

Rebel early, rebel often? Identifying trouble amongst the 2005 intake

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The Second Reading of the ID cards bill on 28 June is widely being heralded as the first test of the government's ability to manage its much smaller majority. In some ways, however, it will be a relatively poor test of their new status.[†] When a very similar bill was last passing through Parliament in late-2004 and early 2005, and before it was lost when the election was called, it attracted relatively mild opposition from Labour backbenchers; there are just 19 Labour MPs left in the Commons who voted against the previous bill. Of the 21 issues (broadly defined) to cause backbench rebellions during the 2001-2005 Parliament, 18 resulted in larger rebellions than did the issue of ID cards. The policy is also an explicit manifesto commitment, something that usually tends to dampen any putative rebellions.

But one of the unknown quantities in the forthcoming vote will be the cohort of new MPs sitting on Labour's benches. They number 40, and it wouldn't take many of them to join in the rebellion and things could be tighter than the government would like.

The good news for the whips is that faced with the uncertainties of a new job, and with the potential for promotion up the ministerial ladder awaiting some of them, newly-elected MPs are usually less willing to rebel than more established Members. For example, 28 per cent of the new intake rebelled at some point in the 1997 parliament; the figure for longer-serving MPs was 54 per cent, almost double.

And no doubt at this moment, the Labour whips are pointing out to many of the new MPs how they have a bright future ahead of them, and how it would be such a shame were they to do anything to spoil it. As one Labour MP, elected in 2001, put it, such conversations are 'not what you might call a rigorous dismissal of the empirical evidence. It's "why are you doing this? You're throwing your whole fucking career away". That's the currency they deal in'.

So what does happen to newly-elected MPs who rebel? Does eternal damnation await – or are these merely empty threats made by the whips?

This short briefing paper examines the behaviour of those MPs elected in both 1997 and 2001 and who defied the whip early in the parliamentary careers.

1997

The first significant revolt of the 1997 Parliament came on 10 December 1997, over the reform of lone-parent benefit.[‡] A total of 47 Labour MPs voted against the measure, along with a large quantity of abstentions. Of these 47, 14 came from the (massive) 1997 intake. They are listed in table 1 (below).

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[†] As we explained in our earlier paper 'Identity cards: The phoney war?', available from www.revolts.co.uk.

[‡] See P. Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, Politico's, 2002, pp. 24-29.

1. Future behaviour and careers of newly-elected Labour MPs who rebelled over lone-parent benefit, 1997

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes against the whip, 1997-2001</i>	<i>Number of votes against the whip, 2001-2005</i>	<i>Government?</i>
Jonathan Shaw	3	0	-
Ian Stewart	3	0	Yes (PPS)
Hilton Dawson	4	28	-
Brian Iddon	4	12	-
Ian Gibson	5	37	-
Harold Best	9	27	-
Martin Caton	12	19	-
James Dobbin	14	24	-
David Chaytor	15	8	-
Ann Cryer	16	17	-
Michael Wood	20	43	-
John Cryer	21	26	-
Kelvin Hopkins	32	87	-
John McDonnell	59	135	-

Table 1 also shows the total number of rebellions by these MPs in the 1997 and 2001 parliaments and whether the MP concerned served in government at all between 1997 and 2005. Two things are clear from the table. The first is that almost none of the newly-elected MPs who rebelled in December 1997 later went on to serve in government. Just one, Ian Stewart, did so, and even he only reached the giddy heights of parliamentary private secretary.

The second is that *all* of the MPs who rebelled over lone-parents benefit went on to rebel over something else later during the 1997 parliament, and – with the exception of Jonathan Shaw and Ian Stewart – in the next parliament as well.

2001

It is not possible to do exactly the same exercise with the 2001 Parliament because there was no similarly large revolt in its early months.

There was the vote over select committee nominations in July 2001, in which some of the new intake voted against the preferred stance of the frontbench, but this was a technically free vote, and so it is not really comparable.*

The first whipped vote in which a member of the 2001 intake defied the whip came in July 2001, when four Labour MPs voted in favour of a Conservative amendment during the committee stage of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill, which ratified the treaty of Nice. Of those four, one, John McDougall, was a newly-elected MP. There were then a series of disparate rebellions in which some members of the new intake participated, but the largest

* Although, for the record, the findings are remarkably similar. Of the nine newly-elected Labour MPs who voted against what was felt to be the government's favoured stance in those votes, just one did not then also go on to rebel on a whipped vote during the rest of the parliament, and just one (not the same one) went on to serve in government.

of these – over Iraq, when parliament was recalled in September 2002 – saw three MPs from the new intake vote against their party whip. So it is not really very sensible to analysis any of these individual votes in detail.

But taken collectively, the rebellions in the first session of the 2001 Parliament involved seven newly elected MPs (listed in table 2).

2. Future behaviour and careers of newly-elected Labour MPs who rebelled in the first session of the 2001 parliament

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes against the whip, 2001-2002</i>	<i>Number of votes against the whip, 2001-2005</i>	<i>Government?</i>
Dai Havard	1	9	-
John Lyons	1	10	-
John MacDougall	1	1	-
Anne Picking	1	5	-
Colin Challen	2	5	-
Iain Luke	2	7	-
David Hamilton	3	18	-

Table 2 shows exactly the same trends as table 1: not one of the newly-elected MPs who rebelled in the first session made it into government between 2001 and 2005, and with one exception – John MacDougall – they all went on to rebel over other issues during the parliament.

It is, of course, too crude to assume that the reason that these MPs did not get into government was because they were blocked from doing so by the whips as punishment for their behaviour (either over this vote or future votes). Despite the rise of the career politician over the last 40 or so years, there are still plenty of MPs who do not want to serve in government. There are others who might want to, but who know that they are temperamentally unsuited to government for a variety of reasons.

So there is no simple cause (rebellion) and effect (no ministerial post) at work here. But still, the overall finding is pretty clear. For whatever reason, those who rebel early in a parliament are not the sort of people you should expect to see in government in the years to come.

Identifying trouble

Those newly-elected MPs who rebel early in a parliament are also the most likely to rebel later in the same parliament. It is not just that most of the early rebels go on to rebel again, but that they rebel *more often* than other MPs from the same intake.

There is a clear, and positive, relationship between the number of dissenting votes cast by an MP in their first session, and the number they go on to cast in the rest of the parliament. For the MPs elected in 2001, for example, the correlation between the number of dissenting votes cast in the first session of the

parliament and those in the final three sessions was 0.56 (statistically significant at $p < .01$).^{*}

The correlations for those elected in 1997 are even more striking. The correlation between the number of dissenting votes in the 1997-98 session and the final three sessions of the 1997 parliament is 0.67 ($p < 0.01$)[†] And the correlation between the 1997-98 session and the 2001 parliament is an astonishing 0.91 ($p < 0.01$).[‡] MPs who rebel early, rebel often.

Conclusion

The vote on ID cards will be the first test of the government's majority. But it will also be the whips first indication of which MPs from the 2005 intake are likely to cause them problems throughout the rest of the parliament. And, if past experience is any guide, those MPs are unlikely to be found clutching government red boxes in the near future.

^{*} The reported correlation is for just those MPs who rebel at least once; the correlation with all the newly-elected MPs is even stronger at 0.61 ($p < 0.01$).

[†] The figure for all the 97 intake is 0.74 ($p < 0.01$).

[‡] The figure for all the 97 intake is 0.92 ($p < 0.01$).