

Neither Serious Nor Organised? Rebellions over the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill

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Monday, 7 February 2005, saw five separate backbench Labour rebellions against voted against various aspects of the wide-ranging Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill. These rebellions went almost entirely unreported in the press – neither *The Times* nor the *Telegraph* mentioned them at all – yet they involved a total of 47 Labour MPs, the same number as rebelled over lone-parent benefit at the beginning of the Blair premiership. This short briefing note explains the issues which caused rebellion and lists the rebels.

The rebellions

The largest rebellion saw 34 Labour backbenchers support a Liberal Democrat amendment that would have abolished the offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel. (David Taylor also cast one of his, by now familiar, deliberate abstentions by voting in both lobbies). The Conservatives, enjoying the luxury of a free vote, split 21/68 against abolishing blasphemy, while Mike Hancock was the only Liberal Democrat MP to vote against a change in the law.

Earlier in the evening, 26 Labour backbenchers had supported a Liberal Democrat clause that would have offered extra statutory protection for those affected when people sought to use religion to incite hatred against racial groups. The Government's preference was to introduce a new law of incitement to religious hatred. The rebellion just failed to match the 27 Labour MPs who voted in December 2001 against the Government's previous attempt to introduce a law against incitement during the passage of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill.

Nine Labour backbenchers also supported a clause moved by the Conservative frontbench that would have abolished the restriction on the use of intercept evidence in the criminal courts. Mike Hancock was the only Liberal Democrat MP to support a separate Conservative amendment that sought to strengthen further measures designed to counter the intimidation of persons working for animal research organisations.

The evening's voting ended with two Labour rebellions on the entirely separate issue of how best to control demonstrations in the immediate vicinity of Parliament. Having permitted a free vote on the Report of the Procedure Committee on 3 November 2004, this time around, the Labour whips were on, and 22 Labour backbenchers voted against a Government clause that would have required all demonstrations due to take place in a designated area (the exact area to be defined later in secondary legislation) around Westminster to be notified to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner six days in advance. The Conservatives, again enjoying a free vote (but on a staggeringly low turnout), split narrowly 26/25 in favour of the new clause, while all the Liberal Democrats opposed it. Several backbenchers felt that the measures were being made to silence one particular protestor – Brian Haw and his long-running protest to the war in Iraq. Jeremy Corbyn asked the House: 'Are we seriously saying that, because one person, Brian Haw, has been outside for three years, we will sweep

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away the right that has existed for centuries for people to come the House, without seeking permission from anyone, to express their view?’

A final Government motion, covering a series of related amendments (such as clauses relating to hindrance to the proper operation of Parliament and the introduction of a £5,000 fine for the unauthorised use of a loudhailer), saw another seven Labour MPs defy the party line, while Sir Nicholas Winterton, Chair of the Procedure Committee, was the only Conservative MP to support the amendments. Debates in Westminster Hall, he claimed, had been ‘badly inconvenienced’ by the level of noise coming from Brian Haw in Parliament square. All the Liberal Democrats voted against these amendments.

Last night’s five Labour revolts saw the total number of Labour rebellions in the session so far rise to 26, averaging 14 Labour MPs per rebellion.

The rebels

<i>Name</i>	<i>Racial Hatred</i>	<i>Blasphemy</i>	<i>Phone-tap</i>	<i>Demos</i>	<i>Other Demos</i>
Abbott, Diane		X			
Barnes, Harry	X	X			
Berry, Roger		X			
Best, Harold	X	X			
Campbell, Ronnie	X			X	
Challen, Colin		X			
Cook, Robin		X			
Corbyn, Jeremy	X	X	X	X	X
Cryer, Ann	X	X			
Cryer, John	X	X			
Cummings, John				X	X
Dawson, Hilton				X	
Dobson, Frank		X			
Dunwoody, Gwyneth	X				
Ellman, Louise				X	
Etherington, Bill				X	
Field, Frank	X		X		
Fisher, Mark		X	X	X	
Flynn, Paul				X	
Gerrard, Neil	X	X			
Grogan, John	X			X	
Heyes, David		X			
Hoey, Kate	X		X	X	
Hopkins, Kelvin	X	X		X	
Jackson, Glenda		X	X	X	
Jones, Lynne		X	X		
Keen, Alan		X			
MacDonald, Calum	X	X			
McDonnell, John	X	X	X	X	X
McWalter, Tony	X	X			
Mahon, Alice	X	X		X	X
Marshall-Andrews, Bob	X	X	X		
Picking, Anne		X			
Prentice, Gordon	X	X			
Rooney, Terry		X			
Salter, Martin		X			
Sedgemore, Brian	X	X		X	
Short, Clare				X	X
Simpson, Alan	X	X	X	X	X
Skinner, Dennis	X	X		X	
Smith, Lew	X	X			
Taylor, David	X	A			
Trickett, Jon	X	X		X	
Wareing, Bob	X	X		X	X
Williams, Alan				X	
Wood, Mike		X		X	
Wright, Tony	X	X			

Note: X indicates a vote against the Government; A indicates a abstention by voting twice.