

## **Benefit traps: Labour's backbench rebellions over welfare reform**

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It is hardly novel for a Labour Government to find itself in difficulties with its backbenchers over benefit reform. The current concerns about mooted changes to Incapacity Benefit are merely the latest in a long line of rebellions by Labour MPs against proposals to reform welfare policy. This short briefing note provides details of the largest revolts by Labour backbenchers against their governments on welfare reform.

### **Pre-war**

The largest backbench revolt against the very first Labour Government in 1924 was over benefits. A total of 73 Labour MPs – almost four out of every ten members of the PLP – voted against the MacDonald Government over the right of strikers to claim unemployment benefit. As a percentage of the PLP, this remains the largest ever rebellion by Labour backbenchers against their government, larger (in percentage terms) even than the revolts over Iraq. There were further rebellions on the Bill involving 68 and 43 rebels.

MacDonald's second government, 1929-31, also struggled with the issue of unemployment benefit. The Unemployment Insurance (No 2) Bill, for example, saw repeated rebellions – the largest seeing 32 Labour MPs support an attempt by Jennie Lee to increase the level of benefit paid to the children of the unemployed from two shillings to five shillings a week. No fewer than 46 of the 62 divisions which witnessed Labour dissent in the 1930-31 session were on the issue of unemployment. Of these, an astonishing 39 took place on one bill – the Unemployment Insurance (No 3) Bill – which sought to impose various restrictions on the entitlement to benefit of various categories of workers. The legislation, which became known as the Anomalies Bill, was opposed by a determined group of Labour MPs. On 15 July 1931, Labour backbenchers opposed the Bill in 32 straight divisions (33 including the Business of the House motion at the beginning of the day's parliamentary business), making it the highest number of Labour consecutive rebellions to take place in one day in any Labour Government before or since.

### **Post-war**

There were also significant rebellions over benefits in 1946 (32 Labour MPs rebelled over a clause in the National Insurance Bill that required claimants to apply to a tribunal for assistance after 180 days), in 1976 (30 rebelled over the Social Security (Misc Provisions) Bill that, *inter alia*, placed restrictions on the unemployment benefit of occupational pensioners) and in 1977 (when Audrey Wise moved an amendment to the Finance Bill, supported by 34 Labour MPs, that would have excluded from the calculation of taxable income the dependency allowance for dependent children of widows and others).

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Of the three issues to see the largest rebellions during the 1997 Parliament, two of them were benefits issues. The issue of lone parent benefit contained in the Social Security Bill triggered the first major Government rebellion of the 1997 Parliament. 47 MPs voted against their whips, plus abstentions, and four MPs resigned from the Government. The later Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill triggered a total of 10 separate rebellions, involving a total of 74 MPs. The largest rebellion involved 67 MPs, plus a large number of abstentions. That was the largest revolt against the whip during the 1997 Parliament.

The 2001 Parliament has so far not seen any medium or large sized rebellions over welfare issues – the largest so far involving just five MPs – but it is clear that this marks it out as unusual compared to previous Labour Governments. Moreover, the potential for trouble is there. Of the MPs who voted against either of the two bills in the 1997 Parliament, 65 are still in the Commons (listed in the table below) – although of these 14 (marked in italics) have already announced that they are leaving at the next General Election.

### Backbench welfare rebels under Blair

<i>Name</i>	<i>Social Security Bill</i>	<i>Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill</i>
Diane Abbott	X	X
John Austin	X	X
<i>Harry Barnes</i>	X	X
<i>Andrew Bennett</i>	-	X
Roger Berry	X	X
<i>Harold Best</i>	X	X
Ronnie Campbell	X	X
Jamie Cann	-	X
Martin Caton	X	X
David Chaytor	X	X
Michael Clapham	-	X
Tony Clarke	-	X
Tom Clarke	-	X
Ann Clywd	X	X
Michael Connarty	-	X
Frank Cook	X	-
Jeremy Corbyn	X	X
Jim Cousins	-	X
David Crausby	-	X
John Cryer	X	X
Ann Cryer	X	X
John Cummings	-	X
<i>Tam Dalyell</i>	-	X
Ian Davidson	-	X
<i>Denzil Davies</i>	-	X
<i>Hilton Dawson</i>	X	-
Jim Dobbin	X	X
Gwyneth Dunwoody	X	X
Bill Etherington	X	X

Frank Field	-	X
Mark Fisher	-	X
Paul Flynn	-	X
Neil Gerrard	-	X
Dr Ian Gibson	X	X
<i>David Hinchcliffe</i>	X	X
Kelvin Hopkins	X	X
Dr Brian Iddon	X	X
Eric Illsley	-	X
Dr Lynne Jones	X	X
<i>Terry Lewis</i>	X	X
Andrew Mackinlay	-	X
<i>Alice Mahon</i>	X	X
Robert Marshall-Andrews	-	X
Jim Marshall	-	X
David Marshall	-	X
Christine McCafferty	-	X
John McDonnell	X	X
<i>Kevin McNamara</i>	X	X
Julie Morgan	-	X
Denis Murphy	-	X
Kerry Pollard	-	X
Gordon Prentice	X	X
<i>Brian Sedgemore</i>	X	X
Jonathan Shaw	X	-
Alan Simpson	X	X
Dennis Skinner	X	X
<i>Llew Smith</i>	X	X
<i>George Stevenson</i>	-	X
Ian Stewart	X	-
Dr Desmond Turner	-	X
Robert Wareing	X	X
Betty Williams	-	X
David Winnick	X	X
Mike Wood	X	X
<i>Tony Worthington</i>	-	X

*Note:* italics indicate an MP who has already announced that they are standing down at the next election.