

Identity cards: The phoney war?

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The first serious backbench revolt of the 2005 Parliament looks as if it will come over the government's proposals for Identity Cards. This is already being seen as the first test of how the government will cope with its much reduced majority – and whether backbenchers will really have the nerve to face down the government.

Yet in many ways, the issue of ID cards is likely to be a very poor test of what life will be like in the third Blair term. The table below lists all the issues to see large Labour rebellions during the 2001-2005 Parliament. As is clear, the issue of ID cards – marked in bold – comes a very long way down the list. Of the 21 issues (broadly defined) to cause backbench rebellions during the 2001-2005 Parliament, 18 resulted in larger rebellions than did ID cards.

Large Labour rebellions during the 2001 Parliament

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Largest Labour rebellion</i>
Iraq	139
Top-up fees	72
Foundation hospitals	62
Prevention of Terrorism Bill	62
Smacking	49
Faith schools	46
Asylum and Immigration	43
Business of the House	40
Serious and Organised Crime Bill	34
Living Wills	34
Trial by Jury	33
Anti-Terrorism measures	32
Gambling	30
Railways Bill	28
Firefighters	27
Community Health Councils	26
Energy Efficiency Targets	26
Enterprise Bill	24
Identity Cards	19
Presumed Consent	19
Europe	15

In December 2004, eighteen Labour MPs supported a cross-party reasoned amendment in the name of Douglas Hogg that declined to give a Second Reading to the Identity Cards Bill because it would 'lead to an unreasonable intrusion into

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the liberties and privacy of the citizen', especially as 'the introduction of such cards is likely to lead to a requirement that they be carried at all times and such a requirement would be objectionable in principle and would lead to serious tension between the police and the citizen'. (David Taylor voted in both lobbies to cast a deliberate abstention). On Second Reading itself, the exact same eighteen Labour backbenchers again defied the Government, together with David Taylor this time only voting once, and four Labour MPs – Jeremy Corbyn, Mark Fisher (casting his first vote against the Bill), John McDonnell and Bob Marshall-Andrews – then voted against the Bill's programme motion.

In February 2005, five Labour MPs opposed the Bill's second programme motion, and five (mostly different) Labour MPs then backed a Lib Dem Report Stage amendment to break the link between applications for passports and ID cards. There was then a rebellion by 19 Labour MPs at the Bill's Third Reading. Although this was exactly the same size as the revolt at Second Reading, some of the MPs involved were different – with the result that a total of 26 Labour MPs voted against either the Second or Third Reading of the last ID card Bill.

We list these 26 MPs in the table in Appendix 1 of this paper. Six are no longer in the House of Commons (all as a result of retirements), and these are marked in italics in the table. This leaves 20 Labour MPs who voted against the measure last time and who are still on the backbenches. Even if all 20 of these MPs vote against the measure this time (and even if they all do so at the same time), and even if every opposition MP votes against, this will not be enough to defeat the government.

The same cannot be said of other issues likely to come up over the next few years. For example, out of the 77 Labour MPs who voted against any part of the last Prevention of Terrorism Bill, 56 remain at Westminster. Of the asylum rebels, 36 are still present. Issues like this are much more likely to be real tests – both of the rebels' willingness to defeat the government and, at the same time, of how the government is prepared to deal with its backbenchers.

Of course, previous Labour ID card rebels may be joined this time by other Labour MPs, either from the new intake (although this is unlikely to be more than a handful), or who did not rebel last time. In Appendix 2 we list all those Labour MPs remaining in the Commons who had indicated their opposition to ID cards in the last Parliament but who did not rebel in the votes in 2004 or 2005. Should some of these MPs join in any revolt, then the government's majority will come under more pressure. But unless there is a surge of new rebels from somewhere it is difficult to see the ID card revolt presenting too much of a threat to the government's majority. †

Those who read too much into any ID cards revolt, therefore, may well be learning the wrong lessons for the rest of the Parliament. ID cards are almost certainly just the phoney war; the real trouble will come afterwards.

† This is before factoring in Conservative abstentions (of which there may well be several), the absence of the Sinn Fein MPs, and so on, all of which will increase the government's 'effective' majority.

Appendix 1: Identity Cards Bill Rebels, 2004-2005

Name	Name of constituency	Div. 23 (Reasoned Amendment)	Div. 24 (Second Reading)	Div. 25 (Programme motion)	Div. 80 (2 nd Programme motion)	Div. 84 (Report stage LD amendment)	Div. 85 (Third Reading)
<i>Andrew Bennett</i>	Denton & Reddish	X	X	-	X	-	X
Michael Clapham	Barnsley West & Penistone	X	X	-	-	-	-
Jeremy Corbyn	Islington North	X	X	X	-	X	X
<i>Tam Dalyell</i>	Linlithgow	-	-	-	-	-	X
Gwyneth Dunwoody	Crewe & Nantwich	X	X	-	-	-	X
Mark Fisher	Stoke-on-Trent Central	-	-	X	X	-	X
Neil Gerrard	Walthamstow	X	X	-	-	X	X
Dr Ian Gibson	Norwich North	X	X	-	-	-	X
Kate Hoey	Vauxhall	X	X	-	-	-	X
Kelvin Hopkins	Luton North	X	X	-	-	-	-
Glenda Jackson	Hampstead & Highgate	X	X	-	-	-	X
Dr Lynne Jones	Birmingham, Selly Oak	-	-	-	X	X	X
<i>Terry Lewis</i>	Worsley	X	X	-	-	-	-
<i>Alice Mahon</i>	Halifax	X	X	-	-	-	-
Bob Marshall-Andrews	Medway	X	X	X	-	-	-
John McDonnell	Hayes & Harlington	X	X	X	-	X	X
Austin Mitchell	Great Grimsby	-	-	-	-	-	X
<i>Brian Sedgemore</i>	Hackney South & Shoreditch	-	-	-	-	-	X
Clare Short	Birmingham, Ladywood	X	X	-	X	X	X
Alan Simpson	Nottingham South	-	-	-	-	-	X
Dennis Skinner	Bolsover	X	X	-	-	-	-
<i>Llew Smith</i>	Blaenau Gwent	X	X	-	-	-	-
David Taylor	Leicestershire North West	A	X	-	-	-	X
Robert Wareing	Liverpool, West Derby	X	X	-	-	-	X
David Winnick	Walsall North	X	X	-	X	-	X
Mike Wood	Batley & Spen	-	-	-	-	-	X

Appendix 2: Other names to watch?

There are other Labour MPs who were known to be opposed to ID cards but who did not vote against the last ID card bill.

On 23 January 2002, Dr Nick Palmer, the Labour MP for Broxtowe, introduced a Ten-Minute Rule Bill that would have issued all UK residents with a smart ID card. On a free vote, Labour MPs split 55/44 in favour of the measure, with one, Kevin Brennan, casting a deliberate abstention by voting in both lobbies.

There have also been various Early Day Motions (EDMs) on the subject. An EDM put forward by the former Conservative Cabinet Minister Peter Lilley in the 2001-02 session (EDM 883), (albeit against compulsory cards rather than ID cards *per se*) was signed by 74 MPs, of whom 27 were Labour. Austin Mitchell's EDM 1396 from the 2003-4 session, which concluded by suggesting that 'the Home Secretary should place the proposal in a deep Home Office drawer, rather than an overloaded Government in-tray', was signed by a total of 30 MPs, 15 of them Labour. This was five more than had signed his similar EDM (EDM 1907) in the previous session. And 26 MPs – 13 of them Labour – signed Neil Gerrard's EDM 1780 which argued that 'a convincing case for the introduction of identity cards and a national database has not been made'.

This produced a figure of 59 opponents prior to the ID Card Bill being introduced into the last Parliament. Of these 59, 27 are still left in the Commons who did not vote against the last ID card bill. They are:

Diane Abbott	Jim Dobbin	Julie Morgan
Karen Buck	Bill Etherington	George Mudie
David Cairns	Paul Farrelly	Meg Munn
Ronnie Campbell	Eric Illsley	Mike O'Brien
Harry Cohen	Jim Knight	Albert Owen
David Crausby	Mark Lazarowicz	Geoffrey Robinson
Tony Cunningham	Fiona Mactaggart	Jonathan Shaw
Ian Davidson	Rob Marris	Mark Tami
Andrew Dismore	Ann McKechin	Rudi Vis

However, several of these are known to have changed their minds on the issue and/or are now in government. Six of the 27 are ministers or whips. Others may well be tied into the payroll vote as PPSs.