Managing the Poor Bloody Infantry: the PLP under John Smith, 1992-1994

Mark Stuart

University of Nottingham

Contact: markhstuart@hotmail.com

Tel: 07913 201975

Submitted to Parliamentary Affairs

8,115 words (excluding abstract & footnotes)
Abstract
Contrary to commonly held perceptions, the PLP minutes from 1992 to 1994 are far from anodyne, and offer a real insight into the issues that divided the PLP, and how the Labour leadership sought to deal with them. Also drawing interview evidence from key members of Smith’s office and frontbench team, the author reveals that the main focus for debate inside the PLP in the Smith period was over the passage of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill, more commonly known as the Maastricht Bill. Labour MPs vigorously debated the issues in the bill, and held formal votes on two key parts (a rare occurrence in the PLP’s history). Other issues hotly debated occurred over Bosnia, electoral reform and whether or not to increase the quota for the number of women in the Shadow Cabinet. The author concludes that the full meetings of the PLP proved a good safety valve during the 22 months of Smith’s leadership, but that the PLP is too unwieldy to assume a policy-making function.
In December 2003, permission was gained from the Labour Party to see the minutes from 1992 to 1994 as part of the author’s research for the authorised biography of John Smith, which was published by Politico’s in June 2005. The Museum of Labour History in Manchester houses all the PLP minutes from its establishment in 1906 up to 1992, except for a few missing years from the late 1930s. The author was the first to see the minutes relating to Neil Kinnock’s twilight period from April 1992 (after he indicated he would be standing down as leader), through the whole of John Smith’s leadership until his death in May 1994, and also Margaret Beckett’s interim spell as Acting Leader (May-July 1994). They end just after Tony Blair’s first speech to the PLP in October 1994. Normally, a ten-year rule applies, but Alan Haworth, Secretary of the PLP from 1992 to 2004, has ruled that nothing more will be released on Blair until he has ceased to be Prime Minister.¹

In the past, the quality and therefore the utility of the published PLP minutes as an historical source has been seen as extremely limited. They have followed a discernible pattern: a bare outline of what each frontbencher said, followed by a nondescript phrase such as ‘a discussion took place’, a list of contributors to the debate, and lastly, an equally anodyne phrase that the frontbencher ‘responded to points raised’. But whatever the previous failings of PLP minutes, those recorded by Alan Haworth from 1992 to 1994 are of a high order in terms of both quality and quantity. Haworth’s methodology was to scribble down a précis, and then type up the notes afterwards. He did not often use direct quotation marks, preferring the past tense, but his record is largely verbatim. Nevertheless, the meaning of what was said is not significantly impaired.
Over the period of two days (15 and 16 December 2003), the author noted down about two-fifths of the total content of the minutes, interspersed with comments and interviews with Haworth. A full record was subsequently transcribed. The author was researching a biography of John Smith, and the note taking reflected this in its emphasis, but there are also valuable insights into internal Labour divisions on issues such as electoral reform, Bosnia and especially the passage of the Maastricht European Communities (Amendment) Bill, or Maastricht Bill, then making its way slowly through Parliament.

Functions of the PLP

Before analysing the PLP in the Smith period, it is worth setting out the two basic functions of the PLP: top-down, allowing the leadership to convey its views to the backbenchers; and bottom-up, permitting the leadership to make known its views to the leadership.²

One of the main top-down leadership functions is conveying information about internal party matters. The most obvious form of information given out at PLP meetings concerns whipping arrangements for the parliamentary week. (This happens in both government and in opposition). At a basic level, it is useful for MPs to turn up to the PLP now and then so they know what is going on, what is coming up, and what the frontbench position is on particular issues. Other internal party matters include elections to the Shadow Cabinet. The PLP also elects the chair of PLP, and the chief whip, the deputy chief whip and the pairing whip (only in opposition).
The only internal party matter which Alan Haworth censored concerned the leadership hustings in 1992 and 1994. On Wednesday, 3 June 1992, the two surviving leadership contenders - Bryan Gould and John Smith - spoke in front of the whole PLP. A week later, the three remaining deputy leadership candidates – Gould, Margaret Beckett and John Prescott – held a hustings meeting in front of their fellow MPs. No detailed record remains of these meetings: the minutes merely record how long each speaker spoke for, and lists some of the names of the MPs who asked questions to the candidates. It is important to remember that this was the first occasion when leadership and deputy leadership candidates had addressed the PLP (something that would be repeated in 1994). Haworth felt that candidates should not be bound in any way in the future by what they had said in a private meeting of the PLP. The only alternative record of the meeting is to be found in Tony Benn’s diary. Apparently, Smith emphasised the importance of reforming the policy and organisation of the Party, stressed his long-held view that a strong economy going complemented and predicated a fair society, and defended his 1992 Shadow Budget, claiming that Labour had to be a party of redistribution.³ But as a result of the PLP minutes, we learn that backbenchers were unhappy about the lack of opportunity for nominees for the deputy leadership and leadership to address the PLP before the close of nominations. An attempt by Max Madden to hold pre-election hustings was overruled by the Chair, Stan Orme. On Wednesday, 6 July 1994, for only the second time in Labour’s history, the three remaining leadership contenders - Margaret Beckett, Tony Blair and John Prescott - took part in a leader’s hustings meeting of the PLP. Again, the record of the meeting is very limited.
Both in government and in opposition, the PLP can also be used by ministers or frontbenchers in order to put across the party’s message to the troops. One Labour MP recently described this as ‘the missionary work’. At a mundane level, ministers or shadow ministers regularly brief the PLP on their subject area. In John Smith’s period as leader, such briefings included Gordon Brown, the Shadow Chancellor’s talk on the autumn statement (November 1992) and David Blunkett, the Shadow Health Spokesperson’s talk on the National Health Service (January 1993). Attendance at these events seems to have varied according to the star quality of the speaker. For instance, in March 1993, Doug Hoyle thanked Tony Blair, the Shadow Home Secretary for his briefing and ‘apologised for the low attendance’. By contrast, the attendance for Gordon Brown’s talk on his *Rebuilding Britain – Budget for Action for Investment and Jobs* – was much better.

From a backbench perspective (‘bottom-up’), the PLP is often very good at conveying a general mood amongst Labour MPs. Busy ministers or frontbenchers lack the time to gauge which issues most concern backbenchers, but they can gain a pretty good idea from the PLP what is bothering MPs. In that sense, this function could also be seen as top-down – as a useful means for ministers to ‘take the temperature’ of the backbenches. But it’s primarily an important bottom-up function, and can be especially effective when the individual minister or frontbencher is given a rough ride at a meeting of the PLP.

In John Smith’s period, this happened to Jack Cunningham, Labour’s Shadow Foreign Secretary, over Labour’s failure to support military intervention in Bosnia (see below). As Home Secretary, Jack Straw famously attended a PLP meeting on hunting,
at which the overwhelming view was that backbenchers wanted legislation in the Queen’s Speech to ban hunting with dogs. Afterwards, Straw commented that there was ‘no point in lying in front of a tank’. But the power described here is exercised in a collective form, rather than in an individual form. As one thoughtful MP has remarked, the PLP is ‘quite a good forum for ganging up on ministers’ but ‘an individual MP isn’t going to get far’.

Theoretically, PLP meetings allow backbenchers to hold the leadership to account in private. In his book, *Revolts and Rebellions* (2002), Philip Cowley terms this aspect of PLP activity as ‘Washing Dirty Laundry in Private’. The hope, from the leadership’s point of view, is that by allowing a forthright discussion in private, MPs will be sufficiently sated not to cast a public rebellion in Parliament. In practice, of course, it doesn’t always work that way.

*Problems with the PLP*

The PLP is supposed to be a private discussion on topics of contemporaneous policy, but it has always leaked. Basically, as one Labour backbencher commented, the PLP ‘leaks like a sieve … you read about it in *The Guardian* the next day.’ Another major criticism of the PLP as a forum for discussion is that it tends to attract those MPs either most willing to attack the leadership, or those willing to support the frontbench line uncritically. Consequently, backbenchers can predict with some accuracy who is going to turn up and almost exactly what they are going to say. Either the floor is taken up with the persistent mouthy critic of the leadership, or the fawning loyalist. In the present Parliament, many Labour MPs have complained about the number of loyalists attending the PLP. One called the meetings ‘a bid for promotion … too many
cheerleaders for the Government … a beauty contest’. The most damning comment of all came from the backbencher who claimed PLP meetings were ‘full of prima donnas … sycophantic people who stick their noses up ministers’ backsides’. But this downside of the PLP is a perennial one, and was just as true when Labour were in opposition as it is the case under Tony Blair in government. For instance, in May 1992, George Foulkes commented: ‘It’s the usual suspects who get up and speak on these occasions.’

Generally, the PLP is at its best when having a forthright general discussion on a contentious issue, but it is too unwieldy to function effectively as a decision-making forum. Attending his first ever PLP meeting, one MP from the 2001 intake described it as ‘one of the most disappointing events of my political life … so many people were standing up and making dull, disconnected points.’ One Labour backbencher recently commented, ‘You don’t get policy change.’

For several reasons, it’s also harder to keep backbenchers contented in government than is the case in opposition. During the Foot, Kinnock and Smith leaderships, many Labour backbenchers, for instance Dennis Skinner, Terry Lewis and the late Bob Cryer, loved nothing better than taking the fight to the other side, keeping the Tory Government up all night. Indeed, some would say they were more content being in opposition than being government backbenchers.

Carrying on backbench involvement in government is much harder. The civil service machinery gets in the way and time pressures crowd in on ministers meaning that they can become detached from their backbenchers. One MP recently compared the PLP to
a machine, saying, ‘You need to keep it well oiled, or it will seize up.’ Or as one senior backbencher put it, it becomes vital to reassure the PLP that they are not just ‘the poor bloody infantry’. At any rate, every previous Labour Government, including the present one, has failed to involve backbenchers properly in policy formulation.

**Formal Votes under Smith**

It is exceptionally rare for the PLP to vote on motions to determine party policy. In Opposition, the Shadow Cabinet normally agrees the whip on legislation after merely consulting the PLP, as one Labour MP found out the hard way when he arrived in Parliament in 1987. The new MP had grown used to group decision-making as the leader of his local council’s ruling Labour group. At his first meeting of the PLP, he had listened attentively to the debate: the leadership view, followed by a good contribution from Tony Benn. Afterwards, the Chair, Stan Orme, said something along the lines of: ‘That’s it, discussion over.’ Naively, the new MP put up his hand and asked: ‘When do we vote?’ Neil Kinnock replied, ‘Boyo, we don’t vote in the PLP.’ However, during Smith’s leadership, within the space of one month in 1993 two important issues relating to Labour’s stance on the Maastricht Bill were fully debated in the PLP, and subject to a democratic vote.

On 17 February 1993, the PLP debated the pros and cons of the European Central Bank (ECB). Roger Berry moved that: ‘The PLP, in line with party policy, opposes the establishment of an independent European Central Bank.’ The leadership moved a much longer amendment which argued that Maastricht ‘while not perfect is the best agreement that can currently be achieved.’ Roger Berry concluded: ‘The Maastricht
proposals are clearly undemocratic, and are deliberately deflationary. Labour should oppose, and oppose vigorously, an Independent Central Bank.’

Moving the amendment, Smith stressed that the move to European Monetary Union (EMU) would be ‘considerably delayed’. While he admitted that the Central Bank was ‘deeply embedded’ in the Treaty, he pointed to other articles that committed the Bank to achieving non-inflationary growth and high levels of employment. The effect of the rebel motion would be to wreck the Treaty: ‘Perhaps that is their motive.’ Speaking candidly, Smith admitted that he would have preferred that the French and British Socialist model of a more democratically accountable ECB had prevailed at Maastricht. However, the unavoidable reality of the European Community was that there had to be compromises, and ‘it is completely hopeless to suggest that we can always get all our points in full’. In conclusion, he held out the possibility of a new Labour Government in 1996, arguing its vision for EMU at an Inter-Governmental Conference: ‘By then we will have hardly got to the point some colleagues fear. It is sometimes a mistake to treat all these things as if they are in concrete forever.’

Peter Shore felt that the issue was about the ‘the future of our country’ because control over monetary policy was being handed over to the ECB. He rubbished Smith’s earlier arguments, claiming that the Franco-British position wasn’t ‘worth a damn, if it ever existed’. He concluded: ‘The Frontbench hasn’t got the guts to stand up for Britain, and if this amendment is carried today it will go down as a day of infamy in the history of the Labour Party’. Bryan Gould argued that whenever the bankers had prevailed they had always brought recession and unemployment. The
Treaty was ‘an outstandingly audacious statement of the bankers’ ambition to achieve power’.

Replying to the debate, John Smith said that Bryan Gould’s remark that Europe should be forced to start again surely encapsulated an idea which could not be supported; every single sister Socialist and Social Democratic Party in Europe would be opposed to this line. The Leadership amendment was carried by 112 votes to 46.

Labour Party unity continued to be difficult to maintain as once again, the PLP voted on a key aspect of the Maastricht Bill, this time on the EC’s plan to limit the amount that Member States could run up budget deficits to 3% of GDP. On Wednesday, 10 March 1993, Denzil Davies moved a motion rejecting the relevant clause in the Treaty, and calling on the Labour leadership to press its probing amendment 119 to a vote during the Committee stage of the bill.

The Labour leadership attached a very long amendment to the rebel amendment. John Smith re-emphasised the ‘not perfect but best available’ mantra. He also emphasised that running excessive budget deficits was not a good thing. Moreover, he pointed out:

The view that we can still operate economic self-government has had its day. It is out of date and is not apt for the vicissitudes of the times. We must co-operate with others; and co-operation involved compromises. That is the nature of a multi-national, multi-party European Community. It is in the Council of Ministers that we will have to make our economic alliances.
An extensive discussion then took place, during which Giles Radice made the case for a single currency. David Winnick, on the other hand, argued that a future Labour Government would be ‘imprisoned’ by the deficit restrictions. Predictably, Austin Mitchell claimed: ‘The Treaty is a Charter for Central Bank rule, on a monetarist basis … how much more will we swallow?’ Replying to the debate, Smith claimed that the Treaty did not have the imprisoning features that were being alleged. The leadership amendment was then carried by 94 votes for to 35 against. The great debate over budget deficits really matters in terms of the history of New Labour because, as a result of the PLP splits, Gordon Brown saw the need to develop his so-called five economic tests before a future Labour Government would contemplate joining the Euro.

The very fact that Smith allowed these votes to take place demonstrates that he paid proper attention to the concerns of the PLP. David Ward, Smith’s main policy adviser, recalls Peter Hain, one of the leading rebels on Maastricht, saying after one of these meetings: ‘We’ve lost, but at least we’ve been listened to.’ But the rebels were not content to leave the issue within the confines of the PLP; Tory backbench amendments opposing the establishment of the ECB attracted sizeable Labour rebellions in the division lobbies, when the Labour frontbench abstained (Commons Debates, 19.4.93).

The same pattern of vigorous debate in the full PLP followed by large Labour rebellions in the House of Commons against the frontbench line of abstention continued over the Third Reading of the Maastricht Bill. During the private debate in
the full PLP, the Labour Euro-sceptics expressed their deep and profound opposition to the leadership’s line. Dennis Skinner’s reaction to the Shadow Cabinet’s decision was ‘in John McEnroe’s words, you cannot be serious’. Peter Shore claimed: ‘This is the largest single issue in our lifetime, yet we can’t muster a view.’ Nigel Spearing felt that the Maastricht Treaty was ‘against what the Party was founded to do – to battle against bankers’ forces.’ On the other side of the debate, Giles Radice argued that Labour Party policy was in favour of Maastricht, that the abstention on Second Reading had been due to the omission of the Social Chapter, and that having gained a victory on that subject, there was now a strong case for a yes vote on Third Reading.

On this occasion, no formal motion was voted upon, but despite appeals for unity, some 68 Labour MPs subsequently voted against Third Reading on 20 May 1993, joining 41 Conservatives in the no lobby, while five Labour MPs supported the Conservatives. In the aftermath of the vote, John Smith sacked Kate Hoey, then the party’s junior spokesperson on the Citizen’s Charter and Women for defying the Labour whip.

Maastricht: Tactics & Tensions

The Maastricht Bill posed a serious dilemma for Smith: how did a principled, long-standing pro-European secure the passage of a treaty he largely supported, while at the same time trying to maximise internal Tory divisions? Those in charge of Labour’s tactics never had any intention of endangering the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. Day-to-day tactics on the Maastricht Bill were left to George Robertson, Labour’s European Affairs Spokesperson since 1985: ‘John trusted me to
harry the Government but not to lose the Treaty, and I reported to him regularly, and to the Shadow Cabinet, while Jack Cunningham took care of the big things.’

The Labour Whips’ Office colluded with the Conservative Maastricht rebels to maximise the chances of defeating the Government. It was ‘a constant source of amazement’ to George Robertson that 26 Conservative MPs, including Iain Duncan Smith, were prepared to vote against their own Government: ‘It was not a normal, casual rebellion. They were there and available. We had a formal arrangement. If I could contrive a situation to defeat the Government, they would co-operate.’ Long after the event, John Major told Derek Foster, Labour’s Chief Whip that he ‘never understood how they [the Tory Maastricht rebels] could be prepared to do that.’

In late October 1992, Derek Foster was aware that his side was just as divided as the Tories. He called on Smith to say that ideally, he would like Labour to vote against the paving motion. The Chief Whip was therefore ‘euphoric’ when Smith agreed: ‘It solved all of my problems [in party management terms], and put Major, who then had a majority of only 22, and more than that number of Maastricht rebels, on the spot.’ Foster argues that Neil Kinnock would not have been able to take the decision to oppose the Treaty because he had started out as anti-European and changed his position, but because Smith had been consistently pro-European, no one was going to seriously doubt his continuing pro-European credentials. This reasoning is doubtful: Kinnock could and probably would have done the same as Smith.

The PLP debated the decision to oppose the paving motion on Thursday, 29 October. Even though the exact wording of the Government’s motion was not then known,
Smith told his colleagues that they would be voting against it, and in terms of any amendment would seek to make support for the Government as difficult as possible in relation to its own rebels, whilst ensuring that all Labour MPs entered the same lobby.

Labour therefore put down an amendment to the paving motion on 4 November 1992. The Government won the first division by six votes, largely due to the votes of the Liberal Democrats, but 26 Conservative MPs voted for Labour’s amendment in the opposing lobby. Then, the Government squeaked home by only three votes on its main paving motion. Perhaps it was opportunism on Smith’s part, but it was a classic example of what Oppositions are supposed to do in the British parliamentary system, namely oppose. The fact that the Opposition had come so close to defeating the Government undoubtedly lifted the spirits of the PLP, and gave backbenchers a renewed sense of purpose. Moreover, the decision to oppose the paving motion was, as Derek Foster puts it, ‘merely the opening salvo in what proved to be ten months of acute embarrassment to the Tories’. The Opposition’s aim, he claims was ‘to prolong the Government’s agony for as long as possible’.

All sorts of parliamentary devices were deployed to this end, including preventing the Government from moving its Business Motion at 10 o’clock, which would have allowed it to carry on debating the bill until the small hours of the morning. These tactics, whilst effective, were also at the same time unsociable and inane. On one occasion, Diane Abbott complained to the leadership at a meeting of the PLP: ‘Is it not becoming a charade, and if so why should she be staying here until late hours, when she could be putting her baby to bed?’
Repeatedly, the Chief Whip had to reassure Labour MPs that they were not being kept there unnecessarily, and to praise them for their continued co-operation. On one occasion, Foster told a gathering of the PLP that it would be ‘grossly incompetent of the Party to forfeit the possibility of a victory over the Government … because of “little local difficulties”’, in this case the prospect of a rail strike (and the resultant problems in Labour MPs being able to return to their constituencies on a Friday). However, Foster recalls: ‘Had we not done this, the Tories would have been able to complete more quickly far more clauses in the Bill.’ And as always, Dennis Skinner strongly supported this kind of combative approach: ‘We keep the Government enfeebled if we turn up in such strength at 10 o’clock that they do not move the motion. Even without a vote we have defeated the Government.’

The other main procedural tactic during the Bill’s Committee stage was for the Opposition to put down ‘probing amendments’, raising an issue for debate, but then not pressing it to a vote. On 26 November 1992, five days before the beginning of the Committee stage, Robertson explained the leadership’s reasoning for the probing amendments to a meeting of the PLP:

We are not out to wreck the Maastricht Treaty. We will call our votes in pursuit of our objectives, not Liberal objectives or right-wing nationalist objectives. Nor are we attempting any filibuster; this bill needs to be carefully considered in its entirety, and over a lengthy period.

Many of the Labour Euro-sceptics were unhappy with these tactics. Dennis Skinner wanted to filibuster continuously, seeing the dangers of Labour being seen to wound
but not to strike. However, on the pro-European side, Giles Radice saw it as ‘entirely legitimate’ to put down amendments and to debate them, but not necessary vote on them. It was not the Party’s policy to wreck the Bill, nor to time waste: ‘That would be to abandon our pro-European position.’ Replying to the debate, Robertson emphasised the need to stand united, while leaving the Tories in disarray.

While most of this account of Maastricht deals with Labour’s parliamentary tactics on the bill, it is important to point out that these tactics were not central to what Labour was doing in terms of policy development on Europe. Labour remained a pro-European party with strong links with European leaders. Smith especially, enjoyed a good working relationship with many of the Socialist leaders. The parliamentary aim, however, was to embarrass the Tories, not to bring down the Treaty.

But as time moved on, the Labour frontbench’s tactics provoked growing complaints from ardent pro-Europeans who became frustrated that the leadership was unnecessarily dragging out the ratification process. After the Edinburgh Summit, some 90 Labour MPs, excluding members of the Shadow Cabinet, but including Neil Kinnock and Gerald Kaufman, signed a motion in the name of Peter Mandelson backing the Treaty as the ‘best available’, and supporting the rapid completion of the ratification process. At a meeting of the PLP on 20 January 1993, Giles Radice warned that the Party was ‘in danger of letting tactics determine strategy’. He added: ‘We should not support time wasting by Tory rebels.’ According to George Robertson, these pro-European MPs were ‘constantly in need of reassurance’ that the Labour frontbench did not intend to wreck the Treaty. Ultimately, he claims, the pro-Europeans trusted Smith because of his consistent pro-European credentials.
According to Derek Foster, the whole exercise of harrying the Government became ‘a great unifying factor’ in the PLP. Not everyone agreed. On 21 April 1993, Bryan Gould condemned ‘a Parliament in which the Labour Party Opposition frontbench spokesmen have tacitly agreed to ease the passage of the Bill.’ A few weeks later, Peter Shore attacked George Robertson for not opposing a Treaty that ‘handed over great chunks of British power to decision making in the European institutions’, adding: ‘If my hon. Friend [Robertson] cannot understand that, he is not fit to speak for my party.’

But it wasn’t just Maastricht that divided the PLP during John Smith’s 22 months as Labour leader. The leadership faced serious splits over several other policy issues, particularly electoral reform, whether to support military intervention in the former Yugoslavia, and internally, whether or not to increase the quota for the number of women in the Shadow Cabinet from three to four.

**Electoral Reform**

Smith’s views on constitutional reform were mildly radical, including incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights into British law, devolution for Scotland and Wales, House of Lords reform, a freedom of information bill and regional government. Indeed, he elaborated on these themes in a speech to Charter 88 on 1 March 1993, in which he attacked the ‘relentless centralisation of power’ under the Conservatives that had rendered Westminster ‘dictatorial and remote’ (*Tribune*, 5 March 1993). However, Smith was far more conservative on the issue of electoral reform, where he awaited the outcome of a working party, which had been established
under the leadership of Neil Kinnock in December 1990, under the chairmanship of Raymond Plant, Professor of Politics at Southampton University.\textsuperscript{6}

In March 1993, as with many other controversial issues, the PLP debated electoral reform and the findings of the Plant Report thoroughly. Proponents of electoral reform, including Dr Tony Wright, the Birmingham academic-turned Labour MP, argued that ‘to retreat now from the point we have reached – that First-Past-The-Post is no longer good enough – would be an act of electoral suicide’. On the other side of the debate, Derek Fatchett, Chairman of the First-Past-The-Post group of Labour MPs warned of ‘coalition by stealth’. Gerald Kaufman argued that the Party was ‘spending too much time on irrelevancies such as this.’ Moreover, ‘Who is going to volunteer to be replaced in a Labour Cabinet to make way for coalition partners?’ Meanwhile, John Spellar and Bruce Grocott appeared to compete to see who could condemn PR in the bluntest fashion, the former arguing that ‘it is not our job to prop up the Liberals’, while the latter left no doubt as to his views: ‘Let us kill the debate stone dead.’

Any subsequent confusion or lack of clarity over Smith’s position on electoral reform arose from the fact that he simultaneously supported a referendum on PR while remaining personally opposed to it. Smith did not want to rule out electoral reform altogether because powerful figures in his party, particularly Robin Cook, supported it enthusiastically. Nor did he want to alienate Liberal Democrat voters. So his solution was to support the idea of a referendum, and Margaret Beckett seems to have played a key role in persuading John to agree to this policy. The referendum pledge was at best a fudge, but it needed to be, given the extent of the splits in the PLP over the issue.\textsuperscript{7}
The Former Yugoslavia

The other main issue vexing the PLP under John Smith’s leadership was the rapid disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. Jack Cunningham broadly supported the Government’s policy of non-intervention in the former Yugoslavia. Cunningham’s predecessor, Gerald Kaufman had harried the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd pretty furiously over what he saw as Hurd’s caving-in to Germany’s demand for the recognition of Croatia and Slovenia in return for British opt-outs on the single currency and the Social Chapter at Maastricht. Kaufman argued that endorsing Croat and Slovene independence gave the green light to the Bosnian Serbs to declare independence, provoking a three-sided civil war with the Bosnian Muslims and the Bosnian Croats (Commons Debates, 2.6.92)

A relatively small but highly vocal section of the PLP had called for an immediate halt to the ethnic cleansing, and strongly supported sanctions against Serbia. On 16 November 1992, sixteen Labour MPs, including Kate Hoey and Clare Short had voted in favour of a Liberal Democrat Opposition Day motion that supported these sentiments. Two days later, Max Madden, one of the sixteen rebels, moved a motion calling on the PLP to express its total opposition to the threatened partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and urging the Opposition frontbench to bring forward an Opposition Day motion in the Commons to debate the merits of military deployment to protect humanitarian convoys. Jack Cunningham replied that while he supported the broad sentiments in Madden’s motion, troops could only be sent as part of a United Nations-authorised intervention.
During the Spring of 1993, Bosnia experienced one of its periodic moments of high tension with the Serb shelling of Screbinica, one of the so-called UN ‘safe areas’. On 17 April 1993, 18 Labour backbenchers wrote an open letter to *The Guardian* denouncing the Government’s policy as appeasement and supporting the possible active engagement of ground troops against the Serbs to halt the shelling of Srebrenica. A decade later, in March 2003, after resigning as Minister of State at the Home Office over the issue of Iraq, John Denham delivered his resignation speech, during which he reminded the House that he was not a pacifist and had supported armed intervention in Bosnia:

> I shall never forget the surprised and bemused expression on John Smith’s face when some twenty newly elected Labour Members of Parliament went to see him to demand Labour support for a foreign war. I believe that we should have supported it, and that, had we done so, Balkan history might be different (Commons Debates, 18.3.2003).

Was Smith at all swayed by the strength of feeling on his backbenches? On the weekend of 17-18 April he issued a statement calling for the UN to issue an ultimatum to Serbia, that unless a ceasefire was made effective, the UN would authorise air strikes against Serbian lines of communication in Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, on 19 April, Jack Cunningham appeared to contradict that view, largely agreeing with Douglas Hurd that air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs might damage the UN’s humanitarian effort (Commons Debates, 19.4.93).
On Wednesday, 21 April 1993, a planned PLP discussion on the Plant Report into Electoral Reform was shelved to allow a full debate on the situation in Bosnia. Several newly elected Labour backbenchers supported military action, and others argued that military intervention was necessary to prevent the conflict from spreading. Bernie Grant went even further: ‘The Moslems will be annihilated if we wait for sanctions to work.’ However, there were plenty of people on the Left opposed to military action, including Alice Mahon, who was worried about ‘being sucked into a whole scale war in the Balkans’, while Robert Wareing, Chairman of the All-Party British-Yugoslavia Parliamentary Group, took a passionately pro-Serb view, claiming that ethnic cleansing was also being carried out by the Croats, and that ‘Military intervention will make a Balkan war more, not less likely.’ Replying to the debate, Cunningham argued sensibly that there was no way that existing UN troops could be turned into fighting troops. Moreover, he rightly argued that ‘as things stand, there is no international support for massive ground forces intervening in Bosnia’. President Bill Clinton, especially would not agree to that. Cunningham reluctantly supported air strikes if the authority of the UN was further flouted, although he continued to share Douglas Hurd’s view that it would be wrong to lift the UN arms embargo, describing Margaret Thatcher’s suggestion (and her rare point of concurrence with Bernie Grant) of arming the Bosnian Muslims as ‘absurd’.

In the subsequent Shadow Cabinet elections of October 1993, Cunningham achieved the lowest vote of any successful candidate. But Smith and Cunningham went back 22 years, having entered the House of Commons at the same time, and few were surprised when Smith retained Cunningham as his Shadow Foreign Secretary. After Smith’s death, Cunningham’s successor, Robin Cook, proved far more incisive in
attacking Douglas Hurd on the ineffectiveness of the UN safe areas (Commons Debates, 7.12.94).

*A skirt too far*

Regrettably, the prevailing culture inside the PLP during John Smith’s period as Labour leader was very misogynistic. But that sorry state of affairs had very little to do with Smith. In fact, in October 1993, Smith showed his progressive credentials by increasing from three to four the number of women MPs who had to be elected onto the Shadow Cabinet, as a result of a PLP review committee report in June of that year.

Unlike the previous reforms that had introduced the three-women minimum requirement, Smith did not increase the number of seats in the Shadow Cabinet to compensate. However, the reform was introduced with a huge struggle: as some unreformed male MPs said at the time, this was ‘a skirt too far’.

On Wednesday, 16 June 1993, the PLP met to discuss the Review Committee’s reforms, and separate votes were taken on a range of subjects, including that the posts of chief whip, deputy chief whip and the pairing whip be elected by the PLP. All these individual votes were passed in the affirmative. However, after each change to the PLP Standing Orders had been voted upon and agreed at two consecutive meetings of the PLP, Doug Hoyle, the Chair of the PLP put the whole package to a final ‘Third Reading’ vote, something he didn’t have to do, and which he must have regretted, because elements of the PLP led by John Spellar voted down the proposals by 50 votes to 43. Immediately after the vote, Don Dixon, the Deputy Chief Whip suggested that the Review Committee be disbanded forthwith, but Doug Hoyle overruled him, and indicated that the Review Committee would ‘reconsider its position’.
John Smith showed his commitment to the policy on increasing the numbers of women by reintroducing the measure. Sixty-seven Labour MPs wrote to Hoyle and the Leader calling for a fresh opportunity for the PLP to vote on the Review Committee’s proposals section by section. But when Jean Corston put down a motion to that effect at the meeting of the PLP on Wednesday, 7 July 1993, a heated exchange of views ensued. Gwyneth Dunwoody called on the Chair to reconsider the idea of holding another series of votes ‘as it will have dire consequences for years to come’, while Gerald Kaufman was even more adamant, claiming that the debate was about the ‘good order of the PLP … If something goes against what they would have preferred, then that is too bad – but they should not be able to re-open issues.’ Derek Fatchett’s amendment to Corston’s motion, calling for a vote on the whole PLP Review was lost by a single vote, 50 votes for, and 51 against, and then Corston’s motion was carried decisively by 71 votes to 34.

The specific matter of increasing the number of women members elected to the Shadow Cabinet was then vigorously debated at a meeting of the PLP two weeks later. Terry Rooney attempted to move an alternative motion, which was not accepted by the Chair, and Stan Orme, Hoyle’s predecessor also voiced his opposition to the arrangements being brought back in this way. John Gilbert felt that quotas were ‘obnoxious in principle’. Gerald Kaufman also expressed:

… deep concern that we have spent so much time debating the composition of the Shadow Cabinet. We have become obsessed with the technicalities of how to
become a better Opposition. We are liable to become the most politically correct Opposition there had ever been.

However, Maria Fyfe forcefully challenged these arguments:

If there had not been such misogyny in the PLP the changes which have been instituted would never have been necessary. If colleagues cannot find four women to support, then they are misogynists.

Mark Fisher also felt that the PLP needed to think about how the vote would be considered outside Westminster, where Labour was seen as ‘a very male-orientated party’. The relevant section was then carried by 98 votes to 58.

However, when it came to the Shadow Cabinet elections that autumn, unreformed sections of the PLP, sometimes referred to as the ‘Jurassic Park’ tendency, irked at this change, dumped their votes on women candidates who stood no chance of winning, while others actively supported people like Joan Lestor, Mo Mowlam and Ann Taylor who opposed positive discrimination. When the Shadow Cabinet results were announced, Lestor, Mowlam and Taylor performed well, while supporters of positive discrimination like Ann Clwyd and Harriet Harman were voted off, but Smith defied the PLP by retaining Harman. Smith feared that Harman’s misfortune might establish a damaging trend in which the PLP would start picking off people they disliked one by one.

*From Parliamentary Battles to National Campaigning*
John Smith carried on the concept of taking the parliamentary fight to the Tories over Maastricht in the first session (1992-93) by agreeing to a five-month period of non-cooperation in the second session (1993-94). In December 1993, the Government had announced that all the stages of the Statutory Sick Pay Bill (which transferred the responsibility for sick pay to employers) and the Social Security (Contributions) Bill (implementing a one per cent increase in national insurance) would be guillotined all in one day the following week. According to Derek Foster, John Smith was ‘incandescent with rage’ at the lack of consultation and parliamentary scrutiny. When Foster suggested that the Opposition should withdraw from the normal behind-the-scenes channels of communication between the two frontbenches, Smith gave the go-ahead, and issued a press release to that effect. It is not clear whether Smith was genuinely angry about the Government’s attempt to restrict debate on these two measures, or whether he saw clear political advantage in highlighting the Tory tax rises, especially in the run-up to a crucial year of local and European elections, and invented these spurious reasons. At any rate, the effect was that the Opposition broke off nearly all links with the Government. Henceforth, there would be no pairing for any purpose, and ‘every possible parliamentary advantage would be exploited to disrupt the Government’s legislative programme’ until further notice.

Night after night, Labour backbenchers kept two to three hundred Tories out of their beds. It didn’t take much organising: MPs like Dennis Skinner and Bob Cryer loved such exercises. They acted as tellers, as the Opposition divided the House on nearly everything, even non-contentious legislation. On Thursday, 13 January 1994, the Chief Whip announced to the PLP that non-cooperation was being extended to pairing on Select Committees, and then thanked colleagues for their support, making it clear
that there would be no attempts to keep colleagues at Westminster unnecessarily. The aim was to ‘harass and detain the Tories’.

In retrospect, Derek Foster claims that not only were Labour Left-wingers kept busy (and therefore not stirring up internal trouble), it also made the Opposition look effective to the Party membership outside Parliament. Not everyone in the PLP agreed with the strategy, however. Certain figures in the Party became unhappy about the way that the Labour leadership had gone into the dispute without a clear objective, or a means of extricating itself from it. In January 1994, Ken Purchase asked what the exit strategy was, and what was ‘the ulterior motive in the present campaign’. The Chief Whip replied that the aim was to stop the Government ‘riding roughshod over the House of Commons’, and said he would keep the campaign going ‘until they [the Government] came to us to seek a reasonable way of conducting the business of the House’.

The ultimate problem with non-co-operation was having started it, how did you call it off? Derek Foster and his Deputy, Don Dixon had great difficulty persuading a reluctant John Smith to wind the exercise down. It took several weeks to convince Smith. In late April 1994, Foster and Dixon eventually came up with a cosmetic package of measures in John Smith’s name that he could present before the PLP along the lines of ‘but for our period of non-co-operation, such-and-such wouldn’t have happened’. On Thursday, 28 April, the Chief Whip announced to the PLP that a number of concessions had been obtained from the Government, and that the ‘usual channels’ had been re-opened. 10
Derek Foster recalls his two years serving under Smith as ‘the most efficient whipping system in my hands in the ten years that I was Chief Whip. It was probably the Opposition at its best’. To those who claim that Smith did nothing in his first year, he had successfully harried the Government over Maastricht to such an extent that their authority to govern had been sapped. Morale in the PLP had been restored, Labour backbenchers had got behind their leader, and the Opposition had demonstrated its fighting qualities.

Yet, despite all these successes on the parliamentary front, the modernisers felt that Smith was adopting too low a public profile and failing to modernise the Party sufficiently to secure guaranteed victory at a general election. This was not entirely true. One has to remember that Smith’s first two years as leader had been at the beginning of a Parliament. Had he lived, the second half would inevitably have turned to campaigning in the country at large.

The PLP minutes reveal that Margaret Beckett had been put in charge of the NEC’s new Campaigns and Elections Committee. Initially, it had two chief tasks: rebuilding the Party and restoring morale, and shaping the nature of the debate in the country. From 1992 until 1994, the Party undertook a large number of high-profile campaigns, including Robin Cook’s Pit Closures campaign in 1992, the Target 96 Group, Gordon Brown’s ‘Budget for Jobs’ and Industry campaigns. By 1994, the focus had shifted to the campaigns for the 1994 County Council Elections and European Parliamentary Elections.
Contrary to the myths of the modernisers, by the end of 1993, John Smith had turned his thoughts fully to the Labour Party’s campaign strategy. At a meeting of the PLP, he indicated that the Party had to be ready to take every opportunity to get its message across in 1994, which would be ‘a pivotal year’. The Tories, he believed were at their lowest ebb for twelve years. The public no longer believed that the Government could be trusted on tax or running the economy. Smith announced that there would be ‘a major campaigning effort in 1994 to bring home even more vividly these points – building up to the April tax increases’. The Shadow Cabinet had identified a number of ‘clear themes which must be repeated and repeated again with ruthless determination and self-discipline’. Smith urged his colleagues to return to Parliament after the Christmas recess prepared for an intensive period of campaigning. No Labour MP should be a mere spectator. The vital organisational changes to the Party (including the introduction of One Member, One Vote) were ‘designed to increase the effectiveness of members as a fighting force’. Tragically, Smith’s untimely death on Thursday, 12 May 1994 meant that he would never live to witness its effectiveness.

_A New Broom, 1994-97_

Tony Blair’s election as Labour leader in July 1994 ushered in a new broom. In what amounted almost to a swipe at John Smith’s leadership, Blair said in his very first speech to the PLP, ‘What was important was not the little battles in Parliament, or within the Parliamentary Party, but the great battle outside.’ In a way, the PLP had heard a similar message two years before from Neil Kinnock as before he formally stood down as leader: ‘We must concentrate next on winning more for the Party, than winning in the Party.’ Both Blair and Kinnock were more concerned about the wider electorate than the parliamentary battles inside Parliament. With this in mind, Blair
stressed the fact that ‘messages needed to be hammered home on every occasion, and every day’. In Parliament, the Party needed a better co-ordinated, more focussed attack: from 1994 onwards, frontbench teams would involved backbenchers from the Departmental Committees and Opposition days would be used to generate ‘a significant news story on each occasion’. Sadly, no more minutes have been released for the author to take the story much further. We will all have to wait patiently until Blair steps down as Prime Minister.

Conclusion

Contrary to commonly held perceptions, the PLP Minutes, at least those taken by Alan Haworth from 1992 to 1994, are far from anodyne. Apart from understandable censorship over leadership hustings (in 1992 and again in 1994), readers will gain a real insight into the issues that the PLP debated in that period, and of who said what to whom. The Smith leadership was content for controversial issues to be hammered out collectively in the arena of the PLP in the hope that if Labour backbenchers vented their spleen in private, they would be less likely to mouth off, and vote against the party line in the House of Commons. Such a hope was a forlorn one, especially over the passage of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill. But all the vigorous internal debates over such issues as Maastricht, Bosnia, electoral reform and the representation of women in the Shadow Cabinet served to act as a valuable safety valve, keeping dissent within bounds.

In the last decade or so since Smith’s death, the PLP has continued to be a good forum for vigorous collective discussion, and is capable of exercising moments of influence, but it is totally unsuitable as a policy-making body. Indeed, it would be unwise for it
to be made into such a body. But the last decade has also seen the decline of the idea of the elected representative as something special. Perhaps with the televising of Parliament, the old mystique surrounding the local Member of Parliament isn’t what it used to be. At the same time, New Labour under Blair has sought to project the Party nationally via the media, rather than from the Chamber of the House of Commons. It isn’t surprising therefore if some of his MPs feel left out, or like ‘the poor bloody infantry’. To repeat, it’s much harder in government to keep the average MP happy than it is in opposition, and that has proved to be a perennial problem for every previous Labour Government. Nevertheless, it is becoming especially true of the present Government. After eight years in power, and on entering a third term, those who seek to marshal the massed ranks of the PLP are entering wholly new territory. One valuable lesson from the Smith period seems to be that making a little time to listen to the gripes of the lowliest backbencher allows the infantry to let off steam – a function that the full meeting of the PLP has performed so well in the past.

1 In late 2004, Haworth was raised to the peerage. His successor is Fiona Gordon, former special adviser to Hilary Armstrong, the Government Chief Whip.
2 This section draws from a large bank of interview evidence from Labour backbenchers conducted by Philip Cowley and the author (both based at the University of Nottingham), as part of a research project into parliamentary voting behaviour funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Further details are available from www.revolts.co.uk. Many thanks are due to Phil for letting me use this data.
4 There is also a good reason technical why potential rebels would not normally put down a motion in the PLP: because it brings out the loyalists, ensuring that the leadership view (or more accurately, the leadership amendment) is carried.
5 The Opposition operated a three-line whip throughout, but Jack Cunningham later agreed to a weekly briefing meeting for all Labour backbenchers for the duration of the Bill’s passage.
7 Derek Fatchett’s First-Past-the-Post Group had attracted the support of 86 Labour MPs, and on the other side of the debate, 62 backbenchers, including Peter
Mandelson, supported Jeff Rooker, Chairman of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform.  

10 The following Wednesday, Foster presented the PLP with a fuller report, outlining these supposedly significant concessions. The Government pledged: not to table all stages of a bill in one day without the prior agreement of the Opposition; maximum advance notice would be given of guillotines on the Annunciator; statements would be available no later than 3pm and would not be given out to the press before delivery; and no Government statements would be made on Opposition Days. In return, Labour would recommence negotiations on the Jopling Report – Report from the Select Committee on Sittings of the House (Session 1991-92) (House of Commons Papers 20 I, 20 II).