

The 'usual suspects' revisited

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The phrase 'usual suspects' is routinely applied to MPs who vote against the Government. It is a phrase that most of them dislike, 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?

This paper updates our earlier analysis (published in December 2003), by including the rebellions from the beginning of the third session of the Parliament (in November 2003) until the whit break (May 2004).

The rebellions

From 2001 to May 2004, there were 169 separate rebellions by Labour MPs. They ranged across the whole gamut of Government policy, but by 13 issues (broadly defined) have seen rebellions in which at least 15 Labour MPs cross-voted:

1. In July 2001 40 Labour MPs voted against the Government's 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.
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 2003 against aspects of the Criminal Justice Bill. The two largest saw 33 Labour backbenchers vote against the

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abandonment of trial by jury in complicated serious fraud cases, or where there was thought to be 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 2003 saw the largest rebellion, when 65 Labour MPs defied their whips to back a Reasoned Amendment to Second Reading, and a subsequent revolt in November saw the Government's majority cut to 17.
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.
12. The Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc) Bill saw nine separate Labour rebellions by the time of the Whitsun recess in 2004, the largest of which involved 34 Labour backbenchers objecting to the Government's plans to remove the right of failed asylum seekers to appeal to the high court.
13. The Government's plans to introduce 'top-up' fees contained in the Higher Education Bill had produced five Labour rebellions by the time of the Whitsun recess, the largest of which saw 72 Labour MPs oppose the Bill's Second Reading, reducing the Government's majority to just five.

The rebels

Between them, these 169 rebellions involved a total of 204 Labour MPs, the most rebellious of whom are listed in the Appendix.

The identity of the most rebellious MPs is unlikely to be a huge surprise to anyone with a passing knowledge of Westminster or the politics of the PLP. Jeremy Corbyn heads the list (with 102 votes against the party whip), closely followed by John McDonnell (93). There is then a sharp drop, down to three MPs with over 60 dissenting votes each (Jones, Marshall-Andrews and Sedgemore), closely followed by another five with 50 or more dissenting votes.

But one problem with producing a league table based on the number of dissenting votes 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 often more 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.

A total of 195 Labour MPs rebelled over one or more of the 13 issues listed above.[†] Table 1 (below) shows the number of issues over which these 195 voted against the Government.

What is striking is how even those MPs who have rebelled have not rebelled over many issues. Almost a third of the rebels (32 per cent) have only rebelled over one issue. Another third (32 per cent) have only rebelled over two or three issues. And only very few have rebelled over more than half of the issues to have caused backbench dissent so far: just 36 have rebelled over seven or more of these issues, and just 15 Labour MPs rebelled over 11 or more.

[†] In addition, there were nine MPs who did not rebel over one of these 13 main issues, but who cast a vote against the whip during one of the smaller, more idiosyncratic, rebellions. They were (with the number of dissenting votes in parentheses): Stuart Bell and James Sheridan (both two), George Howarth, Jackie Lawrence, John MacDougall, Dr Lewis Moonie, Ray Powell, Andrew Reed, Rachel Squire (all one).

1: Number of issues over which Labour rebels dissented, 2001-Whit 2004

<i>Number of issues</i>	<i>Number of rebels</i>	<i>% of rebels</i>
1	61	31
2	38	19
3	24	12
4	15	8
5	12	6
6	9	5
7	10	5
8	4	2
9	3	2
10	4	2
11	7	4
12	5	3
13	3	2
Total	195	101

The most rebellious 36 are listed in Table 2 (below). The table is headed by the same three MPs as we identified in our paper in December 2003 – John McDonnell, Kelvin Hopkins, and Dennis Skinner. It also largely consists of the same MPs as in December – and in pretty much the identical order.

The reason for this is simple enough: it is that nearly all of the MPs we identified as the 'usual suspects' in December have since gone on to rebel over both the issues to have seen rebellion since: asylum and immigration (issue 12 in the list above) and top-up fees (issue 13). As is clear from the profusion of +2 scores in the table, the vast majority of the MPs listed in Table 2 rebelled over both of these issues. A handful (five) just rebelled on one of the issues to see rebellion in the third session, and just one (Ronnie Campbell) rebelled over neither issue.

Just as in December, therefore, 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. Out of almost 200 Labour MPs who have been willing to rebel just 36 have rebelled in half of the issues to have seen backbench dissent. 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. In reality, the Government's problems have not stemmed from the so-called 'usual suspects', but from the much larger number of its MPs who were prepared to vote against it when they deemed it necessary.

2: Labour MPs who rebelled on half or more of main issues, 2001-2004

<i>Number of issues rebelled over</i>						
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Denzil Davies (+2)	Michael Connarty (+2)	Harry Cohen (+2)	Diane Abbott (+2)	R. Marshall-Andrews (+2)	Jeremy Corbyn (+2)	John McDonnell (+2)
Mark Fisher (+2)	Harold Best (+2)	John Cryer (+2)	Andrew Bennett (+2)	Alan Simpson (+2)	Lynne Jones (+2)	Kelvin Hopkins (+2)
Glenda Jackson (+2)	Michael Clapham (+1)	Ian Gibson (+1)	Llew Smith (+2)	Neil Gerrard (+2)	Brian Sedgemore (+2)	Dennis Skinner (+2)
Mike Wood (+1)	Bill Etherington (+2)		Kate Hoey (+2)	Jim Marshall [†] (+2)	Robert Wareing (+2)	
Gordon Prentice (+1)				Alice Mahon (+2)	Harry Barnes (+2)	
David Taylor (+1)				Terry Lewis (+2)		
Paul Flynn (+2)				John Austin (+2)		
Rudi Vis (+2)						
Martin Caton (+2)						
Ronnie Campbell (-)						

Note: [†] figure correct up until his death in May 2004.

Appendix

Most rebellious Government backbenchers from 2001-Whit 2004

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes against the whip</i>
Jeremy Corbyn	102
John McDonnell	93
Lynne Jones	67
Robert Marshall-Andrews	62
Brian Sedgemore	61
Robert Wareing	58
Alan Simpson	57
Harry Barnes	56
Kelvin Hopkins	54
Dennis Skinner	53
Neil Gerrard	47
Denzil Davies	46
Diane Abbott	43
Jim Marshall [†]	42
Alice Mahon	42
Mark Fisher	41
Andrew Bennett	41
Glenda Jackson	34
Llew Smith	34
Kevin McNamara	32
Kate Hoey	29
Terry Lewis	28
Mike Wood	27
George Galloway [*]	27
Tam Dalyell	25
Hilton Dawson	23
Gwyneth Dunwoody	23
Harry Cohen	21
John Austin	21
Michael Connarty	21

Note: * includes only votes cast whilst in receipt of the party whip, up until his suspension from the PLP on 6 May 2003 (and subsequent expulsion on 23 October); [†] figure correct up until his death in May 2004.