

Robin Cook: Backbench rebel

PHILIP COWLEY and MARK STUART*

Few of the glowing tributes paid over the weekend to Robin Cook mentioned that he began and ended his parliamentary career as a backbench rebel, one of the top 40 Labour rebels of all time, and someone who cast no fewer than 95 rebellious votes against the Labour Governments of Harold Wilson, James Callaghan and Tony Blair.

Most of these rebellions took place during his first five years as an MP, between February 1974 and May 1979. He cast his first dissenting vote within four months of being elected as an MP – in favour of an amendment that would have prevented ministers from removing the absolute liability provisions in the Health and Safety at Work Etc. Bill. He went on to back another seven amendments in various bills that would have strengthened the rights of workers.

Cook's backbench career is best remembered for his fervent opposition to Scottish devolution. Like Neil Kinnock, Cook was a democratic centralist, Labour politicians who believed that the cause of working people could only be bettered through policies directed from Westminster. Early on in his parliamentary career, Cook commented that he wanted to 'kill the issue'. By July 1978, he was claiming: 'We are telling the electorate that we will give them better public services through an Assembly but that it will not cost them a penny'. That was, said Cook, 'irresponsibility in every sense of the word and it will not solve the problem in any way'. He cast six votes against the Scotland Bill.

He was a much more frequent rebel on the various issues relating to European integration. Exactly one quarter of his dissenting votes in the 1970s (22 out of 88) were in opposition to various aspects of European integration. He was also an opponent of the annual defence estimates, the Civil List, and cuts in public expenditure – whilst he rebelled in favour of the introduction of import duties, higher rates of income tax for the better off and measures to protect the rents of the less well off.

Cook's last dissenting vote of the 1974-1979 Parliament involved supporting a prayer that would have annulled the draft Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1976 (Continuance) Order. It was one of a dozen separate votes he cast in that period opposing detention of terrorist suspects without trial. Given that, it was perhaps fitting that Cook's last ever dissenting vote – on 28 February 2005 – was also cast against the Government on their most recent Prevention of Terrorism Bill. Cook supported a cross-party amendment that would have provided for judicial involvement in non-derogating as well as derogating orders. In his speech during the Bill's Committee Stage, the former Foreign Secretary welcomed the fact that Charles Clarke had made 'a significant step to remove one of the worst offences of the measure', but hoped that the Home Secretary would cede ground on non-derogatory orders as well. He did not, and Cook went on to join 61 other rebels in the division lobbies.

Robin Cook resigned from the Blair Government on 17 March 2003, because he could not support 'a war without international agreement or domestic support'. Cook then engaged in a measured demolition of the Government's case for war.

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

His most stinging line - 'What has come to trouble me most over past weeks is the suspicion that if the hanging chads in Florida had gone the other way and Al Gore had been elected, we would not now be about to commit British troops.' - demonstrated better than any other what one writer has called Cook's 'talent for controlled contempt'.

But in contrast to his behaviour in the 1970s, Cook did not become a serial rebel after his resignation from the Government, casting only seven rebellious votes between 2003 and 2005. Apart from his dissenting vote on the Prevention of Terrorism Bill, Cook supported the cross-party amendment on 18 March 2003 that refused to support the war in Iraq, and also opposed the subsequent Government motion. He also voted: in favour of the idea of presumed consent in organ donation (Human Tissue Bill, June 2004); in favour of a Children's Commissioner for Wales (Children's Bill, November 2004); in favour of an amendment that would have retained the option of nationalising rail companies at the end of their franchise arrangements (Railways Bill, January 2005); and supported the abolition of the law of blasphemy and blasphemy libel (Serious Organised Crime & Police Bill, February 2005).

But he picked his targets with care and did not become one of the 'ex-ministers club', a phrase used by the whips to dismiss the ex-members of the government who were now willing to rebel against it frequently. His pronouncements on policy, especially over what he saw as the folly of the Iraq war, were measured and relatively free from bile. And on key pieces of legislation, he did not vote against the Government. In May 2003, for instance, he spoke in support of the Government during the crucial Second Reading vote introducing foundation hospitals, claiming there was nothing in the bill 'to cause trouble to our party, to undermine our principles or to be hostile to the values of the NHS'. In his tribute in the *Sunday Telegraph* at the weekend, Gerald Kaufman claimed that Cook's actions helped to prevent a Government defeat.¹ Later, Cook was persuaded to abstain on the Second Reading of the Higher Education Bill introducing top-up fees (January 2004), and on the Second Reading of Identity Cards Bill (December 2004), despite harbouring doubts whether the scheme could be made to work. In June 2005, Cook supported the Government's fresh ID Cards Bill in the division lobbies.

¹ Gerald Kaufman, 'The genial statesman with a lethal sting', *Sunday Telegraph*, 7 August 2005.