

No great surprises here

PHILIP COWLEY and MARK STUART*

There was very little that was surprising about the identity of those Labour MPs who inflicted the first Commons defeats of the Blair Premiership. Almost invariably, most media attention focused on the more surprising names – the ex-minister Nick Raynsford, and the handful of the 2005 intake – and failed to notice the most striking feature about the vast majority of the rebels: that most of them have been rebelling like that for years. It is not in any way to diminish their behaviour to note that it was entirely predictable.

By the end of last week, 62 Labour MPs had voted against their whip during the first six months of Blair's third term (they are listed in the table below). Six of these are from the 2005 intake. Of the remaining 56, 53 have what police officers call 'form', having rebelled between 2001 and 2005. Of the 30 most rebellious MPs remaining from the last Parliament, all but two have already voted against the whip. This was no uprising of virgins.

What happened last week was simply a continuation of the behaviour seen throughout the 2001-2005 Parliament, when Labour MPs rebelled more regularly than MPs in any post-war Parliament. The MP-as-sheep cliché was so deeply ingrained that even many of the most experienced commentators were simply unable to get it out of their head. On the pages of the *Guardian*, Roy Hattersley recently claimed that the Terrorism Bill had 'at last, awakened a slumbering Parliamentary Labour Party'. How can anyone get it so badly wrong? The PLP have been wide awake – and screaming their opposition to key planks of the Government's programme – for years now.

Just over two weeks ago, one of us published a book called *The Rebels*, the subtitle of which is 'How Blair Mislaid His Majority'. Even at the book's launch party, over glasses of poor quality (but quite extortionately expensive) House of Commons wine, one or two people doubted this was what had really happened.

We shan't name all of those who told us with absolute confidence that Labour MPs would behave differently now that there was a smaller majority, and that 66 was a perfectly manageable majority (although like the U-Boat Officer in Dad's Army we have taken down their names). When anyone would try to point out the extent to which rebellion had become commonplace within the Parliamentary Labour Party, people would look at us as if we were slightly retarded eight-year-olds who had ingested too much lead somewhere along the line.

An otherwise positive review of the book in *Tribune*, published with exquisite timing just days before the majority came crashing down, complained that the book's central argument was not 'entirely convincing'. 'Rarely,' wrote the reviewer, 'have they challenged the size of Labour's majority'.

Does anyone have any doubts any more?

* University of Nottingham. This paper draws on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Further details are available from www.revolt.co.uk.

Labour backbench rebels, from 2005 election to the Terrorism Bill

<i>Name of MP</i>	<i>No. of times voted against the whip, 2005 Parliament</i>
Corbyn, Jeremy	21
McDonnell, John	20
Marshall-Andrews, Bob	20
Jones, Lynne	19
Short, Clare	17
Simpson, Alan	15
Wareing, Bob	15
Fisher, Mark	14
Jackson, Glenda	14
Clark, Katy	13
Hoey, Kate	13
Hopkins, Kelvin	13
Gibson, Ian	12
Riordan, Linda	12
Flynn, Paul	9
Abbott, Diane	8
Clapham, Michael	8
Dunwoody, Gwyneth	8
Taylor, David	8
Gerrard, Neil	7
Skinner, Dennis	7
Wood, Mike	7
Prentice, Gordon	6
Austin, John	5
Cousins, Jim	5
Grogan, John	5
Love, Andy	5
Winnick, David	5
Burden, Richard	4
Cryer, Ann	4
Dobson, Frank	4
Hamilton, David	4
Mudie, George	4
Trickett, Jon	4
Caton, Martin	3
Cohen, Harry	3
Kilfoyle, Peter	3
Lloyd, Tony	3
Meacher, Michael	3
Smith, Geraldine	3
Smith, John	3
Challen, Colin	2
Cook, Frank	2
Drew, David	2
Godsiff, Roger	2

Henderson, Doug	2
James, Sian	2
Khan, Sadiq	2
McCafferty, Christine	2
Mitchell, Austin	2
Morgan, Julie	2
Mullin, Chris	2
Raynsford, Nick	2
Soulsby, Sir Peter	2
Thornberry, Emily	2
Connarty, Michael	1
Doran, Frank	1
Field, Frank	1
Lazarowicz, Mark	1
Owen, Albert	1
Ruddock, Joan	1
Vis, Rudi	1

Note: Bold indicates members of the 2005 intake.