

Where's it all coming from? Backbench rebels in the 2001 Parliament

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Where do you think most of this poison is coming from? From the dispossessed and the never possessed. You can think of ex-ministers who are going around causing all sorts of trouble. We don't want another three more of the bastards out there (John Major, April 1993)

The rise in backbench discontent is already causing serious problems for the Government – but the real fear amongst the Labour hierarchy is the situation after the next election. The Government is struggling to enact key pieces of legislation whilst enjoying a majority of 161. How will it manage with a majority of, say, 61? To make matters worse, the most rebellious MPs sit for safer seats than the rest of the PLP, meaning that as the Government's shrinks, the rebels become a larger proportion within the parliamentary party. Echoing Norman Lamont's verdict on the Major years, one Labour insider has already described the possibility as 'office without power'.¹

Such a view presupposes several unknowns about any future Labour Government – including whether a smaller majority would generate greater self-discipline from Labour backbenchers – but the mere possibility of backbench rebels being able to hold a third term Blair government to ransom is causing concern amongst the Labour leadership. Hence the recent (albeit extremely vague) rumours of deselections and expulsions, targeted against a handful of the most rebellious backbenchers, both to remove them from the equation and, more generally, *pour encourager les autres*.

The underlying irony in all this is that throughout the 1997 parliament the PLP was routinely discussed in very different terms. Backbench Labour MPs were said to be trooping loyally through the division lobbies, and Labour MPs were routinely described as timid, gutless, sycophantic and cowardly. They acquired a reputation for loyalty and a lack of backbone. They were variously described as sheep, poodles, clones, robots or – most bizarrely of all – daleks.

So where have all these rebels come from? This briefing paper looks at the composition of today's backbench rebels, comparing their behaviour now to their behaviour in the last Parliament.

The rebels

From the 2001 election to the end of the second session in November 2003 a total of 197 Labour MPs voted against their whip.² This is more than did so in the whole of the 1997 Parliament and means that almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of those who have been on the backbenches at some point during this Parliament have rebelled.

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Of those who have been on the backbenches solidly since 2001, just over three-quarters (77 per cent) have now voted against the whip.

These 197 rebellious MPs can usefully be split into four groups:

1. Those who are MPs now but were not then (12 per cent)
2. Those who are rebels now and were then (50 per cent)
3. Those who are rebels now but were not then (22 per cent)
4. Those who were ministers then but rebels now (16 per cent)

1: MPs now but not then.

The 2001 cohort have turned out to be more rebellious than many commentators expected. Despite claims that Labour's new selection procedures would weed out any dissenting voices, out of the 40 new Labour MPs, 23 had voted against their whip by the end of the second session in November 2003.³

The 23 rebels are listed in Table 1, a table that David Hamilton leads by a long way. The number of rebellions cast by these MPs is relatively small – especially when compared to the most rebellious MPs in Table 2 – but infrequent rebellion is fairly typical for new MPs.

Table 1: The rebellious members of the 2001 intake

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes cast against the whip, 2001-2003</i>
David Hamilton	11
Dai Havard	6
Iain Luke	6
Albert Owen	6
Vera Baird	5
John Lyons	5
Colin Challen	4
David Heyes	4
Hywel Francis	3
Kevan Jones	3
Mark Lazarowicz	3
Ann McKechin	3
Anne Picking	3
Paul Farrelly	2
Kevin Brennan	1
Parmjit Dhanda	1
Ian Lucas	1
John MacDougall	1
Khalid Mahmood	1
Rob Marris	1
Chris Mole	1
James Sheridan	1
David Wright	1

However, the number of MPs involved here is far too small to explain the overall changes in behaviour. Primarily because of the small number of seats that changed hands, the turnover in MPs at the 2001 election was the lowest at the end of any full-length Parliament since 1945.⁴ This group of 23 new rebels effectively just cancels out the 20 rebels who left the Commons (either through retirement or defeat) at the 2001 election.

2. Rebels now and then.

The largest single group – accounting for 99 of the 197 rebels – consists of those who rebelled during both the last Parliament and during this one.⁵

Table 2: The 25 most rebellious Labour MPs since 2001

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes cast against the whip 2001-20031</i>	<i>Number of votes cast against the whip 1997-2001</i>
Jeremy Corbyn	87	64
John McDonnell	79	59
Dr Lynne Jones	57	38
Brian Sedgemore	53	12
Robert Marshall-Andrews	51	32
Alan Simpson	48	38
Harry Barnes	47	25
Kelvin Hopkins	47	32
Robert Wareing	47	22
Dennis Skinner	43	41
Neil Gerrard	40	24
Denzil Davies	38	25
Alice Mahon	37	25
Andrew Bennett	37	10
Diane Abbott	36	26
Jim Marshall	32	11
Mark Fisher	31	15
Llew Smith	29	26
Kevin McNamara	28	16
George Galloway*	27	4
Mike Wood	25	20
Glenda Jackson	24	0
Kate Hoey	24	0
Terry Lewis	24	15
Tam Dalyell	22	29

Note: * includes only votes cast whilst in receipt of the party whip.

This group is not homogenous – being far from equally rebellious – but from their ranks come the majority of the more persistent rebels against the Blair Government.

Of the 25 most rebellious Labour backbenchers (listed in Table 2) all but two have been rebelling against the Blair Government since it was first elected in 1997.

3. Rebels now but not then.

Third, there are those Labour backbenchers who did not rebel during the last Parliament but who have now begun to vote against the party whip.

There are 43 Labour MPs (listed in Table 3) who were on the backbenches throughout the last Parliament without rebelling once, but who began to rebel after the 2001 election.

As the Table shows, none of the 43 has become especially rebellious. The table is headed by Paul Marsden, who voted against his whip 11 times before leaving the PLP and then joining the Liberal Democrats. He is followed by Clive Efford and Linda Perham (nine dissenting votes each) and then by Karen Buck, Tom Cox and Malcolm Savidge (seven each). But the majority of these 43 have cast three or fewer dissenting votes since 2001.

The majority of these new rebels (30 out of the 43) are from the 1997 intake,⁶ and include 13 of the women elected in 1997, who were routinely criticised for being too loyal to the Government. The latter group includes Helen Clark (who, as Helen Brinton, became synonymous with excessive loyalty) and Jane Griffiths, who was recently de-selected by her constituency party.

Table 3. Backbench MPs who did not rebel during the 1997 Parliament but have done so since 2001 (those in Government for any of 1997-2001 excluded)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes cast against the whip, 2001-2003</i>
Paul Marsden	11
Clive Efford	9
Linda Perham	9
Karen Buck*	7
Tom Cox	7
Malcolm Savidge	7
Helen Brinton/Clark	6
Doug Naysmith	6
Mohammad Sarwar	6
Gerry Steinberg	6
Colin Burgon	5
Roger Godsiff	5
Andy King	5
Martin O'Neill	5
Valerie Davey	4
Julia Drown	4
Jimmy Hood	4
Diana Organ	4
Debra Shipley	4
Paul Truswell	4
Jane Griffiths	3
Helen Jones	3
Bill Tynan	3
Anne Begg	2
Stuart Bell	2
Jim Cunningham	2
Huw Edwards	2
Louise Ellman	2
John Grogan	2
Joan Humble	2
Martyn Jones	2
Peter Pike	2
John Robertson	2
Clive Soley	2
Kevin Barron	1
Nigel Beard	1
Stephen Hepburn	1
Lindsay Hoyle	1
Jackie Lawrence*	1
Eddie O'Hara	1
Stephen Pound	1
Paul Stinchcombe	1
Brian White	1

Notes: Karen Buck was appointed Assistant Whip in 2001 but did not take up the post; Jackie Lawrence has been a PPS since 2003.

4. *In government then but not now.*

And lastly, there are those MPs who were previously in Government and are now enjoying (?) the freedom of the backbenches. A few ex-ministers and former PPSs are to be found in Group 2 (above) – especially those who left the Government early on and began to rebel later on in the 1997 Parliament.⁷ Here, however, we focus on those MPs who have been members of the Government at some point since 1997, and who did not rebel during the last Parliament. They number 32, listed in Table 4.⁸

Table 4. Ex-Members of the Government, who have rebelled since 2001

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of votes cast against the whip, 2001-2003</i>
Glenda Jackson	24
Kate Hoey	24
Frank Dobson	9
Jon Trickett	9
Doug Henderson	8
Graham Allen	6
Geoffrey Robinson	5
Richard Burden	5
Tony Banks	5
Chris Smith	5
Ken Purchase	4
John Battle	3
Clare Short	3
Bob Blizzard	2
Keith Bradley	2
Anne Campbell	2
Robin Cook	2
John Denham	2
Frank Doran	2
Angela Eagle	2
Helen Jackson	2
Joyce Quin	2
Joan Ruddock	2
Graham Stringer	2
Win Griffiths	2
Eric Martlew	2
Alan Meale	2
Jeff Ennis	1
George Howarth	1
Andrew Reed	1
Alan Whitehead	1
David Clelland	1

Of these 32, the most rebellious are Glenda Jackson and Kate Hoey, both of whom voted against the whip 24 times during the first two sessions of the 2001 Parliament.

They are followed by Frank Dobson, the most rebellious former Cabinet Minister, and Jon Trickett (who have both rebelled nine times), and Doug Henderson, the former Minister of State (eight). But most of these new rebels are not especially rebellious. As with the newly-rebellious backbenchers, the majority have cast three or fewer dissenting votes since 2001.

This group of ex-ministers is routinely identified as being a key source of the Government's current difficulties, with their behaviour presumed (in most cases) to be based on resentment at having been dropped from government. Yet in percentage terms, former members of the government are no more rebellious than members of the 2001 intake, nor (Kate Hoey and Glenda Jackson aside) are many of them frequent rebels. Any damage that this group does to the Government is therefore more qualitative – based on their organisational abilities and what Old School Conservatives call 'bottom' – than it is quantitative.

Getting the habit

Once an MP rebels for the first time, it is likely that he or she will do so again. Of the 111 Labour MPs who rebelled in the last Parliament, and who were then reelected in 2001, just 12 have not broken ranks so far since 2001. None of the 12 was especially rebellious during the 1997 Parliament (the most rebellious, the former Opposition Chief Whip, Derek Foster, rebelled on four occasions). Moreover, the 12 include Jamie Cann, who died at the beginning of this Parliament, and eight MPs who are now in government and bound by collective responsibility to vote the party line. In other words, out of 102 MPs who rebelled in the last Parliament and who were able to rebel again this time, just three have not done so.

What should also be of concern to the Government is the increasing frequency with which some backbench MPs are rebelling. Almost all of the MPs who rebelled in both the last Parliament and this (85 of the 99) rebelled more often in the first two sessions of the 2001 Parliament than they did in the first two sessions of the 1997 Parliament.⁹ Indeed, almost two-thirds (63 of the 99) rebelled more often in just the first two sessions of this Parliament than they did in the *entire* 1997 Parliament.

Table 5 lists the 35 Labour backbenchers whose level of rebellion has increased steadily over time – with more rebellions between 2001-2003 than between 1999-2001, and with more between 1999-2001 than between 1997-1999.¹⁰ (MPs who served in government at any point are excluded). In some cases, such as Jeremy Corbyn or John McDonnell, the table shows MPs who were already rebelling frequently and who went on to do so more often. But it also shows initially hesitant rebels – such as David Taylor, Rudi Vis, David Drew, or Chris McCafferty – rebelling more easily as time goes on.

Table 5. MPs with increasing levels of rebellion (MPs with any time in government, 97-01, excluded)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of dissenting votes</i>		
	<i>97-99</i>	<i>99-01</i>	<i>01-03</i>
Jeremy Corbyn	24	40	87
John McDonnell	23	36	79
Lynne Jones	18	20	57
Robert Marshall-Andrews	12	20	51
Alan Simpson	15	23	48
Kelvin Hopkins	14	18	47
Dennis Skinner	20	21	43
Denzil Davies	10	15	38
Jim Marshall	3	8	32
Kevin McNamara	6	10	28
Gwyneth Dunwoody	11	16	18
David Taylor	1	4	17
David Hinchcliffe	2	4	16
Paul Flynn	7	12	15
Alan Hurst	2	3	13
Christine McCafferty	1	3	13
Rudi Vis	0	3	13
David Drew	0	1	13
Ian Davidson	7	8	11
Frank Cook	2	10	11
George Stevenson	1	5	10
Joan Walley	0	1	9
Austin Mitchell	3	4	7
Gwyn Prosser	0	3	7
Andrew Dismore	0	3	6
Terry Davis	0	4	5
Patrick Hall	0	2	5
Marsha Singh	0	1	4
David Lepper	0	3	4
Fabian Hamilton	0	1	4
Andrew Mackinlay	2	3	4
Geraldine Smith	0	1	4
Janet Dean	0	3	4
Joe Benton	0	1	2
Alan Williams	0	1	2

Conclusion

For all the rise in rebelliousness on the Government backbenches, there has been no collapse in party discipline. Most votes see all Labour MPs vote in the same division lobbies. Cohesion remains the norm, dissent the exception. When cohesion weakens, it usually produces splinters rather than splits. The majority of rebellions since 2001 have seen fewer than 10 MPs defy their whips. Those that give the whips

sleepless nights - like those over Iraq or top up fees or foundation hospitals - remain rarities. Few MPs rebel regularly, and even the most rebellious vote with their party more often than not. Even the 'rebels', therefore, are overwhelmingly loyal.

Yet something has been changing. As this paper has shown, the recent rise in rebellion has not been caused by any influx of newly-elected rebellious MPs. Rather, for the most part the PLP consists of exactly the same people as it did in the 1997 Parliament – just behaving differently.

Nearly all of the MPs who rebelled against the Blair Government between 1997 and 2001 have done so again – and (most worryingly of all for the Government) most have done so with increasing frequency. But to those with what the police call 'form' have been added a further 75 new rebels from the ranks of the backbenchers and from the former ministers, along with 23 Members from the 2001 intake. Most of these MPs are currently rebelling infrequently – but as time goes on, it is likely that they too will begin to rebel more frequently.

For all this, the Government remains undefeated on whipped votes – the first government about which this can be said since that elected in 1966 – and (despite its close shave over the Higher Education Bill) the likelihood must be on it managing to get to the next election with this record intact. The prospects after the next election must, however, be less rosy. A small majority may well force Labour MPs to be more self-disciplined, with the result that there may be fewer rebellions, but those that occur will be far more damaging.

¹ *The Times*, 14 February 2004.

² Of these, one has since died, one defected to the Liberal Democrats, and one had the whip removed. Which is the worse fate?

³ This figure excludes Shaun Woodward, elected for the first time as a Labour MP in 2001 but who was first elected to the Commons in 1997 as a Conservative, but it includes the two by-election entrants elected since 2001.

⁴ That is, excluding 1950-51 and February-October 1974. See P. Cowley, 'The Commons: Mr Blair's Lapdog?', in P. Norris (ed), *Britain Votes 2001* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 258.

⁵ This group includes both Ray Powell, who since died, and George Galloway, who has since been expelled from the party.

⁶ Including Bill Tynan and John Robertson, elected at by-elections during the Parliament.

⁷ There are 16 ex-members of the Government amongst the 99 MPs.

⁸ Technically, Karen Buck could be included in this group rather than listed in Table 3, but because she did not take up her position we have chosen to include her in the previous category.

⁹ Even amongst the few MPs who are not more rebellious now than they were before, there are very few who have become noticeably *less* likely to rebel. Just three of the 99 have rebelled two or more fewer times between 2001-03 than between 1997-99: Ann Clywd (14 dissenting votes between 1997-99, down to six between 2001-03) and Tom Clarke and David Marshall (both eight then, now down to two).

¹⁰ Excluding the stunted pre-election 2000-2001 session, there are seven MPs (listed below, along with the number of dissenting votes cast in each session), whose level of rebellion has increased steadily, session-on-session, since 1997. Most of the names will not be much of a surprise to observers (although Chris McCafferty's might be):

Name	Session				
	97-98	98-99	99-00	01-02	02-03
Lynne Jones	7	11	20	27	30
Robert Marshall-Andrews	3	9	20	25	26
Harry Barnes	2	11	12	18	29
Diane Abbott	4	10	11	16	20
Jim Marshall	1	2	7	15	17
Llew Smith	3	11	12	13	16
Christine McCafferty	0	1	3	4	9