 November 2004 was no surprise: yet again MPs voted for a total ban on hunting with hounds. But a widespread sense of *ennui* at the result should not detract from the remarkable nature of the vote itself.

On a free vote, MPs rejected by 321 votes to 204 a compromise that hunting would be licensed for control of pests, where it could be shown that no other reasonable method would cause less suffering. Other than the fact that the vote probably marks, legal challenges to the Parliament Act notwithstanding, the beginning of the end of hunting in the UK, the vote was remarkable for three reasons.

The first was that it took place at all. Ever since the 1997 election, it has been clear that many at the top levels of government – especially the Prime Minister and his two Home Secretaries – do not want to see the introduction and implementation of a total ban. But ever since they voted in such overwhelming numbers for Michael Foster's Private Members' Bill in November 1997, Labour MPs have refused to allow their government to wriggle away from the issue. When he was Home Secretary Jack Straw attended a packed meeting of Labour's backbench committee on Home Affairs, at which nearly all of the 100 or so MPs in attendance made it clear that they wanted to see a ban - and as he left the meeting Straw was heard to say that he could see no point 'lying in front of a tank'. Every time that the Government have tried to offer a compromise, or a delay, or some other concession to the hunting lobby, their backbenchers have refused to concede the issue. For all the talk about executive dominance, and the weakness of Parliament, this is a policy which – when it is finally implemented – will be on the Statute Book because Labour MPs refused to let it go. Whatever one's views about the *policy*, and whether one thinks hunting should continue or not, that aspect of the *process* is striking.

The second point of interest is the splits the vote reveals within the Liberal Democrats. On a day in which the *Guardian* ran a story discussing the way the Liberal Democrats tend to split quite heavily on free votes, and questioning whether the party had the cohesion necessary to be taken seriously,¹ the Lib Dems split right down the middle: 22 voted for the compromise amendment, 22 against.² The Lib Dems that voted are listed in Table 2. Most of those to vote for the compromise represent rural seats; most of those to vote for the all-out ban represent urban seats.

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¹ Sarah Hall, 'Kennedy targets Labour in talk on tough liberalism', *Guardian*, 16 November 2004.

² The previous vote on the issue (Division 198, on 18 March 2002) had seen them split 17/26 against a licensing system.

1. Liberal Democrat voting on the hunting compromise

<i>For the compromise</i>	<i>Against the compromise</i>
Alan Beith	Richard Allan
Colin Breed	Norman Baker
Malcolm Bruce	John Barrett
Sue Doughty	Tom Brake
Andrew George	Annette Brooke
Matthew Green	Paul Burstow
Nick Harvey	Dr Vincent Cable
David Heath	Patsy Calton
Simon Hughes	Brian Cotter
Charles Kennedy	Edward Davey
Sir Archy Kirkwood	Don Foster
Norman Lamb	Sandra Gidley
David Laws	Mike Hancock
Michael Moore	Paul Holmes
Mark Oaten	Nigel Jones
Lembit Opik	Dr John Pugh
Alan Reid	David Rendel
Sir Robert Smith	Bob Russell
Matthew Taylor	Adrian Sanders
Paul Tyler	Andrew Stunell
Roger Williams	Sarah Teather
Richard Younger-Ross	Steve Webb

This is yet further evidence of the extent to which these sorts of issues cause deep divisions within the ranks of the Liberal Democrats, in a way in which they do not with the other parties.³ Some 143 Conservative MPs supported the amendment, with only three long-standing opponents of hunting – David Amess, Roger Gale and Ann Widdecombe – voting against it. That is, 2% of Conservatives voted in one lobby, 98% in the other. For Labour, the splits were 8% and 92%.

But the most remarkable feature of the vote was the third: that the Prime Minister was amongst that 8% Labour minority. The isolation of the Prime Minister was astonishing. Blair's support for a compromise amendment failed to swing his backbenchers into line. Just 25 Labour MPs supported his preferred option.

They are listed in Table 1 and include five members of the Cabinet – Beckett, Blair, Blunkett, Reid and Straw – plus the minister responsible, Alun Michael, along with two other ministers of state, Adam Ingram and Kim Howells, and the Advocate General for Scotland, Lynda Clark. They were joined by five whips, led by the Chief Whip, Hilary Armstrong (along with Ainsworth, McAvoy, Kemp and Watson) – although of these Kemp and Watson were merely acting as tellers to

³ For previous evidence, see P. Cowley and M. Stuart, 'Sodomy, Slaughter, Sunday Shopping and Seatbelts', *Party Politics*, 3 (1997); P. Cowley *et al*, 'Mr Blair's Loyal Opposition? The Liberal Democrats in Parliament', *British Elections and Parties Review*, 10 (2000); or P. Cowley and M. Stuart, 'Not much discipline? Divisions on the Children Bill', available from www.revolts.co.uk).

ensure that the business was expedited through the Commons. This leaves just 11 Labour backbenchers, mainly people who have publicly supported the licensing solution for some time (Sheerman, Dunwoody, Cook, Mitchell, Wright, Hoey, Field, Fisher, and Irranca-Davies). Only John Mann and Gisela Stuart are relatively new converts to the compromise option.⁴

1. Labour MPs to vote for the hunting compromise

Bob Ainsworth
Hilary Armstrong
Margaret Beckett
Tony Blair
David Blunkett
Dr Lynda Clark
Robin Cook
Gwyneth Dunwoody
Frank Field
Mark Fisher
Kate Hoey
Dr Kim Howells
Adam Ingram
Huw Irranca-Davies
Fraser Kemp*
Thomas McAvoy
John Mann
Alun Michael
Austin Mitchell
Dr John Reid
Barry Sheerman
Gisela Stuart
Jack Straw
Tom Watson*
Tony Wright (Cannock)

Note: * indicates a teller. In addition, David Taylor voted in both lobbies in order to cast a deliberate abstention, a tactic that he is now using frequently.

On the other side were six Cabinet ministers – Paul Boateng, Charles Clarke, Peter Hain, Alan Johnson, Ian McCartney and John Prescott – as part of the broad mass of 297 Labour MPs.⁵ The Prime Minister therefore voted along with just 8% of the Labour MPs to have voted. Facing him, were the remaining 92%.

Answers on a postcard: when was the last time a party leader of one of the major parties, let alone a Prime Minister, was so detached from the majority of his or her party? Certainly, we cannot think of an occasion in the post-war period when the PM has been so isolated.

⁴ At the equivalent vote last time (Division 198, on 18 March 2002) 14 Labour MPs (including tellers) supported licensing, though two of these, Tony McNulty and John Heppell, were whips, almost certainly acting as tellers, as Watson and Kemp were in November. They were: David Blunkett, Robin Cook, Gwyneth Dunwoody, Mark Fisher, Bruce George, Kate Hoey, Huw Irranca-Davies, Peter Mandelson, Barry Sheerman, Jack Straw, Gareth Thomas and Tony Wright (Cannock). Of these Bruce George and Gareth Thomas did not vote this time around, and Peter Mandelson has since left the Commons.

⁵ This figure includes tellers, but excludes David Taylor.