

Losing control? Blair's procedural rebels

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One possibility for the Second Reading of the Education and Inspections Bill on Wednesday 15 March is to win the Second Reading vote, but then lose the Bill's programme motion. This would herald a ramping up of backbench opposition to the Government, stripping the Government of one of its main weapons: control of the parliamentary agenda.

Although the last time a Government lost such a vote was in the late-1970s, the most recent example of the problems this can present for the government came in the early-1990s, when the Major Government were attempting to pilot the Maastricht Bill onto the statute book. Although Major's Government did not lose any procedural votes, it was their inability to be confident of winning them that caused them such problems, and was one of the reasons that the Bill dragged on month after month, not receiving its Third Reading until more than a year after its introduction into the House.¹ As Major noted in his autobiography: 'We could never be sure what progress we could make. Decisions had to be taken on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis'.² And it was the willingness of Conservative MPs to engage in such tactics that so infuriated their whips – who saw it as an unacceptable form of parliamentary opposition.

Blair's rebels

Since 1997, there have been 32 divisions on programme/timetabling motions which have resulted in Labour backbench dissent: six between 1997-2001, 22 between 2001-2005, and four so far in the 2005 Parliament. November 2000 saw the introduction of an experiment (which would later be made permanent) introducing the automatic programming of Government bills, and it was this innovation that led to a rise in Labour rebellions on this type of division.

Most of these rebellions have been small, rarely consisting of more than ten MPs, and almost always smaller than the substantive rebellion against the Bill itself. The largest procedural rebellion since 1997 occurred on 16 July 2001, when 40 Labour MPs opposed a Business of the House motion curtailing a debate on the membership of Select Committees.

The largest rebellion on a programming motion on a Government bill since 1997 – as opposed to the rebellions on the select committee nominations – came on 28 February 2005 when 26 Labour MPs opposed a third programme motion to the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Bill. And the largest since 2005 was on 28 June 2005 on the first programme motion to the Identity Cards Bill (22 rebels). Indeed, in this case more rebels voted against the programme motion than did so against the principle of the Bill (22 to 21).

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¹ There were 61 separate debates, consuming more than 210 hours of debate, over 23 sitting days, and involving 70 votes.

² John Major, *The Autobiography*, p. 373.

Not all rebel Labour MPs have rebelled over programming motions in the past, but a total of 49 Labour MPs currently in the House have voted against a programming motion (or the pre-November 2000 equivalent) to date. All bar one of these MPs – Barbara Follett, now a PPS – remain on the backbenches, although the 49 include such figures as Frank Field and Ann Clwyd, known supporters of the Bill.

These MPs are listed in the table at the end of this paper, and are more than enough to defeat the Government should they all mobilise and/or should they attract new converts.

<i>Name of MP</i>	<i>No of rebellions over timetable/business of House</i>
Abbott, Diane	6
Austin, John	1
Campbell, Ronnie	1
Caton, Martin	1
Clapham, Michael	1
Clark, Katy	1
Clwyd, Ann	2
Connarty, Michael	1
Cook, Frank	1
Corbyn, Jeremy	19
Cousins, Jim	1
Cryer, Ann	1
Dobbin, Jim	1
Dobson, Frank	2
Drew, David	1
Dunwoody, Gwyneth	7
Etherington, Bill	1
Field, Frank	2
Fisher, Mark	9
Flynn, Paul	5
Follett, Barbara	1
Gerrard, Neil	3
Gibson, Ian	2
Hamilton, David	1
Havard, Dai	1
Hoey, Kate	8
Hopkins, Kelvin	5
Jackson, Glenda	3
Jones, Lynne	13
Keeble, Sally	1
McDonnell, John	9
Mackinlay, Andrew	3
Marshall-Andrews, Bob	12
Martlew, Eric	1
Mitchell, Austin	2
Mullin, Chris	1
Prentice, Gordon	1
Prosser, Gwyn	1
Riordan, Linda	1
Short, Clare	7
Simpson, Alan	5
Skinner, Dennis	3
Smith, Geraldine	1
Taylor, David	1
Viz, Rudi	1
Wareing, Bob	7
Winnick, David	1
Wood, Mike	2
Wright, Dr Tony	1