

It depends what you mean by 'normally loyal': The supporters of the Alternative Education White Paper

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Much of the news coverage of the alternative education 'white paper', launched by Labour MPs on 14 December 2005, has described those MPs who have signed up to its provisions as 'normally loyal Labour backbenchers'. This short briefing paper – which examines the signatories – shows that things are a little more complicated than this phrase implies.

The signatories

According to today's Guardian on-line, 58 Labour MPs have so far signed the alternative white paper, although the Guardian provides only 57 names (listed at the end of this paper).

It is clear that some effort has gone into ensuring that these names do not include the most rebellious Labour MPs – those who are usually described (and dismissed) as 'the usual suspects'. Of the 20 Labour MPs who rebelled most in the 2001 Parliament, and who are still in the Commons, not one has so far been identified as a signatory to the document. This is clearly not a coincidence.

Of the 57 MPs listed at the end of this paper, four are from the new 2005 intake – David Anderson, Nia Griffith, Alison Seabeck and Sir Peter Soulsby. Of these, only Soulsby has rebelled so far since coming into Parliament in May.

But, of the remaining 53 MPs (who were all present in the 2001 Parliament), some 48 (or nine out of ten) have 'form' from the last Parliament. Only five of them did not vote against the whip in the last Parliament: Linda Gilroy, Andy Love, Nick Raynsford (the former local government minister) John Smith, and Mark Todd. Yet since the 2005 election, Love has rebelled on five occasions so far this Parliament, Raynsford has done so twice, and Smith has voted against his whip on three occasions.

Put starkly then, excluding the 2005 intake, the list of so-called 'normally loyal backbenchers' includes just two – Gilroy and Todd – never to have voted against the Government before.

Although the list does not include any of the 20 surviving most rebellious MPs from the last Parliament, it does include 14 Labour backbenchers who rebelled against the Government on fifteen or more occasions in the last Parliament: John Austin (24), Martin Caton (19), Ann Cryer (17), Frank Dobson (27), David Drew (29), Paul Flynn (23), John Grogan (16), Christine McCafferty (16), Austin Mitchell (15), Julie Morgan (15), Gordon Prentice (32), David Taylor (39), Desmond Turner (15) and Rudi Viz (16). These are people who mostly do not belong the ranks of the 'usual suspects', but for whom the habit of rebellion is not unfamiliar. Taken as a whole, the 48 rebellious signatories rebelled on an average of 11 occasions in the last Parliament.

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Of course, all of these MPs can rightly point out that they *are* normally loyal. But part of the problem with this phrase is that *all* MPs are 'normally' loyal, in that they all normally vote with the Government. Even the most rebellious MPs are overwhelmingly 'loyal' – which is one of the reasons that so many of them dislike being described as 'disloyal'. Even Jeremy Corbyn, the most rebellious MP in the 2001 Parliament voted against the government in just 12 per cent of divisions. Even allowing for those votes from which he was absent, and the various free votes given by the whips, Corbyn was still much more likely to vote with the Government than against it. Corbyn once made this point to his whip, arguing 'I'm with you in 99 per cent of cases'.¹ To which the whip's response was: 'Yes, Jerry, but not in the one per cent that matter'.

Other opponents

Of even greater concern to the Government whips is that there may be even more Labour MPs unhappy with this legislation but who have yet to declare their support for the alternative white paper. We know, for example, that those unhappy with the government's white paper include another 16 Labour MPs who recently supported EDM 898 in the name of Dr Ian Gibson which expressed 'grave reservations about the new Education White Paper', but who did not put their names to the alternative white paper:

Katy Clark
Michael Connarty
John Cummings
Jim Dobbin
Dr Ian Gibson
Kelvin Hopkins
Glenda Jackson
Dr Lynne Jones
Rob Marris
John McDonnell
Edward O'Hara
Linda Riordan
Alan Simpson
Marsha Singh
Graham Stringer
Bob Wareing

Of these, seven were in the group of the most rebellious 20 from the last Parliament, and who most people had anyway assumed would oppose the Government's Education Bill, which means that once we add in the remaining 13 from that group – Diane Abbott, Jeremy Corbyn, Bob Marshall-Andrews, Clare Short, Dennis Skinner, et al – along with this 16, we can assume at least an extra 29 opponents to those listed today as signatories to the alternative white paper. Thus we can safely assume that the numbers expressing doubts about the white paper probably stands at around 85 Labour MPs.

The arithmetic

One Labour insider recently compared the government's education white paper to the 2004 Higher Education Bill. Then, 196 Labour MPs had signed various EDMs opposing the legislation, but through a combination of argument, concession, and pressure, the number who defied their whips at the Bill's crucial Second Reading on 27 January was just under half that (with 72 voting against, around 20

¹ An over estimate by 11 percentage points – but who's counting?

abstaining).² The problem for the Government is that, with its new smaller majority, the numbers known to be opposed to the current legislation have already climbed to a level which means that it even if the Government could persuade Labour MPs back on board in the same way it did over Higher Education, any vote could still be lost.

The Government's nominal majority is 66. Add in the non-voting Sinn Fein MPs and it rises to 71. Assuming a full opposition turn out, it therefore takes 36 Labour MPs to vote against (or some equivalent mix of cross-votes and abstentions) to defeat the Government. Purely as an illustrative example, if we assume the exact same proportions of known opponents vote against and abstain as did over the Higher Education Bill in 2004 – that is, 37 per cent of non-opponents vote against, and 10 per cent abstain – then with 85 known opponents so far, the Government's majority reduces to exactly zero.³ In reality, things will not be so neat as that (real life seldom is), but this is still an example of how bad the problem is for the government. Even if it can persuade over half of those who have publicly indicated their opposition to the white paper to back down, they could still lose any vote.

The only good news for the Government is that many of those who signed the alternative white paper are prepared to negotiate – that, indeed, is the point of the exercise. They are looking for what one of their number described as a 'dialogue' to help produce a better bill. The trouble is that – as the same MP put it – 'it takes two to tango and there is no sign that Ruth and Tony are sewing their sequins on'. The strength of support for the alternative white paper suggests that if the Government does not want to enact the Bill as a result of Conservative votes, it is time to get dancing.

² See P. Cowley, *The Rebels. How Blair Mislaid His Majority*, London, Politico's, 2005, Ch. 7.

³ That is, 31 dissenting votes (37% of 85=31), plus nine abstentions (10% of 85=8.5).

As of 14 December 2005, the signatories to the alternative white paper were as follows:

Graham Allen	Martyn Jones
David Anderson	David Lepper
John Austin	Tony Lloyd
Roger Berry	Andy Love
Clive Betts	Judy Mallaber
Richard Burden	Chris McCafferty
Colin Burgon	Austin Mitchell
Martin Caton	Chris Mullin
Colin Challen	Albert Owen
David Chaytor	Julie Morgan
David Clelland	Gordon Prentice
Harry Cohen	Gwyn Prosser
John Cruddas	Ken Purchase
Ann Cryer	Nick Raynsford
Janet Dean	Joan Ruddock
John Denham	Martin Salter
Frank Dobson	Alison Seabeck
David Drew	John Smith
Angela Eagle	Peter Soulsby
Clive Efford	David Taylor
Louise Ellman	Mark Todd
Paul Flynn	Jon Trickett
Linda Gilroy	Des Turner
Nia Griffith	Rudi Vis
John Grogan	Joan Walley
Eric Illsley	Alan Whitehead
David Heyes	Betty Williams
Kevan Jones	Derek Wyatt
Helen Jones	