

Sheep No More: backbench behaviour at the beginning of the third session

As the third session of the 2001 Parliament begins, the Government whips face a parliamentary party in which Labour MPs are now rebelling more often than government MPs in *any* post-war Parliament.

This briefing note provides background information on the voting behaviour of Labour MPs since 2001. It draws on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and conducted at Nottingham University.

The note is deliberately fairly short. Further information can be obtained from the author. Contact details are supplied at the end of the paper.

The rebellions

Since 2001 there have been 141 separate backbench rebellions by Labour MPs. This is more than by Government MPs in the first two sessions of any post-war Parliament.

As Table 1 below shows, this remains true when these 141 revolts are expressed as a percentage of the number of divisions taking place. The Government whips now face a rebellion by their own backbenchers roughly once every five votes, a higher rate of rebellion than that faced by Government whips in any other post-war Government.

Table 1: Frequency of rebellion by Government backbenchers in the first two sessions of all post-war Parliaments

<i>Parliament</i>	<i>Rebellions as a % of divisions</i>
2001	18.8
1983	17.4
1970	16.2
1992	16.1
1974O	13.7
1987	12.3
1959	12.2
1979	7.8
1974F	7.3
1945	5.6
1997	5.0
1966	3.8
1950	2.1
1955	1.5
1951	0.4
1964	0.3

The rebellions over Iraq – the largest of which saw 139 Labour MPs vote against their whips – were the largest against the whip by government MPs since the beginning of modern British politics. They easily surpassed all the previous records: the 110 Labour MPs who rebelled over agricultural rent reform in 1975 or the 95 Tories who voted against the post-Dunblane firearms legislation. To find a bigger rebellion you have to go back to the Corn Laws in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The rebellions over Foundation Hospitals produced the largest revolt at the Second Reading of a Government Bill since the Shops Bill in 1986, and, in a later vote, reduced the Government’s majority to just 17, the lowest since 1997.

There have also been major rebellions over faith schools, anti-terrorism legislation, immigration and asylum, community health councils, and the firefighters dispute.

Indeed, such is the frequency with which Labour MPs are now rebelling that even some large revolts are going unreported. A rebellion in mid-November over the Fire Services Bill saw 41 Labour MPs vote against their whips – yet the revolt went almost entirely unreported in the media. The same applied to a range of large revolts over the Criminal Justice Bill on 18 November.

Table 2: Size of Labour backbench rebellions, 2001-2003

<i>Number of MPs voting against the whip</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>As % of revolts</i>
1-9	82	58
10-29	38	27
30-50	13	9
50+	8	6
Total	141	100

That said, one of the few crumbs of comfort for the whips is that most of the rebellions have been small. As Table 2 shows, the majority have consisted of fewer than 10 MPs.

The Government faces a rebellion roughly every five votes, but it suffers a large rebellion – of 30 or more backbenchers – roughly every 35 votes. The average size of the rebellions – as a percentage of the parliamentary party – is less than half that of the 1970s. So Labour MPs may therefore be rebelling more often than they did in the 1960s and 1970s, but they are not (yet at least) rebelling in anywhere near the same quantity.

The rebels

A total of 197 Labour MPs have voted against their whips since 2001. This is more than did so in the entire last (1997) Parliament. It is also more than did so in the whole of the 1992 Parliament under John Major. (Excluding the three who have left the party or died, this leaves 194 Labour MPs in receipt of the whip who have been prepared to vote against it over the last two years.) The most rebellious of these 197 MPs are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Most rebellious Labour MPs since 2001

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes cast against the whip since 2001</i>
Jeremy Corbyn	87
John McDonnell	79
Dr Lynne Jones	57
Brian Sedgemore	53
Robert Marshall-Andrews	51
Alan Simpson	48
Harry Barnes	47
Kelvin Hopkins	47
Robert Wareing	47
Dennis Skinner	43
Neil Gerrard	40
Denzil Davies	38
Andrew Bennett	37
Alice Mahon	37
Diane Abbott	36
Jim Marshall	32
Mark Fisher	31
Llew Smith	29
Kevin McNamara	28
George Galloway*	27
Mike Wood	25
Kate Hoey	24
Glenda Jackson	24
Terry Lewis	24
Tam Dalyell	22

Note: * includes only votes cast whilst in receipt of the party whip. Galloway has only cast one vote – with or against the government – since his suspension from the PLP on 6 May 2003 (and subsequent expulsion on 23 October), and that was to participate in the anti-Foundation Hospitals vote on 19 November.

The names of these MPs will not be much of a surprise to Westminster-watchers. Most of these MPs are often characterised as the 'usual suspects', a label most of them hate. But a total of 197 rebels means that the tendency (or ability) to rebel extends far beyond the 'usual suspects'. As a proportion of those who have been on the backbenches at any point over the last two years, it means that almost two-thirds (65 per cent) have rebelled so far this Parliament.

The problem for the Government is that rebellion is habit-forming. Once an MP has rebelled once, he or she is then much more likely to rebel for a second time (and then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth and so on).

It is also clear that the rebellious habit has already spread to the newly elected MPs. Of the 40 new Labour MPs (including the two by-election entrants since 2001), 23 voted against their whip during the first two sessions. This constitutes 58 per cent of the 2001 intake. By the end of the second session of the last parliament, by contrast, just 19 per cent of the 1997 intake had rebelled.

The 23 rebels are listed in Table 4, a table that David Hamilton leads by a long way. The number of rebellions cast by these MPs is relatively small – especially when compared to the most rebellious MPs in Table 3 – but this is fairly typical for new MPs. By this point in the last Parliament, for example, John McDonnell (then a new MP) had rebelled just 23 times; in the first two years of this Parliament, by contrast, he has rebelled 79 times.

Table 4: The most rebellious of the 2001 intake

Name	Number of votes cast against the whip since 2001
David Hamilton	11
Dai Havard	6
Iain Luke	6
Albert Owen	6
Vera Baird	5
John Lyons	5
Colin Challen	4
David Heyes	4
Hywel Francis	3
Kevan Jones	3
Mark Lazarowicz	3
Ann McKechin	3
Anne Picking	3
Paul Farrelly	2
Kevin Brennan	1
Parmjit Dhanda	1
Ian Lucas	1
John MacDougall	1
Khalid Mahmood	1
Rob Marris	1
Chris Mole	1
James Sheridan	1
David Wright	1

Of the 32 MPs from the 1997 intake who had rebelled within the first two years of the last Parliament, all but five have gone on to rebel again in this Parliament – in almost every case with far greater frequency. And so the 23 MPs listed above are likely to cause increasing amounts of trouble for the Government whips in the coming years and months. They are the usual suspects of the future.

Conclusion

The 2001 election did not mark the point at which the PLP changed from being sheep to rottweilers – both because Labour MPs were not sheep before (the supposed spinelessness of the 1997 Parliament was always a myth), and because they have not become rottweilers since (despite the rise in rebelliousness, cohesion remains the norm, dissent the exception).

Yet even so, the idea, fashionable just a few years ago, that the Government whips face an acquiescent parliamentary party – in which Labour MPs sit around like lemons, mindlessly supporting the Government – is now just laughable.

This Parliament has seen more backbench rebellions than any other post-war government, the largest at Second Reading for almost twenty years, and the largest rebellion of any government since the middle of the nineteenth century. It has seen almost two-thirds of its backbenchers vote against it in just over two years.

Despite this, so far the Government whips have managed to stave off defeat. The Government remains the first elected since 1966 to have survived undefeated on whipped votes. This has been no small achievement by the whips office, and cannot be attributed to the size of the Government's majority alone. On Foundation Hospitals, for example, a total of 87 Labour MPs voted against the Government's plans, which should easily have been enough to bring about a Government defeat. But the rebels never did so at the same time, and so despite suffering several large revolts and seeing their majority slashed to the lowest since 1997, and then having to overcome a resistant House of Lords, the Government eventually got its way.

There are likely to be several issues in this Queen's Speech with the potential to cause further trouble – of which student top-up fees is the most explosive. Based on the combination of the number of overall rebels now sitting on the backbenches, and the number that have already signed anti-top-up fees Early Day Motions, the issue has the clear potential to defeat the Government. There have already been signs of compromise from the Government in order to placate critics of the policy, but yet more concessions, together with some intensive whipping, will be required to prevent the first defeat since 1997.

Notes

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