

Trident record breakers?

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No previous Labour leader would be surprised to discover that a Labour government was facing a rebellion over defence policy. Successive Labour leaders have struggled with their backbenchers over precisely this topic. Indeed, the first ever rebellion by a Labour MP in government came when the Rev Herbert Dunnico, the then Labour MP for Consett, voted against the Government's programme of light cruiser construction – the Trident of 1924.

This short briefing paper discusses the scale of the rebellion facing the Government and explains some of the background. It also identifies a list of likely rebels and gives some simple historical comparisons.

The scale of opposition

We last published a briefing paper on this subject in November 2006,¹ at which point there had been nine Early Day Motions hostile to Trident and supported by Labour MPs. Since then, there have been four fresh EDMs relating to the issue, bringing the total number of Labour-supported motions to thirteen since the General Election.

Twenty-two Labour MPs have signed EDM 576 in the name of Gordon Prentice calling on the Labour Party's ruling National Executive Committee (NEC) to televise a special gathering of Labour's National Policy Forum to consider the Trident upgrade. Nine Labour MPs signed an EDM (1017) put down by Dai Davies, the Independent MP for Blaenau Gwent, which claimed that since the Prime Minister's judgement on Iraq had been 'fatally flawed', the Government should 'postpone any decision to replace Trident' and instead 'devote its attention to genuine multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations'.

Of far greater significance were two EDMs from Jon Trickett and David Chaytor. Trickett's EDM 579, calling on the Government to extend the period of consultation on the Government's White Paper, attracted 83 Labour signatories. Chaytor's EDM 798 called on 'any decision on the renewal of the Trident fleet of submarines to be deferred', and was supported by 51 Labour MPs.

Taken together, the 13 EDMs have now been signed by some 124 Labour MPs (plus Clare Short, who resigned the Labour whip in October 2006). The attached table (below) sorts the 124 potential rebels by number of EDMs signed. Ann Cryer, the Labour MP for Keighley, is the only Labour MP to have signed all thirteen. Worryingly for the Government, 94 out of the 124 signatories (or 76 per cent) have already voted against the Government in this Parliament. The 30 MPs who have so far stayed loyal this Parliament include six MPs from the new intake: Gordon Banks, Mary Creagh, Sharon Hodgson, David Anderson, Roberta Blackman-Woods and Sarah McCarthy-Fry. Another nine new MPs – Katy Clark, Linda Riordan, Sir Peter Soulsby, Jim McGovern, Sian James, Emily Thornberry, Nia Griffith, Sadiq Khan and by-election entrant Jim Devine – have both signed at least one of the EDMs and voted against the Government already this Parliament.

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¹ Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart, 'PLP in Defence Rebellion Shocker', available from www.revolts.co.uk; in turn, that replaced Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart, 'Labour Concerns Grow over Trident', published in March 2006.

Some of the earlier EDMs – such as 1113 and 1197 – mainly called for a consultation paper and for Parliament to be allowed to have a vote on the issue, rather than opposition to Trident *per se*. Some of these potential rebels will now be satisfied that the Government has allowed a vote on the issue. Yet even taking just the two recent EDMs from Trickett and Chaytor produces a list of 90 possible rebels – and even this excludes some known opponents.

The problem for the whips

This is a difficult issue for the Labour whips to handle. For one thing, it comes as many English MPs are up for reselection and at their most vulnerable to pressure from activists. (It was at exactly this point in the parliamentary cycle in 2003 that the Iraq revolts took place). It is also a particularly live issue for Scottish MPs, with Trident based in Scotland and with the Scottish elections due on 3 May. Although defence is a reserved matter, the SNP have been busy attacking the Scottish Labour Party over the issue. Our list of potential rebels contains no fewer than 17 Scottish Labour MPs out of a Scottish parliamentary party of 41.² The whips will be hoping to persuade at least a half-a-dozen of these MPs to abstain or vote with the Government – or else the SNP will be able to argue that Labour MPs are hopelessly divided on defence policy.

More generally, it is a difficult issue because there is so little room for compromise. The usual government tactic with embryonic rebellions is to engage in a series of negotiations, giving a concession here, a rephrased clause there, and negotiating their way out of difficulty. It is harder to do this with an either/or issue like nuclear weapons. Add to that the fact that all the rebels know the government are going to win, and it becomes possible for an MP to vote against the party safe in the knowledge that the government isn't going to be defeated as a result. This is a free hit for some rebels.

We suspect two things will muddy the waters – and limit (somewhat) the appearance of division. The first is that we are expecting lots of abstentions, which could lower any headline figure for cross votes. The second complicating factor is that there are two votes – the Trickett amendment arguing for delay and the substantive motion. The whips will be trying to divide the rebels, getting some of them to back one rebellion but abstain on the other, whilst persuading other MPs to do the opposite. Two rebellions of, say, 60 would be less damaging than one concentrated revolt of, say, 80.

Either way, we cannot see any way that the government will get this revolt down to below 34 cross-voting MPs – the point at which the government are reliant on opposition MPs to win the vote.³ As a result, there is no will-they, won't-they element to this vote. They won't. The government will win because it enjoys the support of the Conservatives. This will then mean that the Prime Minister has enacted his key foreign policy decision (Iraq, in 2003) thanks only to the votes of the Opposition; he has enacted a key plank of his third term domestic agenda

² Gordon Banks, Anne Begg, Russell Brown, Brian Donohoe, Katy Clark, Michael Connarty, Ian Davidson, Jim Devine, Frank Doran, David Hamilton, Mark Lazarowicz, Ann McKechnie, Jim McGovern, David Marshall, Sandra Osborne, Mohammad Sarwar and Gavin Strang. Add in Nigel Griffiths, who resigned from the government over the issue, and we're up to 18 out of a Scottish Westminster contingent of 41.

³ The figure assumes a full turnout of MPs, and unity amongst the other parties. In practice, the figure is a bit more flexible than this: there is, for example, never a full turnout and we are expecting some small splits within the Opposition.

(schools reform, in 2006) thanks only to the votes of the Opposition; and he will have enacted his key defence policy decision (Trident, 2007) thanks only to the votes of the Opposition.

Comparison figures

So all the attention is on the size of any Labour rebellion – and whether it'll be a record breaker. The five issues to have provoked the biggest rebellions under Blair to date are:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Iraq (2003): | 139 |
| Higher Education Bill (2004): | 72 |
| Education and Inspections Bill (2006): | 69 |
| Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill (1999): | 67 |
| Health and Social Care Bill (2003): | 65 |

Note: All figures are for cross votes and ignore abstentions. Some of these issues – most notably Iraq - involved multiple large rebellions; reported here is the largest rebellion caused by each issue.⁴

It might therefore be possible for this to be the largest domestic rebellion endured by Blair (if you want to class Trident as domestic), but there is no indication that it will break the 139 MPs who defied the whip over Iraq. A figure of 70 would make it the largest rebellion this parliament – topping the 69 who rebelled over the Education and Inspections Bill. A figure of 73 would make it the largest domestic rebellion since 1997.

Another (higher) benchmark is with a revolt in 1977, which is to date the largest rebellion in government by Labour MPs on the issue of defence: then, 79 Labour MPs supported an amendment calling for a reduction in arms spending. Wednesday at least has the potential to top this, although we suspect that this particular record might remain unbroken.

⁴ There were, for example, three large Iraq revolts, all larger than the 72 MPs who defied the whip on the Second Reading of the Higher Education Bill. As a result, a rebellion of, say 73, should not be described as the second largest revolt faced by Blair but the fourth.

Anti-Trident EDM signatories

| Name | 1017 | 798 | 579 | 576 | 129 | 649 | 1113 | 1197 | 1614 | 219 | 239 | 323 | 327 | No |
|---------------------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|
| Ann Cryer | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | 13 |
| Jeremy Corbyn | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 12 |
| Lynne Jones | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 12 |
| Alan Simpson | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | 12 |
| Harry Cohen | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 12 |
| John McDonnell | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | 11 |
| Kelvin Hopkins | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | 11 |
| Paul Flynn | | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | 11 |
| David Drew | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 11 |
| Neil Gerrard | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 11 |
| Martin Caton | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 11 |
| Robert Wareing | | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 10 |
| Linda Riordan | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 10 |
| Ms. Katy Clark | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 10 |
| Gordon Prentice | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | | X | X | 10 |
| Rudi Vis | | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 10 |
| William Etherington | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 10 |
| Marsha Singh | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | 10 |
| Glenda Jackson | X | X | X | | X | | X | X | X | X | | | X | 9 |
| Ian Gibson | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | | | X | 9 |
| David Taylor | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | | | | X | X | 9 |
| Mike Wood | | X | | | X | | | X | X | X | X | X | X | 8 |
| Peter Soulsby | | X | X | | X | | X | X | X | X | | | X | 8 |
| David Heyes | | X | X | | | | X | X | X | X | | X | X | 8 |
| David Chaytor | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | | X | X | | | 8 |
| Janet Dean | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | | | | 8 |
| Betty Williams | | X | X | | X | | X | X | X | X | | | X | 8 |
| Clare Short * | | | X | | X | | X | X | X | X | | | X | 7 |
| Mark Fisher | | | X | | X | | X | X | X | | | X | X | 7 |
| Diane Abbott | | | X | | X | X | X | X | | X | | | X | 7 |
| Michael Clapham | | | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | | | | 7 |
| Roger Godsiff | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | | | | | 7 |
| Gavin Strang | | X | X | | X | | X | X | X | X | | | | 7 |
| Fabian Hamilton | | X | X | | X | | X | X | X | | | | X | 7 |
| Joan Ruddock | | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | | | | | 7 |
| David Lepper | | X | | | X | X | X | X | X | X | | | | 7 |
| Desmond Turner | | | X | | X | | X | X | X | X | | | | 6 |
| Richard Burden | | X | X | | | | X | X | X | X | | | | 6 |
| Jim Dobbin | | | X | | X | | | X | | X | X | | X | 6 |
| Joan Walley | | | X | | X | X | X | X | X | | | | | 6 |
| Gwyn Prosser | | X | X | | | | | X | | X | | X | X | 6 |
| Nia Griffith | | | X | | | X | X | X | | X | | | X | 6 |
| Doug Naysmith | | X | X | | | | X | X | X | X | | | | 6 |
| Graham Stringer | | X | X | X | X | | X | X | | | | | | 6 |
| Jon Trickett | | | X | | | | | X | X | X | | | X | 5 |
| Michael Meacher | | | X | | | | X | X | | X | | | X | 5 |

