

More of the same?: backbench behaviour at the beginning of the fourth session

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Despite a slight reduction in the number of backbench rebellions amongst Labour MPs over the last year, the PLP still begins the fourth session of the 2001 Parliament as one of the most rebellious parliamentary parties in the post-war period. There have been just under 200 separate backbench rebellions since 2001 involving just over 200 MPs.

This short briefing paper outlines the issues that caused rebellion during the last session, places the Parliament in its historic context, and identifies the most rebellious MPs.

The rebellions

Since 2001 there have been 191 separate backbench rebellions by Labour MPs. The first two sessions of the Parliament had produced 141 rebellions. The third session – which ended last Thursday – saw an additional 50 rebellions.

The largest of the 50 revolts occurred during the passage of the Government's Higher Education Bill: 72 Labour MPs voted against the Bill's Second Reading, along with almost 20 abstentions. This was the joint-largest rebellion at the Second Reading of a Government Bill since 1945 and the Government saw its majority whittled away to just five, the lowest (on a whipped vote) since Labour came to power in 1997. Some 57 Labour MPs then voted against their whip during Report Stage, whilst 18 voted against Third Reading, along with a stack of abstentions.

There were also rebellions during:

- The Children Bill. The Bill's passage produced three backbench rebellions, with the largest seeing 49 Labour backbenchers defy the whip to vote in favour of a total ban on smacking.
- The Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc) Bill. This Bill produced nine separate rebellions – more than any other measure during the Third session – with the largest seeing 34 Labour MPs vote against the Government's plans to remove the right of failed asylum seekers to appeal to the High Court.
- Iraq. Although there were no rebellions to match the record-breaking rebellion of the previous session (which consisted of 139 MPs), concern about Iraq manifested itself periodically in votes, with the largest rebellion seeing 32 Labour MPs vote in favour of a closure motion at the end of an adjournment debate on the Butler Report in July.
- The Gambling Bill. A total of 30 Labour MPs voted against the Bill's Second Reading in November, along with an unspecified number of abstentions.

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- The Housing Bill. The largest of the Bill's two rebellions saw 26 Labour MPs vote against the Government over energy efficiency targets for residential property.
- The Human Tissue Bill. Some 19 Labour MPs defied their frontbench over the issue of 'presumed consent' for organ donation.

In addition, there were also a host of smaller rebellions over, *inter alia*, the European Parliamentary and Local Elections (Pilots) Bill, the Scottish Parliament (Constituencies) Bill, the Civil Partnership Bill, and the Pensions Bill.

This rate of rebellion represents a backbench revolt in about 15% of divisions (roughly one in every seven votes) during the Third session. This is a slight diminution in the rate of rebellion (the comparable figure for the first two sessions was just under 19%) – and there has similarly been a drop in the absolute number of revolts, down from 76 in the first session, to 65 in the second, to 50 in the third - but in historic terms both the absolute number and the rate of rebellion are still relatively heavy.

1: Frequency of rebellion by Government backbenchers in the first three sessions of post-war Parliaments

<i>Parliament</i>	<i>Number of rebellions in first three sessions</i>	<i>Rebellions as % of all divisions</i>
1970	193	18.3
2001	191	17.5
1983	184	16.8
19740	173	16.2
1992	138	14.1
1979	151	13.1
1987	162	13.0
1959	79	11.5
1966	98	8.4
1997	83	7.8
1945	62	6.5
1955	10	1.5
1951	8	1.1

Note: For obvious reasons, the table excludes those Parliaments which had fewer than three sessions.

Table 1 shows the equivalent totals for the first three sessions of other post-war parliaments. A total of 191 revolts is more than in all but one post-war Parliament (by this point of its life). This is also true when the rebellions are expressed as a percentage of the votes: a rebellion in 17.5% of divisions is more than in all but one post-war Parliament (and it's the same one: 1970) by the end of the third session. Despite the slight reduction in the frequency of rebellion over the last year, therefore, this still remains one of the most rebellious Parliaments of the post-war era.

As in previous sessions, one of the crumbs of comfort for the government is that most of the rebellions have been small. As Table 2 shows, the majority (64%) have consisted of fewer than 10 MPs, with just six involving 30 or more MPs.

There may be lots of rebellions – but most of them remain small, and easily brushed aside.

2: Size of Labour backbench rebellions, 2001-2004

<i>Number of MPs voting against the whip</i>	<i>Third session only: 2003-4</i>	<i>As % of third session revolts</i>	<i>First three sessions total: 2001-4</i>	<i>As % of total revolts</i>
1-9	34	68	116	61
10-29	10	20	48	25
30-50	4	8	17	9
50+	2	4	10	5
Total	50	100	191	100

The rebels

The rebellions during the third session of the 2001 Parliament involved a total of 144 different Labour MPs, 130 of whom had rebelled earlier during the Parliament. The 14 new rebels are listed in Table 3, and as is clear from the Table, most of them have hardly gone feral. The majority of the new rebels have rebelled just once; even the most rebellious, Tony Colman, only voted against his whip on four occasions.

3: New Rebels during the Third Session

<i>Name</i>	<i>Rebellions during the third session</i>
Tony Colman	4
Rachel Squire	3
Keith Vaz	3
Jon Cruddas	2
Barbara Follett	2
Dr Lewis Moonie	2
Stephen Hesford	1
Calum MacDonald	1
Judy Mallaber	1
John Mann	1
John McFall	1
Michael Meacher	1
Sandra Osborne	1
Greg Pope	1

These 14 new rebels bring the number of Labour MPs to have rebelled against the Government since 2001 to 211. Of these, some 67 did not vote against their whip at all during the third session. Excluding those MPs who have died or left the party, the most obvious changes in behaviour came from Ann Cryer (who cast 14 votes against the whip during the first two sessions of the Parliament, but none during the third), George Stevenson (who cast ten rebellious votes during the first two, down to none during the third), and Linda Perham and Joan Walley (nine down to zero). On the whole, however, most of those who did not vote against the whip during the third session were much more infrequent rebels

during the first two: 55 of the 67 had voted against the whip on five or fewer occasions during the first two sessions.

In general, therefore, rebellions in the third session have involved pretty much the same people rebelling again – and in roughly the same quantities. Excluding those who have never voted against their party whip so far this Parliament, the correlation between the number of dissenting votes cast in the first two sessions and the number cast in the third is astonishingly high: +0.994 ($p < 0.000$).

As a result, the overall league table of the most rebellious MPs contains many of the same names as it has in previous years. For example, the top ten names at the end of the third session are exactly the same as the top ten names at the end of the second session (albeit in a slightly different order).

Table 3: Most rebellious Labour MPs since 2001

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes cast against the whip during the third session</i>	<i>Total number of votes cast against the whip since 2001</i>
Jeremy Corbyn	24	111
John McDonnell	21	100
Dr Lynne Jones	15	72
Robert Marshall-Andrews	16	67
Brian Sedgemore	14	67
Robert Wareing	17	64
Alan Simpson	15	63
Dennis Skinner	16	59
Harry Barnes	12	59
Kelvin Hopkins	12	59
Denzil Davies	14	52
Neil Gerrard	9	49
Alice Mahon	9	46
Mark Fisher	13	44
Diane Abbott	8	44
Jim Marshall	10	42 [†]
Andrew Bennett	4	41
Llew Smith	10	39
Glenda Jackson	10	34
Terry Lewis	9	33
Kevin McNamara	5	33
Kate Hoey	7	31
Tam Dalyell	5	27
Mike Wood	2	27
George Galloway	-	27 [*]
Hilton Dawson	10	26
Gwyneth Dunwoody	7	25
Gordon Prentice	8	23
Harry Cohen	7	23
David Taylor	6	23

Note: * includes only votes cast whilst in receipt of the party whip. † died in May 2004.

Conclusion

The Conservative MP and diarist 'Chips' Channon once noted what he called the 'odour of dissolution'. An approaching general election can make even the most unhappy of MPs hold their tongues in the final session of a parliament and there is usually less serious legislation to cause trouble anyway. As a result, it is normal for the fag ends of Parliaments to see relatively little backbench dissent.

It is, however, not quite so certain that the same will be true of the final session of the 2001 Parliament. The Queen's Speech on 23 November is said to contain several measures with the potential to cause backbench unrest amongst the PLP. The most obvious of these is the proposal for an identity card, but several other measures emanating from the Home Office are also likely to cause rebellions as the Bills pass through Parliament. None of these are likely to be serious enough to defeat the Government – with the result that the Government will reach the election undefeated on a whipped vote in the Commons, something no other Government has done since the Wilson Government of 1966-70. But they will still cause division within the ranks of the PLP. If, as is widely believed, one of the purposes of these Bills is to 'smoke out' the Lib Dems (and the Conservatives), then they may end up smoking out divisions within Labour's own ranks just as obviously.

Notes

This briefing note draws on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The research analyses backbench behaviour in the House of Commons.

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