

Her Majesty's Very Loyal Opposition Conservative Voting in the House of Commons, 2005-09

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One of the standard complaints about British politics is that it is too adversarial, that political parties routinely, and unthinkingly, oppose what the other is doing, whatever its merits. In fact, British politics is far more consensual than such critics realise. Indeed, one of the most striking things about voting in the House of Commons over the last year has been how rarely the Conservatives have opposed Government legislation.

The Government introduced some 148 bills into the House of Commons between 2005 and the end of the 2008-9 session; of these, the Conservative frontbench voted against the principle of the legislation, at either Second and/or Third Reading, of just 32 (22% of the total). In the last session, they opposed just four out of 27 bills, a rate of 15%.

As the Table below shows (which gives the session-by-session figures back to 1997) shows, this was a lower rate of opposition than in any session since Labour came to office in 1997. We do not have comparable data for before 1997, but we suspect that it is also lower than any session since the end of the wartime coalition in 1945.

Conservative contestation of Government legislation, 1997-2009

<i>Session</i>	<i>Government Bills</i>	<i>Bills contested by Conservative frontbench</i>	<i>As % of Government Bills</i>
97-98	53	19	36
98-99	31	15	48
99-00	42	19	45
00-01	28	10	36
Total (97-01)	154	63	41
01-02	39	12	31
02-03	36	15	42
03-04	35	12	34
04-05	34	7	21
Total (01-05)	144	46	32
05-06	57	12	21
06-07	32	7	22
07-08	32	9	28
08-09	27	4	15
Total (05-09)	148	32	22

Note: The figures show the bills on which the Conservative frontbench chose to divide the House at Second and/or Third Reading. They exclude

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government bills where the Conservative parliamentary Party had free votes, but include Reasoned Amendments on Second or Third Reading.

It is important to note that the Table excludes those occasions when the frontbench gave its MPs a free vote. Moreover, there are also plenty of occasions when the Conservatives do not oppose the government at Second or Third reading, but do object, and attempt to amend, government legislation at Committee or Report.

Yet there is still clearly something going on here. The data show a parliament-by-parliament decline in the propensity of the Official Opposition to object to the *principle* of government legislation. William Hague's Conservative Party voted against the principle of about two out of every five bills. Under IDS and Michael Howard that fell slightly, to just under one in three. But under David Cameron it has fallen yet further, down to just one out of every five pieces of government legislation.