

Who are the 'usual suspects'?

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In addition to being an unnecessarily complicated film, the 'usual suspects' is a phrase frequently applied to MPs who regularly vote against the Government. Many of them dislike the phrase intensely – as they do 'maverick' or 'serial rebel' – believing that it downplays and belittles their actions. To imply that those who oppose the Government are just the 'usual suspects' is to imply that their opposition is predictable, only to be expected, and should not therefore be taken seriously.

This short briefing paper looks at the composition of the major backbench rebellions to have taken place since 2001 – and the identity of those who rebelled in each case. To what extent are there MPs who have rebelled in most (or even all) rebellions? To what extent are there MPs who are usual suspects?

The rebellions

From the General Election of 2001 until the end of the second session in November 2003, there were 141 separate backbench rebellions by Labour MPs. This is more than by Government MPs in the first two sessions of *any* post-war Parliament, either in absolute terms or 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.

These rebellions have ranged across the whole gamut of Government policy, including opposition to the war in Afghanistan, commonhold and leasehold reform, community care, Post Office closures, pensions, ministerial conduct, regional assemblies, and so on. But 11 issues (broadly defined) saw rebellions in which at least 15 Labour MPs cross-voted. They were:

1. In July 2001 40 Labour MPs voted against the timetabling motion for a debate on the membership of select committees.
2. Throughout November and December 2001 there were 22 separate backbench revolts during the passage of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill. The largest saw 32 Labour MPs support an amendment to allow judicial review of the Home Secretary's decisions to detain terrorist suspects without trial.
3. In January 2002 26 Labour MPs backed a backbench amendment to the NHS Reform and Health Care Professions Bill, opposing the abolition of Community Health Councils (CHCs).
4. There were three rebellions during the passage of the Education Bill, including one in February 2002 in which 46 Labour backbenchers supported an amendment moved by the former Health Secretary, Frank Dobson, on faith schools.
5. Throughout June and November 2002 there were 17 separate rebellions during the passage of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill. The largest, insisting on the education of asylum seeker children in mainstream education, saw 43 Labour MPs vote against their whips.
6. In June and October 2002 the Enterprise Bill saw two rebellions, the largest of which saw 24 Labour MPs support an attempt to compel the Office of Fair Trading to take into account damage to the public interest and employment levels when determining competition policy on mergers and acquisitions.

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7. The biggest rebellions of all came over the possibility of military action in Iraq, the largest of which saw 139 Labour MPs vote for an amendment that 'the case for war against Iraq had not yet been established, especially given the absence of specific United Nations authorisation'.
8. The subject of firefighters' pay and conditions saw rebellions during both the Local Government Bill and the Fire Services Bill; the largest saw 41 Labour MPs vote against their whips.
9. There were 20 rebellions throughout April, May and November against aspects of the Criminal Justice Bill. The two biggest revolts saw 33 Labour backbenchers vote against the abandonment of trial by jury in complicated serious fraud cases, or where there was deemed a danger of a jury being interfered with.
10. There were nine rebellions during the passage of the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Bill that sought to establish Foundation Hospital Trusts. May saw the largest rebellion, when 65 Labour MPs defied their whips to back a Reasoned Amendment to Second Reading, but a subsequent revolt in November saw the Government's majority cut to 17, the lowest since Labour entered Government in 1997.
11. In July 2003 15 Eurosceptic Labour MPs opposed a Government motion welcoming the draft Constitutional Treaty produced by the Convention on the Future of Europe.

The rebels

Between them, these 141 rebellions involved a total of 197 Labour MPs, the most rebellious of whom are listed in the Appendix. Most of these names listed there will not be a great surprise to seasoned observers of Westminster – or to the Government whips. Jeremy Corbyn heads the list (with 87 votes against the party whip), closely followed by John McDonnell (79). There is then a sharp drop, down to three MPs with over 50 dissenting votes each (Jones, Sedgemore and Marshall-Andrews), closely followed by another six with 40 or more dissenting votes.

It is worth stressing that this means that even the most rebellious Labour MP only votes against the party once every eight votes. And – as the Appendix shows – Corbyn and McDonnell are exceptional in their behaviour, even when compared to some of the other more rebellious Labour MPs. Even Lynne Jones, the third most rebellious Labour MP (and the most rebellious woman), has voted against the party line 57 times, just once in every 13 votes. Even the rebels, therefore, are overwhelmingly 'loyal' in the division lobbies.

However, one problem with producing a league table like that in the Appendix is that it takes no account of the different number of votes that there might be on some issues. Some topics (criminal justice, for example) saw repeated votes and rebellions in the Commons; others (like the CHCs issue) saw more isolated votes. As a result, an MP who objected strongly to an issue with multiple votes but remained otherwise 'loyal' could seem more rebellious than an MP who rebelled across a far wider range of issues where there were fewer opportunities to dissent.

So the raw number of dissenting votes cast is not necessarily a good measure of whether someone is rebellious across a range of issues.[†] Instead, therefore, it is useful to look at the record of MPs in terms of the number of issues over which they have rebelled rather than the number of dissenting votes they have cast.

[†] That said, for those MPs who have rebelled at least once, the correlation between the number of issues over which they have rebelled and the number of dissenting votes cast against the whip is very high, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.867 ($p < 0.01$).

A total of 190 Labour MPs rebelled over one or more of the 11 issues listed above. Table 1 shows the number of issues over which these 190 voted against the Government.

Table 1: Number of issues over which Labour rebels dissented, 2001-2003

<i>Number of issues</i>	<i>Number of rebels</i>	<i>% of rebels</i>
1	69	36
2	36	19
3	26	14
4	11	6
5	18	9
6	6	3
7	4	2
8	5	4
9	7	4
10	5	3
11	3	2
Total	190	102

The 'usual suspects' is a (doubtless deliberately) vague phrase, but if by it we mean rebelling over, say, three-quarters of the issues to see backbench dissent, then (as the table shows) the 'usual suspects' comprise just 15 MPs. If we widen the definition as far as it can possibly go, to include those MPs who rebelled over 50 per cent of the issues that triggered backbench dissent (and by its very nature, 'usual' cannot mean less than 50 per cent), then we are still talking about just 30 MPs. These 30 are listed in Table 2, below. To avoid offending anyone, we shall eschew describing these MPs as the usual suspects – but when there is a rebellion you can suspect they will usually be involved.

Yet what is most striking about Tables 1 and 2 is how few such MPs there are. Out of almost 200 rebels, there are just 30 who have rebelled in more than half of the issues to have caused trouble. Many of the MPs who might be casually dismissed as 'the usual suspects' in fact have voting which is much more discerning than this label implies – including people like Peter Kilfoyle (who rebelled over five issues out of the 11), Ann Cryer (five), Austin Mitchell (five), Gwyneth Dunwoody (four), Tam Dalyell (three) and Graham Allen (three).

The good news for the Government therefore is that although there are lots of MPs who are willing to rebel against it, it does not yet face any large-scale factional opposition on the backbenches of the PLP. The flip side of this, however, is that when it gets into trouble with its backbenchers, it cannot simply dismiss its problems as the result of the behaviour of the usual suspects – because there just aren't enough of them to cause it trouble.

Table 2: Labour MPs who rebelled on more than half of main issues, 2001-2003

<i>Number of issues rebelled on (out of 11)</i>					
6	7	8	9	10	11
Harold Best	Ronnie Campbell	Dr Ian Gibson	Neil Gerrard	Harry Barnes	Kelvin Hopkins
Bill Etherington	Michael Clapham	Kate Hoey	Alice Mahon	Jeremy Corbyn	John McDonnell
David Taylor	Harry Cohen	Diane Abbott	Bob Marshall-Andrews	Dr Lynne Jones	Dennis Skinner
Mike Wood	John Cryer	Andrew Bennett	Alan Simpson	Brian Sedgemore	
Michael Connarty		Llew Smith	John Austin	Robert Wareing	
Gordon Prentice			Terry Lewis		
			Jim Marshall		

Appendix 1: Most rebellious Labour MPs, 2001-2003

<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.