

Railways and Food Supplements: More Unreported Rebellions

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The week ending 28 January began with a largely unreported series of rebellions on gambling. It ended with a further two rebellions – on railway ownership and food supplements – that also went virtually unreported in the media.

On Thursday, 27 January 2005, 29 Labour MPs (including two tellers) supported a Report stage amendment to the Railways Bill in the name of John McDonnell that would have reintroduced a small element of public ownership and involvement in the railway system. McDonnell's amendment proposed that when a franchise came up for renewal, there should be a public sector comparator to enable an independent assessment to be made of whether the public or the private sector could run the best system. The contract should then be awarded as a result of that assessment. Moving his amendment in the very limited time available (because of the programme motion on the Bill), McDonnell argued: 'I am unable to comprehend why the Government cannot allow some form of public sector operational involvement in the railways industry'. He also reminded fellow Labour MPs that the previous year's Labour party conference had voted overwhelmingly in favour of a policy to bring rail back into public ownership.

The 29 Labour rebels, who included Robin Cook, the former Foreign Secretary and Leader of the House, were:

Harry Barnes
Ronnie Campbell
Michael Clapham
Robin Cook
Jeremy Corbyn*
Ann Cryer
John Cryer
Ian Davidson
Jim Dobbin
David Drew
Neil Gerrard
John Grogan
David Hamilton
Kate Hoey
Kelvin Hopkins
Lynne Jones
John McDonnell
Andrew Mackinlay
Alice Mahon
Bob Marshall-Andrews
Austin Mitchell
Gordon Prentice
Gwyn Prosser
Brian Sedgemore
Dennis Skinner
Llew Smith

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David Taylor
Robert Wareing*
David Winnick
(* denotes tellers)

Earlier, on Tuesday, 25 January 2005, seven Labour MPs backed a 'cross-party' Opposition Day motion, which regretted the passing of the Food Supplements Regulations (2003), and called upon the British Government to renegotiate the Food Supplements Directive with the European Union. Unusually, the Conservatives had allowed one of their Opposition day debates to be used to express all-party concern about the banning of many types of vitamins and food supplements by the EU.

During the debate, Kate Hoey, who had put her name to the motion, pointed out that she had originally been one of the members of the Statutory Instrument Committee that had considered directive, but that having told her whip that she was going to vote against it, she was immediately removed from the Committee. Another unnamed MP had also been removed, only to be replaced by Jeremy Corbyn, who had voted against it anyway. Only three of the eight original Labour members of the Committee had remained at its conclusion. Despite all the efforts of the whips, the measure had only passed in Committee by eight votes to six, having already been defeated in the Lords a few weeks before. Hoey argued: 'I cannot understand why our Minister and officials did not stand up more vigorously in Brussels for people who want to be able to continue to use such supplements'. She described the directive as 'a classic example of the way in which Europe is becoming further and further removed from the ordinary experiences and everyday lives of our citizens'.

Diane Abbott described the cross-party motion as 'measured and modest', and expressed concern that banning such products would drive people to use the 'wholly unregulated internet market'. Why, she asked, was the Government banning vitamins, minerals and supplements on which people depended, and yet 'legislating to allow people to drink themselves into a stupor 24 hours a day?' She also pointed out that people had been taking such products for years with no report of ill effects.

The seven Labour MPs to vote in favour of the motion were:

Diane Abbott
Tony Colman
Jeremy Corbyn
Denzil Davies
Frank Field
Kate Hoey
Dennis Skinner

David Taylor also registered one of his now familiar deliberate abstentions by voting in both lobbies.