

A coalition with wobbly wings: Backbench dissent since May 2010

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For all that backbench behavior has changed over the post-war era – with MPs becoming more rebellious, less willing to be lobby fodder – there has been one constant: rebellion has always remained the exception, cohesion the norm. Whilst the exact rate of rebellion has varied from year to year and parliament to parliament, the majority of divisions (votes) in the Commons have seen complete unity amongst Government backbenchers.

Yet so far this Parliament the opposite has been true: rebellion has become the norm, cohesion the exception. Out of the first 110 divisions in the Commons since Parliament resumed, there have been rebellions by government MPs in 59.[†] That is a rate of rebellion of 54%, simply without parallel in the post-war era. This brief note explains the composition of those rebellions and puts them into some historical context.

The rate of rebellion

In the first four parliaments after the end of the Second World War (those of 1945, 1950, 1951 and 1955), the rate of rebellion by government MPs never rose above one backbench revolt every ten divisions (indeed, the majority of sessions between 1945 and 1959 saw a rate of below one in twenty). That remained largely true in the next three Parliaments (those of 1959, 1964 and 1966), although there were five sessions in which the percentage of divisions to see government MPs defy the whip rose marginally above 10%. Backbench rebellion then increased noticeably during the Premiership of Edward Heath, with a government rebellion in almost one in five of the divisions between 1970 and 1974, and increased yet further during the Labour governments of 1974 to 1979 (to 21% overall, but reaching 30% and 36% in the final two sessions of the Parliament). Backbench dissent fell back somewhat during the Thatcher and Major years – although never to pre-1970 levels – and then slowly began to pick up again during the post-1997 Labour governments, rising from a rebellion in 8% of divisions (1997-2001) to 21% (2001-5) to a post-war peak of 28% (2005-10).

Even in the most rebellious post-war parliament, therefore, almost three quarters of votes saw unanimity amongst government backbenchers. Even if we focus just on the most rebellious *session*, that of 2004-5, in which there was a rebellion by government MPs in 39% of divisions, we still find the majority of divisions seeing unanimity in the government lobby. In other words, out of all the sessions between 1945 and 2010, there was not a single one in which a majority of divisions saw dissent by government MPs.

* Both authors are from the University of Nottingham, which has funded this research. Further details of the research project from which this note draws are available from www.revolts.co.uk.

[†] Data run from the start of the new Parliament on 18 May 2010 until Friday 5 November 2010.

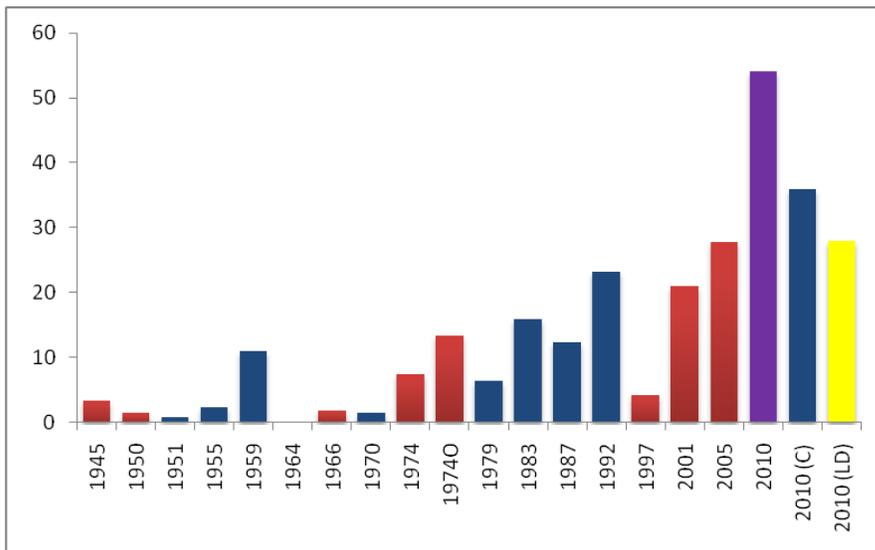
The current rate of 54% in the 2010 Parliament is therefore extremely atypical, and the parliament is on course to be a record breaker. Whilst individual issues can often generate particularly high levels of dissent over a short time period, what will concern government whips is that dissent by government MPs has now been running a rate of a rebellion in more than half of divisions consistently since September.

This, of course, is the figure for the coalition as a whole, and it could be argued that it is unfair to compare data for dissent from two parties with historic data from individual parties. However, even if we break down the overall figure of 54% into its component parts, it remains high. Conservative MPs have broken ranks in 35% of whipped votes; Lib Dem MPs have done so in 28%. (These two figures sum to more than 54%, because of some votes in which both parties have seen dissent, something considered further below).

Even these separate figures are very high by comparison with historic behavior of government backbenchers. The Conservative rebellion rate of 35%, for example, is higher than the rare of rebellion by government MPs in all but four of the post-war sessions. The Lib Dem rate of 28% is higher than that seen by government MPs in all but seven post-war sessions. (It is also noticeably higher than the rate of rebellion seen by Lib Dems in any session for which we have data, going back to 1992-93 when the rate of rebellion was at 9%).

Comparisons with the last parliament are also revealing. The Conservative rate of 35% marks almost a trebling of the rate of rebellion seen between 2005 and 2010. Liberal Democrat MPs have gone from rebelling in just 3% of divisions to 28%. Indeed, the whole of the last Parliament – covering five years - saw just 39 divisions in which at least one Liberal Democrat voted against their party line; in just over five months, the total for the 2010 Parliament has already reached 31. We predict that by Christmas Liberal Democrat MPs will have rebelled more often in the short life of the Coalition than in the whole of the last Parliament.

1. % of divisions to see rebellion by government backbenchers, first sessions, 1945-2010.

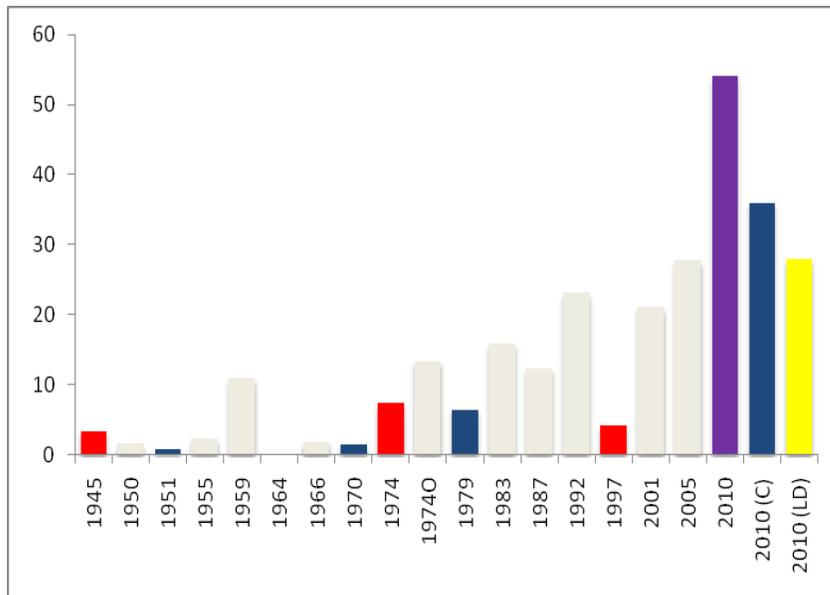


But perhaps the most striking difference – and in some ways the most revealing – is to compare behavior in this session with behavior in other *first* sessions. First sessions usually see relatively little dissent. It is in the first session that the government’s authority is usually greatest. The discipline of the election campaign is still strong; and the fact that the government is implementing its manifesto is usually enough to prevent many MPs, even those who may disagree with the policies, from dissenting. There are also usually many new MPs, normally much less willing to defy the whips. The first session, then, is usually the calm before the storm.

Figure 1 (above) gives the percentage rate of rebellion in every first session since the war, and the contrast is obvious. The rebellion rate for coalition MPs collectively is almost double the highest other first session, and is way above most first sessions.

When you compare current behavior to the first sessions of parliaments following a change in government (Figure 2), then the contrast is even clearer. Between 1945 and 1997, the six sessions immediately after a change in government saw rates of rebellion between zero (1964) and 6% (1979). The current rate of rebellion is therefore *nine times* what had until now been the post-war peak. Even the figures for the Conservatives and Lib Dems separately are roughly six and four times the post-war peak respectively.

2. % of divisions to see rebellion by government backbenchers, first sessions, 1945-2010 (only changes of government highlighted).



The issues and the rebels

The issue to have caused the most frequent dissent so far this session has been the Coalition's plans for constitutional reform. The awkwardly-titled Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill has been responsible for 26 of the 59 rebellions. That bill alone saw no fewer than 53 Coalition MPs break ranks against the Government (43 of them Conservatives, 10 of them Liberal Democrats).

Thus far, 89 Coalition MPs have so far broken ranks against the Government; 67 of them Conservatives, together with 22 Liberal Democrats. Both are high figures, but in relative terms it is the Lib Dem figure that is the more impressive. The 67 Conservative rebels constitute a third of the backbench Conservative parliamentary party. The Liberal Democrat parliamentary party currently comprises 57 MPs, but of these 22 (or 39%) are members of the payroll vote, either as ministers or parliamentary private secretaries, expected to remain loyal in voice but especially vote to the government. The Liberal Democrat 'backbench' therefore consists of 35 MPs. For 22 of these have rebelled against the Government therefore means that a whopping 63% of backbench Lib Dems have defied the whip.

Why the whips can rest easy (for now)

For all that, at no point since May has the Government's majority been in any way threatened. The lowest Government majority thus far has been 58.

For one thing, although the frequency of rebellions is alarmingly high, the average rebellion is small, comprising just six MPs. (The average Conservative rebellion is seven MPs, the average Liberal Democrat revolt is even lower at just three MPs). The largest Coalition rebellion thus far – on Europe – involved 37 Conservative MPs, not enough to threaten the Government's majority, not least because the Labour Opposition frontbench abstained. The largest Lib Dem rebellion saw ten MPs support Charles Kennedy's amendment during the Report stage of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill that would have made numerous exceptions for preserving large islands and large geographical areas as whole constituencies.

And second, so far the two sets of Coalition rebels – Conservative and Liberal Democrats – only rarely vote against the Government on the same types of issues. Conservative dissidents so far have tended to vote against the Government's constitutional agenda, particularly the bills relating to the introduction of AV and fixed-term parliaments. Liberal Democrat rebels are more likely to have cast dissenting votes on social issues, such as the increase in VAT from 15% to 17.5%, the introduction of free schools and the expansion of academies, and curbs to superannuation for civil servants. Conservative-only rebellions make up 46% of the total of Coalition rebellions thus far. Lib Dem only votes make up 34% of the rebellions that the Coalition has faced thus far. Votes in which Conservative and Liberal Democrat rebels unite in common cause against the Government account for only one in five of the rebellions.* And the good news for the whips is that it remains relatively hard to see an issue emerging in the near future where discontented

* Rebels from both parties have, variously combined in the division lobbies to: preserve traditional constituencies in the Highlands, the Isle of Wight and Cornwall; object to the timetabling of government legislation, expressed doubts over the war in Afghanistan; and to oppose to the temporary continuation (pending a review) of control orders and the 28-day detention of terrorist suspects.

Conservatives, unhappy Liberal Democrats and the entire Parliamentary Labour Party will combine in any unholy alliance to inflict a defeat on this Government.*

Nevertheless, the Coalition is saddled with two wobbly wings, and there are plenty of issues ahead in the immediate future that will ensure continued high levels of Coalition dissent: on Tuesday, Labour will appeal to Liberal Democrat backbenchers to oppose curbs on housing benefit during an Opposition Day debate on the subject; on Wednesday, Conservative Eurosceptics will find it difficult to allow a European Union document approving of increased economic policy co-ordination to pass without a vote. In the coming weeks, the Government will have to get its Fixed-Term Parliaments Bill through the House of Commons in the face of determined opposition from a group of over a dozen Conservative backbenchers.

And over time, the ranks of rebellious new MPs are bound to swell, unless the Government can create a whole raft of new jobs to keep its backbenchers occupied. We find it difficult to imagine the rate of rebellion remaining quite this high over the entire parliament – the whips will certainly hope not – but in parliamentary terms, the government needs to brace itself for a winter of discontent.

* Even the issue of raising the cap on student tuition fees, where disgruntled Liberal Democrats are likely to join Labour in sizeable numbers in opposition to the changes, if the LD frontbench support the move, it would require more than the entire Liberal Democrat backbench to threaten the Government's majority. In practice, we assume that Government concessions will ensure that enough Liberal Democrats will abstain on the final deal (as allowed under the terms of the Coalition Agreement) rather than casting an outright vote against, leaving those hoping for a Government defeat on this issue disappointed.