

Europe: The dog that hasn't barked (yet?)

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In the 1970s the issue of Europe could split the Parliamentary Labour Party right down the middle. In April 1975, on a free vote, 138 Labour MPs voted in favour of the Labour Government's renegotiation of the EEC Treaty, with 145 Labour MPs voting against. Even as recently as the 1990s, when the European Communities (Amendment) Bill, more commonly known as the Maastricht Treaty, was going through the Commons, Labour MPs were still rebelling in decent numbers. There were some 40 occasions in 1992/3 when Labour backbenchers rebelled over Maastricht. These involved a total of almost 1,300 dissenting votes on the topic, more than were cast by Conservative MPs opposed to the Bill. There were six occasions when more than 60 Labour MPs defied their whip over the issue.

Given this, and given the depth and breadth of dissent by backbench Labour MPs during the last ten years, it is something of a surprise to discover that the issue of Europe did not produce any large-scale Labour rebellions during the Blair era. At least on the Labour benches, Europe has been very much the dog that didn't bark.

Now, however, there is talk of a possible significant Labour revolt on the subject. The Scottish Labour MP Ian Davidson is claiming to have the support of more than 120 fellow Labour MPs in calling for a referendum on the latest European Treaty. This briefing paper looks at the rebellions over the last decade, along with the identity of the rebels, and considers the possibility of Prime Minister Brown encountering a large backbench revolt over the European treaty.

Previous European rebellions

Between 1997 to 2007 there were only 19 Labour backbench rebellions on the issue of Europe. This figure excludes revolts on bills and motions which, though they mentioned Europe, were in reality on other subjects – such as rebellions over European elections, which were about opposition to the introduction of proportional representation or postal voting.

The 19 revolts occurred in all three of Blair's Parliaments, with the majority (13) occurring in the middle parliament, between 2001 and 2005. There were also three between 1997 and 2001 and three between 2005 and 2007. These 19 rebellions constitute just four percent of the all the rebellions endured by the Blair government.

Moreover, they were never significant in size. Between them, the 19 revolts only included 48 dissenting votes. They therefore constitute a rather pitiful 0.7 percent of all the rebellious votes cast against the whip by Labour MPs during the Blair period. The average was 2.5 Labour MPs per European revolt, and the largest rebellion, the only rebellion of any note, occurred in July 2003 when 15 Labour backbenchers opposed a Government motion approving of the draft Constitutional Treaty produced by the Convention on the Future of Europe.

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The rebels

With a nice symmetry, these 19 rebellions involved a total of 19 Labour MPs (listed in Table 1, below).

1. Blair's European rebels, 1997-2007

<i>Name of MP</i>	<i>Number of times rebelled on Europe</i>
Denzil Davies	13
Dennis Skinner*	9
Ian Davidson*	3
Kelvin Hopkins*	3
John McDonnell*	3
Jeremy Corbyn*	2
David Drew*	2
Frank Field*	2
Harry Barnes	1
Ronnie Campbell*	1
John Cryer	1
Dr Ian Gibson*	1
Roger Godsiff*	1
Kate Hoey*	1
Terry Lewis	1
John MacDougall*	1
Ray Powell	1
Alan Simpson*	1
David Taylor*	1

Note: * indicates an MP still in the Commons

By far the most Eurosceptic Labour backbencher in the Blair period was Denzil Davies, who rebelled on 13 occasions, against nearly everything to do with Europe, from the Nice Treaty to the Common Fisheries Policy. Next came Dennis Skinner, a long-time opponent of European integration, with nine dissenting votes. Of the 19 rebels, 14 remain in the House of Commons.

There are, of course, other Labour MPs with a history of opposition to issues relating to European integration. For example, of the Labour MPs who voted against the Third Reading of the Maastricht treaty a total of 28 remain in the Commons. Two of these are now members of the Government, leaving 26 former Maastricht rebels now on the backbenches.* Adding the two groups together, and avoiding any double counting, gives a total of 33. Even including some MPs not in either group, but who

* Apart from those who have also rebelled since 1997 as well, the remaining Maastricht rebels on the backbenches are Diane Abbott, John Austin, Dr Roger Berry, Michael Clapham, Michael Connarty, Brian Donohoe, Gwyneth Dunwoody, Bill Etherington, Neil Gerrard, George Howarth, Dr Lynne Jones, David Marshall, Austin Mitchell, George Mudie, Bill Olnor, Greg Pope, Gordon Prentice, Alan Williams, and David Winnick.

have gone public in their calls for a referendum, such as Keith Vaz and Gisela Stuart, it is difficult to see how this number will rise much above 40 at best.

If Ian Davidson has secured 120 MPs prepared to defy their whips, then he must have secured the backing of an awful lot of Labour backbenchers who have previously not expressed any misgivings about the issue of Europe.