

They haven't gone away, you know: Backbench Labour rebels under Gordon Brown

PHILIP COWLEY and MARK STUART*

Most new governments enjoy a relatively peaceful time with their backbenchers when first in power. And at first sight, this appears to have been true of the new Brown government. The first month of Gordon Brown's premiership produced a handful of small backbench rebellions in the House of Commons, but none were especially large or worrying.

Yet when compared to other post-war Prime Ministers, it is noticeable how many rebellions Brown suffered in his first month, how large they were, how quickly they occurred, and how many MPs they involved. In all of these four areas, the Brown Government has already set post-war records for backbench dissent.

Time of first revolt

Prior to Brown's arrival in No 10, the length of time before the first rebellion under each new Prime Minister in the post-war era ranged from five days to sixteen months.

The previous speed record had been held by Winston Churchill's administration, which saw complete backbench cohesion break after just five days in office in October 1951, as a result of a dispute on a whipped vote over the Speakership of the House of Commons. John Major lasted six days in 1990 before suffering a rebellion of seven MPs over – prophetically – the Government's European policy. James Callaghan's honeymoon in 1976 lasted only seven days, when Jim Sillars (later to found the breakaway Scottish Labour Party) voted against raising the duty on spirits in the first Budget of the new administration.

Margaret Thatcher's revolts honeymoon also lasted for less than a month, broken by a rebellion by three Conservatives over the obscure, and now largely forgotten, dispute over the island of Kiribati in May 1979.

Tony Blair's rebellions honeymoon falls in the middle range of post-war Prime Ministers. He became Prime Minister on 1 May 1997, and did not experience a rebellion on his own side until 25 November when Jamie Cann voted against the Second Reading of the European Parliamentary Elections Bill. Cann objected strongly to the new system of proportional representation.

Harold Wilson enjoyed the longest honeymoon of any post-war Prime Minister, clocking up 16 months before a lone Labour Member voted to increase the earnings limit in respect of retirement pensions. Wilson only just pipped Macmillan's record of just short of 16 months, held until 14 Conservatives voted against the transitional arrangements for derating mainly seaside hotels.

By contrast, Brown's period of backbench unanimity lasted just 45 minutes, from 2.48pm on 27 June 2007, when he left Buckingham Palace as the new Prime

* University of Nottingham. Further details are available from www.revolts.co.uk.

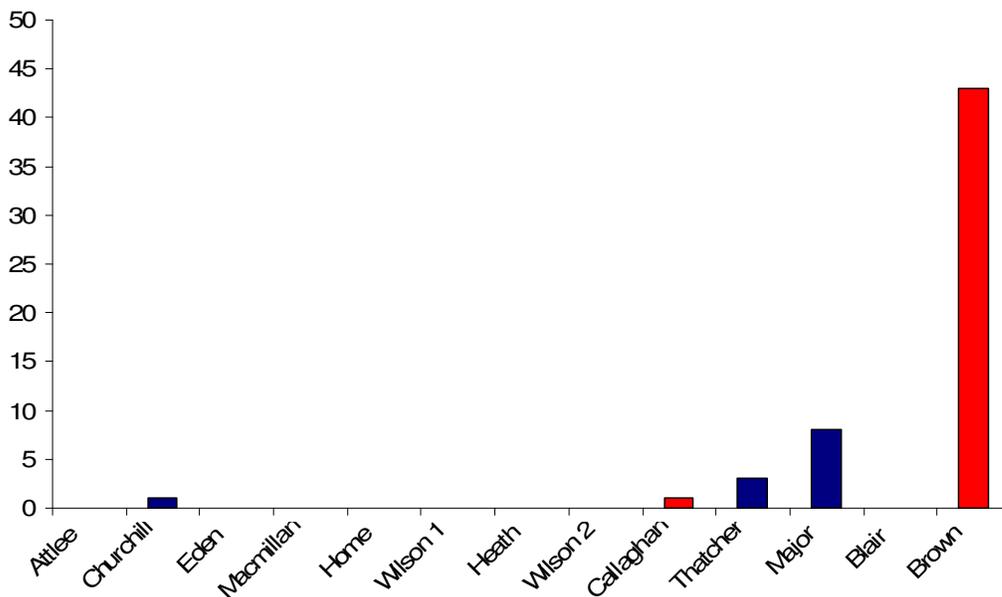
Minister, until 3.33pm, when Austin Mitchell rebelled over the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Bill. Ironically, Mitchell's new clause hoped to 'impose discipline' to the debt enforcement industry.

The first month

The majority of new Prime Ministers between 1945 and 2007 saw not a single backbench revolt within their first month in office. That applied to Attlee, Eden, Macmillan, Home, Wilson (both in 1964 and 1974), Heath and Blair. Of the others, Churchill, Callaghan, and Thatcher faced just one backbench revolt; Major suffered two revolts within the first month of his premiership. Gordon Brown endured nine backbench rebellions within his first month in office – more than every other post-war Prime Minister combined.

He has also seen the largest rebellion within the first month of any post-war Premier. The previous record was held by John Major's backbenchers, seven of whom defied their whips on 4 December 1990 over the government's European policy. Other first month revolts were even smaller: Thatcher's Kiribati revolt involved just three MPs, Churchill and Callaghan's largest revolt in their first month involved just one backbencher. By contrast, in his first month, Gordon Brown faced two revolts over the Pensions Bill, one of 17 MPs, another of 16. Even the smaller of these two rebellions was larger than the largest revolt in the first month of every other post-war premier combined. And (largely as a result), he has also seen more MPs rebel in total in his first month than any other post-war Prime Minister – 21 separate MPs defying the whip, compared to a total of eight in the first month of the Major government. And again, this figure for the total number of backbench rebels in the first month of the Brown government is larger than the totals for the first months of every other post-war PM combined.

1. Dissenting votes cast by government backbenchers in the first month of all post-war Premier'ships



The real impact of this is seen when looking at the total number of dissenting votes cast against the Brown government in its first month. In total, Labour MPs cast a total of 43 dissenting votes against the whips in Gordon Brown's first month as Prime Minister. As the figure (above) shows, that is noticeably larger than for every other PM since 1945. The figure for the first month of the Brown government is more than five times the figure for the Major government, which is in second place. Not only is it greater than the total of the first months of all other Prime Ministers combined, it is more three times all the others combined.

Conclusion

Plenty of the Prime Ministers discussed here later suffered devastating backbench revolts. Wilson may not have seen any rebellions within his first months as Prime Minister – but when he did face his first major backbench revolt it was 76 Labour MPs strong. Callaghan may have only faced one revolt within a month, but once the honeymoon ended, dissent mushroomed to previously unseen levels from the summer of 1976 onwards. Ditto for John Major. The period from 1990 till 1992 saw relatively infrequent revolt; it was after his 1992 general election victory that the trouble began, over Europe, crippling his administration.

In itself, these figures are not that alarming for the new Government. The number of rebels has not spread that far beyond the list of the usual suspects. But they are proof that the rebellious behaviour seen under the Blair governments – which itself set a whole batch of records that the whips would have rather seen left alone – has not gone away. In addition to the revolts listed above, Brown's first month in power also saw ministers engaged in a series of compromises over the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Bill, the Offender Management Bill, and the Pensions Bill in order to placate backbench rebellions. Without such negotiation, the level of rebellion would have been noticeably larger. The evidence is clear enough: Brown needs to treat his backbenchers with care.