

When Sheep Bark: The Parliamentary Labour Party, 2001-2003

PHILIP COWLEY and MARK STUART*

Throughout the last parliament the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) was routinely discussed in terms that would have been unrecognisable to MacDonald, Attlee, Wilson or Callaghan. Backbench MPs were said to be trooping loyally (most said far *too* loyally) through the division lobbies. If the complaint used to be that Labour leaders were not in control of their party, after 1997 it soon became that they were too much in control. Labour MPs were routinely described as timid, gutless, sycophantic and cowardly. They acquired a reputation for excessive cohesion, excessive loyalty and an overall lack of backbone. They were variously described as sheep, poodles, clones, robots or – most bizarrely of all – daleks.¹

Since the 2001 election, however, these phrases now seem distinctly out-of-date. From the beginning of the Parliament the focus has instead been on how rebellious the PLP has become. Labour MPs began the Parliament making clear their opposition to reforms to incapacity benefit at a remarkably hostile Prime Minister's Questions on 4 July - an encounter described by some as 'Day One of the Intifada'.² Several meetings of the PLP have been similarly rumbustious.³ Over 100 Labour MPs then voted against frontbench advice (albeit on a free vote) over the membership of departmental select committees.⁴ In May 2002 the Government was forced to back down over its plans for Lords reform in the face of backbench pressure.⁵ February and March of this year saw two enormous backbench revolts over Iraq, which were followed by two rebellions over Foundation Hospitals, the second of which reduced the Government's majority to just 35.⁶ And the issue of university top-up fees is lying in wait for the Government. With good reason, there are plenty of MPs who think that this could be the issue that brings about the Government's first Commons defeat.

How did it come to this? This paper is an analysis of the behaviour of Labour MPs at the mid-point of the current Parliament. It has four substantive sections. First, it details the rebellions that have taken place so far, and then places those rebellions in an historical context. Second, it identifies the most rebellious MPs, and discusses the changing behaviour of some MPs. Third, it examines the behaviour of the 2001 intake in some detail, to examine the effect of Labour's selection procedures. Fourth, it examines the factional nature of the behaviour seen so far. We begin, however, with a short methodological note, explaining the nature of the data employed in the paper.

Methodology

MPs are not of equal importance. In an important article on legislative studies in 1976, Anthony King noted that although commentators often talked about 'parliamentary control' as if Parliament was one entity, there were in fact three groups within Parliament who wanted to 'control' the executive – the Opposition frontbench, the Opposition backbench, and the Government's own backbenchers. Of these, it was the relationship between the Government's own backbenchers and the executive – what he termed the 'intra-party' relationship – that was crucial. 'As far as the Government is concerned, government backbenchers are the most important Members of the House'.⁷ This paper therefore examines the votes cast by Labour MPs from the start of the Parliament on 6 June 2001 to the beginning of the summer recess on 17 July 2003.

The voting procedures in the House of Commons score highly in terms of transparency.⁸ This is important in terms of democratic accountability – since electors can see how their elected representatives have voted – but it is also invaluable in terms of scholarship: the published records of divisions (that is, votes) yield a mass of what David Truman termed ‘hard data’.⁹ Yet the data are not perfect. Printing errors (such as the names of MPs being mixed up) are not frequent but neither are they rare. Some errors are obvious (such as when a minister votes against his or her own government, for example), but others have to be resolved by checking with the MP concerned.¹⁰

A further drawback of divisions in the House of Commons is that, unlike in some legislative chambers, abstentions cannot be formally recorded.¹¹ The whips may formally sanction an absence from a vote, it may be accidental, or it may be deliberate. There is no information on the record that allows us to establish, at least not systematically, the cause of absences. We cannot therefore necessarily read anything into non-voting. For the purpose of systematic analysis over time, therefore, we have to rely on the votes cast.

The focus here is primarily on dissenting votes; that is, those occasions when one or more Labour Members vote against their own party whip or the apparently clear wishes (sometimes implicit) of their own frontbench. This is the definition employed in earlier research.¹² And as in previous research, excluded from the analysis are votes on matters of private legislation, private members’ bills, matters internal to the House of Commons and other free votes.

The rebellions

There have been a total of 121 separate backbench rebellions by Labour MPs to date in this Parliament: 76 in the first session (from 6 June 2001 to 7 November 2002), with 45 so far in the (as yet incomplete) second session (from 13 November 2001 to 17 July 2003). The 11 issues to see larger rebellions were:

- In July 2001 40 Labour MPs voted against the timetabling motion for the debate on the membership of select committees.
- Throughout November and December 2001 there were 22 separate backbench revolts during the passage of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill. The largest saw 32 Labour MPs support an amendment to allow judicial review of the Home Secretary’s decisions to detain terrorist suspects without trial. In two other votes, a total of 30 Labour MPs opposed the Government’s attempts to introduce a new offence of incitement to religious hatred.
- In January 2002 26 Labour MPs backed a backbench amendment to the NHS Reform and Health Care Professions Bill, opposing the abolition of Community Health Councils (CHCs).
- The following month 46 Labour backbenchers supported an amendment moved by the former Health Secretary, Frank Dobson, to the Education Bill, insisting that new religious or faith schools admit at least a quarter of their pupils from other religions or from families with no religious background; 41 then backed a similar Liberal Democrat amendment applying Dobson’s strictures only to new faith schools. There were another two rebellions during the Bill’s passage, including one of 19 MPs on the issue of selection by aptitude.
- Throughout June and November 2002 there were a series of 17 separate rebellions during the passage of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill, especially over opposition to establishment of large accommodation centres and measures to deal with unfounded asylum claims. The largest – over the insistence upon the education of asylum seeker children in mainstream education – saw 43 Labour MPs vote against their whips.

- In June and October 2002 there were two rebellions during the Enterprise Bill, the largest seeing 24 Labour MPs support an attempt to compel the Office of Fair Trading to take into account damage to the public interest and employment levels when determining competition policy on mergers and acquisitions.
- The biggest rebellions of all came over the possibility of military action in Iraq. In September 2002, in the largest revolt of the first session, 56 Labour backbenchers used a vote on the adjournment to indicate their opposition to military conflict.¹³ The first revolt of the second session saw 30 Labour MPs vote for an amendment calling for no military action without a further resolution from the Security Council. January 2003 saw a debate on 'Defence in the World' dominated by the issue of Iraq, at the end of which 44 Labour MPs defied their whips.¹⁴ In February 2003 121 voted for a backbench amendment to a government motion, arguing that 'the case for military action against Iraq [is] as yet unproven'; 60 then voted against the Government's own motion.¹⁵ The next month 139 voted for an amendment that 'the case for war against Iraq had not yet been established, especially given the absence of specific United Nations authorisation'; 84 then voted against the Government's own motion.¹⁶
- In March 2003, during the report stage of the Local Government Bill, 17 Labour MPs objected to the Bain Review's linkage between reform of the fire service and the then on-going negotiations on firemen's pay. Twenty-seven Labour backbenchers subsequently voted against both the Second and Third Readings of the Fire Services Bill in May and June, which sought to impose a settlement on the firefighters' dispute.¹⁷
- In April 2003 30 Labour MPs sought to remove clauses from the Criminal Justice Bill that would have made a defendant's bad character admissible as evidence in most criminal cases. In May 33 Labour backbenchers twice voted against the abandonment of trial by jury in complicated serious fraud cases, or where there was deemed to be a danger of a jury being interfered with. The Bill saw a further eight rebellions.
- In May 2003 65 Labour MPs supported a reasoned amendment declining to give a Second Reading to the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Bill which sought to establish Foundation Hospital Trusts; the subsequent Second Reading vote also attracted a substantial rebellion of 31. Then, in July, the Government's majority fell to 35 as 62 Labour backbenchers supported a Report Stage amendment in the name of David Hinchliffe calling for the removal of the foundation hospitals clauses from the bill.¹⁸
- In July 2003 15 Eurosceptic Labour MPs opposed a Government motion welcoming the draft Constitutional Treaty produced by the Convention on the Future of Europe.

There were also an additional 46 smaller revolts covering a wide range of issues, including opposition to the war in Afghanistan, Sinn Fein's access to facilities in the House of Commons, commonhold and leasehold reform, student finance, community care, licensing laws, social security, the suspension of elections and justice issues in Northern Ireland, reproductive cloning, Post Office closures, pensions, ministerial conduct, regional assemblies, the European Communities (Amendment) Bill and other European issues.

A total of 121 rebellions meant that there were rebellions by Labour MPs in 18.4 per cent of divisions. In *absolute* terms, this is clearly not a high level of dissent: it means that around one out of every five divisions sees a rebellion – no matter how small – by a Labour MP. The others see complete cohesion. But since party cohesion has been a marked feature of British parliamentary life since the end of the nineteenth century, this should not be surprising.¹⁹ Of more interest,

therefore, is to view the rebellions in *relative* terms. How does this behaviour compare to the behaviour of government MPs in previous parliaments?

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1 shows the number of rebellions in the first session of every Parliament in which Labour was in government, going back to MacDonald in 1924. You do not need to be a statistical whiz to spot the key finding: there were more backbench revolts in the first session of this parliament than in the first session of *any* previous parliament when Labour has been in power. The comparison with the first session of the 1997 parliament is especially sharp: there were almost five times as many revolts in the first session of this Parliament than there were in the first session of the last. But there were also more rebellions in the first session of this Parliament than there were in the first session of the Parliament elected in October 1974, the Parliament in which backbench dissent was to reach its post-war height.²⁰

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2 extends the analysis, including the first *two* sessions of every post-war Parliament, both periods of Labour and Conservative Government. (We lack systematic data on periods when the Conservatives were in government before 1945 to enable us to go back further). Again, the finding is fairly clear. A total of 121 revolts in (less than) two sessions is more than in the first two sessions of all but two post-war Parliaments. A total of 121 exceeds every period of Labour Government in the post-war era and is topped by just two periods of Conservative government, under Heath (1970-1972) and Thatcher (1983-1985).²¹ And remember: the figures for 2001 are for less than two full sessions (the period from September to November still remains of this Parliament's second session), whereas those for 1970 and 1983 are for two complete sessions. It is therefore extremely likely that by the end of this session in November, the 2001 Parliament will be top of the rebellion pops.

Yet here – as so often in life – size matters. If each of these revolts consisted of a single MP, then the Labour whips could sleep soundly in their beds. Unfortunately for the whips, this is clearly not the case. The two largest Iraq rebellions were the biggest since the mid-19th century, easily breaking all the modern records: the 110 Labour MPs who rebelled over agricultural rent reform in 1975, or the 95 Conservatives who voted against the post-Dunblane firearms legislation.²² To find a bigger revolt, you have to go back to the Corn Laws.²³ The rebellion in favour of a reasoned amendment to the Second Reading of the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Bill was the largest against the Second Reading of a Government Bill by its own backbenchers since the Shops Bill in 1986.²⁴ And as the list above showed, there were also large revolts over faith schools, anti-terrorism legislation, immigration and asylum, community health councils and the fire service.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

That said, as Table 1 makes clear, the majority of the rebellions since 2001 have been smaller. Over half have consisted of fewer than ten backbenchers; just 18 (15 per cent) have seen 30 or more Labour MPs break ranks. So whilst the Government may suffer a rebellion every five votes, it only suffers a large rebellion every 33.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The mean size of the rebellions since 2001 is 14. Figure 3 compares this to comparable means for the first two sessions of all other post-war Parliaments. As Figure 3 shows, a figure of 14 is greater than the average size of backbench rebellions in every Conservative period of Government from 1945 to 1997. It is also greater than for all the Labour governments between 1945 and 1966. But it is smaller than the Parliaments of 1966, October 1974, and (perhaps more surprisingly) 1997. This conclusion is reinforced when the average size of rebellion is presented as a percentage of the parliamentary party (three per cent for the period between 2001-2003), at which point the difference between the parliaments of the 1960s (where the average rebellion was six per cent of the parliamentary party) and the 1970s (seven per cent) becomes even starker.²⁵ Labour MPs may therefore be rebelling more often than they did in the 1960s and 1970s, but they are not (yet) rebelling in anywhere near the same quantity.

Who are the rebels?

Since the Commons resumed following the 2001 election a total of 193 Labour MPs have voted against their whip.²⁶ This is more than did so in the whole of the last (1997) Parliament. It is also more than did so in the whole of the 1992 Parliament under John Major.²⁷ As a proportion of those MPs on the backbenches, 193 rebels means that almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of those who have been on the backbenches at some point during this Parliament have rebelled. Of those who have been on the backbenches solidly since 2001, just over three-quarters (76 per cent) have now rebelled. Yet if we take a longer perspective, this is not an especially high figure. The 1987 Parliament saw 213 government MPs defy their whips in total, 165 of whom had done so by the end of the second session, and the Parliament of 1983 saw some 226 MPs defy their whips by the end of the second session, 13 more than the current parliament – and from a smaller parliamentary party as well.²⁸

Most of the 193 have not rebelled often: three-quarters (143) rebelled on fewer than ten occasions; just 22 voted against their party whip 20 or more times. The identity of the 22 most rebellious MPs (listed in Table 2) is unlikely to be a huge surprise to anyone with a passing knowledge of Westminster or the politics of the PLP. Jeremy Corbyn heads the list (with 79 votes against the party whip), closely followed by John McDonnell (71). There is then a sharp drop, down to four MPs with over 40 dissenting votes each (Jones, Marshall-Andrews, Sedgemore and Simpson), closely followed by another eight with 30 or more dissenting votes.

TABLE 2 IN HERE

It is always worth stressing that this means that even the most rebellious Labour MP only votes against the party once every eight votes. And – as the Table shows – Corbyn and McDonnell are exceptional in their behaviour, even when compared to some of the other more rebellious Labour MPs. Even Lynne Jones, the third most rebellious Labour MP (and the most rebellious woman), has voted against the party line 44 times, just once in every 14 votes. Even the rebels, therefore, are overwhelmingly 'loyal' in the division lobbies.²⁹

The turnover caused by the 2001 election was the lowest at the end of any full-length Parliament since 1945.³⁰ Just 38 Labour MPs (discussed in more detail below) were new to the Commons.³¹ This small influx of new MPs means that the changes in the PLP's behaviour cannot be as a result of changes in its membership. For the most part, the PLP now consists of the same people now as it did four years ago, but behaving differently. It is, however, possible to identify three explanations for the difference in behaviour.

First, there are all the ex-members of the Government now sitting on the backbenches. After the last reshuffle, this group now totals over 90.³² It is not necessarily that members of this group have begun to vote against the Government out of bitterness at leaving government (although some be doing so), but that believing that their ministerial career is over gives them a freedom to act which is denied to others. Over half of this group (47) have voted against the Government so far this Parliament, although this leaves almost half who have not done so, and even many of the rebels are less rebellious than they sometimes seem. Many of the better-known ex-ministers have in fact been fairly selective in their rebellions (the most rebellious ex-Cabinet Minister, Frank Dobson, has only voted against the whip seven times since 2001). If they have inflicted damage to the government, then it has usually been by voice as much as by vote.

Second, there is now a large group of MPs who know that they are unlikely ever to get onto even the first rung of the ladder. Of the huge 1997 intake, there are 78 who have not yet received even the lowest of government positions. Of these, all but 13 (83 per cent) have rebelled over the last two years. Of course, some – like John McDonnell or Bob Marshall-Andrews – were never going to be likely candidates for ministerial office. But there were 27 MPs from the 1997 intake who were on the backbenches for all of the last Parliament without rebelling once, but who have begun to do so since 2001. They include the much-maligned Helen Clark, who (as Helen Brinton) became synonymous with excessive loyalty, but who has voted against the party line five times so far this Parliament.

Third, partly as a result of the two factors listed above (what one senior whip described as 'the dismissed and the disappointed'), and partly simply because of the passage of time, the overall number of MPs to have defied the whip climbs ever-upwards. As Figure 4 shows, the number of MPs to have rebelled against the Government at least once rose steadily from 77 at the end of the 1997 session to 133 by the end of the last Parliament. Just over 20 rebels then left at the last election, lowering the total temporarily, but it had reached 122 by the end of the first session of this Parliament and to the current total of 193 by the summer recess in 2003. Once an MP has rebelled once, he or she is much more likely to rebel for a second time (and then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth, and so on).³³ And so with each new rebellion, the number of likely rebels for any subsequent rebellion increases.

FIGURE FOUR ABOUT HERE

Largely unnoticed, the Government attempted in the last reshuffle to ameliorate all three of these problems. Back into government came some ex-ministers – such as Chris Mullin or Bridget Prentice – thus sending out the message that resurrection is possible. Into Government also came a substantial group of 1997 loyalists– such as Nick Palmer or David Stewart – who might otherwise have come to the conclusion that they had no chance of ever making it even slightly up the greasy poll. And third, into government came a handful of MPs who had rebelled very occasionally – such as Jackie Lawrence or David Borrow – in order to show that sporadic rebellion does not of itself result in an eternity in darkness. The much publicised cock-up in the changes at the top of Government therefore distracted attention from the (much better thought through) changes at the lower levels.

But there is a limit to the extent to which these problems can be ameliorated in this way. There is an obvious limit to the number of ex- or would-be-ministers who can be brought into government, without simply creating more disgruntled ex-ministers in the process. Although the Government has been criticised for increasing the number of PPSs in an attempt to extend its patronage,³⁴ the recent

increases were in fact very small when seen in any long-term perspective,³⁵ and anyway can only bring in a very limited extra number of MPs. And promoting rebellious MPs can create resentment from any overlooked loyalists. For the most part, therefore, these problems will just continue to get worse the longer the Government is in office.

The 2001 intake

Complaints about the behaviour of MPs were fuelled in recent years by the changes to the procedures used by Labour to select its parliamentary candidates.³⁶ For example, Parliament First's recent pamphlet, *Parliament's Last Chance*, complained of the increasing centralisation of political parties, and the resulting decline of the independent-minded Parliamentarian.³⁷ The accusation is a simple one: Labour's ruthless Head Office weeds out any dissenting voices. All those who might think for themselves and cause the whips sleepless nights are blocked, with the result that only Blairite clones make it to the Commons.

It was difficult to test this argument in 1997, because the scale of Labour's victory meant that it won many constituencies that were widely assumed to be safe Conservative seats, with the result that the very large 1997 intake included MPs who had not been properly vetted by the Party's HQ.³⁸ The 2001 intake, however, constitutes a good test case for the effects of Labour's selection procedures, because in 2001 there was very little change in the number of seats held by each party, and so nearly every new Labour MP inherited his or her seat from a retiring Labour incumbent. As a result, they had all been vetted properly; and the party hierarchy had plenty of warning about its new MPs.

The 40 new Labour MPs (including the two by-election entrants) are listed in Table 3. Of the 40, 22 had voted against their whip by the beginning of the summer recess in 2003. This constitutes 55 per cent of the 2001 intake. (By the end of the second session of the last Parliament, by contrast, just 19 per cent of the 1997 intake had rebelled).

Notwithstanding the difficulties with abstentions (noted above), because of the extremely high profile of the issue we also looked at those who were absent from one or more of the Iraq votes, where there would have to be an extremely good reason for an absence. In fact, this makes relatively little difference to the figures, since most of those who were absent have also cast dissenting votes at one point or other. Just three of the 2001 intake who have yet to cast a dissenting vote were absent from one or more of the main Iraq votes. James Purnell was absent from the votes on 26 February for personal reasons; Paul Daisley was terminally ill and unable to vote but was opposed to the Government's position; and Mark Tami abstained once on 18 March.³⁹

On whipped votes therefore, including abstentions on Iraq, 23 of these 40 MPs have defied the whips to date.⁴⁰ In itself, this is a fairly remarkable figure: just two years after their election, almost 60 per cent of the 2001 intake have already defied their whips.

We then took a wider view, and included two key free votes. First, the vote on Lords reform. The vote may well have been free, but the Prime Minister's preference for a 100 per cent appointed chamber was well known.⁴¹ Of the 40 members of the 2001 intake, just 16 backed the PM's preferred position. Second, we examined a key vote on the nomination of select committees, which again was free but where the known preference of many within the whips' office was to reject Robin Cook's reforms.⁴² Of the 40, just over half backed the proposals.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 shows the behaviour of the 2001 intake across these various votes. There are just five MPs from the 2001 intake who (a) have not yet defied the whips on a whipped vote; (b) backed the PM's position on the Lords; and (c) rejected Cook's proposals on select committee reform.⁴³ These are shaded in grey in the table: David Cairns, Tony Cunningham, James Purnell (notwithstanding his absence from one of the Iraq votes), Sion Simon, and Tom Watson.

If the aim of Labour's selection process was to ensure that only Blairite clones made it to the Commons, then it failed dismally. Over half have defied the whips before even the second anniversary of their election, making them roughly three times more rebellious than the 1997 intake were. (It also makes them more rebellious in percentage terms than the group of ex-ministers discussed above). On 'free' votes they show no inclination to do as either the PM or the whips' office would like. The majority did not back the PM's position on Lords reform; the majority defied the known preferences of the whips over select committee reform. Just five – a mere 13 per cent – have not yet rebelled or defied either their whips or their Prime Minister.

It is, however, worth noting that this behaviour has its costs. Ten of the 2001 intake have so far been promoted to Government – nine as PPSs and one, David Miliband, as a Minister of State. Of these ten, none has voted against the party line. By contrast, of the 22 who have voted against the party whip none has made it into government, even at the lowest level. Of the five most 'super loyal' MPs identified above, four – Cairns, Cunningham, Purnell, and Watson – entered Government at the last reshuffle. The promotion rates are therefore:

- Of the 22 who rebelled, zero per cent are now in government.
- Of the 12 who did not rebel but who did not necessarily do the whips or the PM's bidding on free votes, 50 per cent are now in government.
- Of the five who did not rebel and who did both the whips and the PM's bidding on free votes, 80 per cent are now in government.⁴⁴

This is unlikely to be coincidental.

Rebels with causes

Richard Rose famously identified a classic distinction between factions and tendencies in political parties. The Conservatives were a party of tendencies – in which *ad hoc* groups of MPs (or others) joined together in temporary coalitions over specific individual issues. Labour, by contrast, was a party of factions, in which groups of MPs (or others) campaigned together over a range of issues.⁴⁵ The Conservatives classification as a party of tendencies is now disputed.⁴⁶ But what about Labour? To what extent are the rebels on each issue the same people? To what extent are they simply the 'usual suspects'?

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

To examine this, we first grouped the 121 individual rebellions into the 11 broad issue categories listed above, excluding the smaller, more idiosyncratic, rebellions. We then performed a principal components analysis of these 11 issues, in order to identify underlying dimensions in the rebellions.⁴⁷ As Table 4 shows, this reveals just two underlying dimensions. The first loads onto ten of the 11 issues, the exception being the small European rebellion. This one factor alone explains just over 40 per cent of the variance. The second factor – which

explains an additional nine per cent of the variance – loads onto four of the revolts: anti-terrorism, CHCs, Europe and the firefighters legislation. These two components combined can explain half the variance. There is therefore evidence of a factional core to the rebellions: with the exception of the eurosceptic revolt, one underlying factor explains around 40 per cent of the revolts. But even including the less important secondary factor, half the variance remains unexplained. There is therefore a factional core, but factionalism alone does not explain the composition of any rebellion.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

We also looked at the number of issues over which MPs rebelled (see Table 5). One of the phrases often used to describe MPs participating in a rebellion is 'the usual suspects'. It is a phrase that many of the rebels dislike, believing that it is used deliberately to make light of their actions. It is a (doubtless deliberately) vague phrase, but if by it we mean rebelling over, say, three-quarters of the issues to see backbench dissent, then (as the table shows) the 'usual suspects' comprise just 18 MPs. If we widen the definition as far as it can go, to include those MPs who rebel over 50 per cent of the issues that triggered backbench dissent (by its very nature, 'usual' cannot mean less than 50 per cent), then we are still talking about just 29 MPs. These MPs are listed in Table 7. To avoid offending anyone, we shall eschew describing them as the usual suspects – but when there is a rebellion you can suspect these MPs will usually be involved.

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

There is therefore a factional core to the rebellions. Rather than there being different underlying factors to the various rebellions, there is instead one main factor, which alone explains just over 40 per cent of the variance (together with a smaller, secondary factor, explaining an additional 9 per cent). But this still leaves unexplained as much as it explains. Similarly, there is a hard core of rebels in the PLP, who participate in most serious rebellions, but this group numbers no more than 30. Around them, there is a much larger group of MPs who are willing to rebel but who do so less frequently, and less predictably. This latter group includes many who might be casually dismissed as 'the usual suspects', but whose voting is more discerning than this label implies – including people like Peter Kilfoyle (who rebelled over five issues out of the 11), Ann Cryer (five), Gwyneth Dunwoody (four), Austin Mitchell (four), Tam Dalyell (three) and Graham Allen (three). The good news for the Government therefore is that although there are lots of MPs who are willing to rebel, there is not yet any large-scale factional opposition to the government on the backbenches of the PLP.

Conclusion

The 2001 election did not mark the point at which the PLP changed from being sheep to rottweillers – both because Labour MPs were not sheep before, and because they have not become rottweillers since.

The supposed spinelessness of the 1997 Parliament was always a myth. Although there were relatively infrequent rebellions in the last Parliament, there were still 96 separate backbench revolts, and (as Figure 3 indicates) those that did take place were sizeable. The rebellions between 1997 and 2001 were, on average, larger than in every Parliament between 1945 and 1966, larger than those under Heath between 1970 and 1974, and larger than those during the four consecutive Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997. For poodles, Labour MPs could bark loudly when provoked – and a lot louder than Conservative MPs ever did.⁴⁸ Moreover, the growing restlessness of the PLP had begun *before* the 2001

election. The number of rebellions grew throughout the last Parliament, session-on-session (at least until the stunted, pre-election session of 2000-2001).

Rebellion therefore was on the increase before the 2001 election, and it has continued to increase since. The 2001 Parliament has seen the largest revolt since the middle of the 19th century, has already seen more revolts than in any comparable period of Labour government, and by the end of the session in November will probably have seen more revolts than any comparable period of post-war government. The widespread impression that Labour MPs are causing trouble for their leadership is far from erroneous.

But it is wise not to exaggerate the changes that have occurred. There has been no collapse in party discipline. Cohesion remains the norm, dissent the exception. Most votes still see complete cohesion. Even when Labour MPs do break ranks, they do not usually do so in huge numbers. Most rebellions are small, with the result that, despite the two largest rebellions since the 1840s, the average revolt since 2001 is lower than in three other post-war parliaments. Things may be bad, but they are not as bad as they were in the 1960s or (especially) the 1970s. There is not yet any large-scale organised factional opposition to the Government on the backbenches. There may be lots of would-be-rebels, but they have yet to form into any organised resistance against the Government.

And – perhaps most importantly of all – the Government remains undefeated in the Commons. Every other Government from 1970 to 1997 was defeated at least once in the division lobbies as a result of its own backbenchers rebelling. The Parliament of 1997 saw no such defeats. The Parliament of 2001 began with government backbenchers giving the executive a bloody nose over the membership of select committees but these were both free votes.⁴⁹ Despite the rise in backbench dissidence, the Government elected in 1997 therefore remains undefeated on whipped votes, the only government to have managed this for over 30 years. The forthcoming issue of top-up fees, however, has the potential to test this record to destruction.

Figure 1: Number of first session rebellions, all Labour Governments

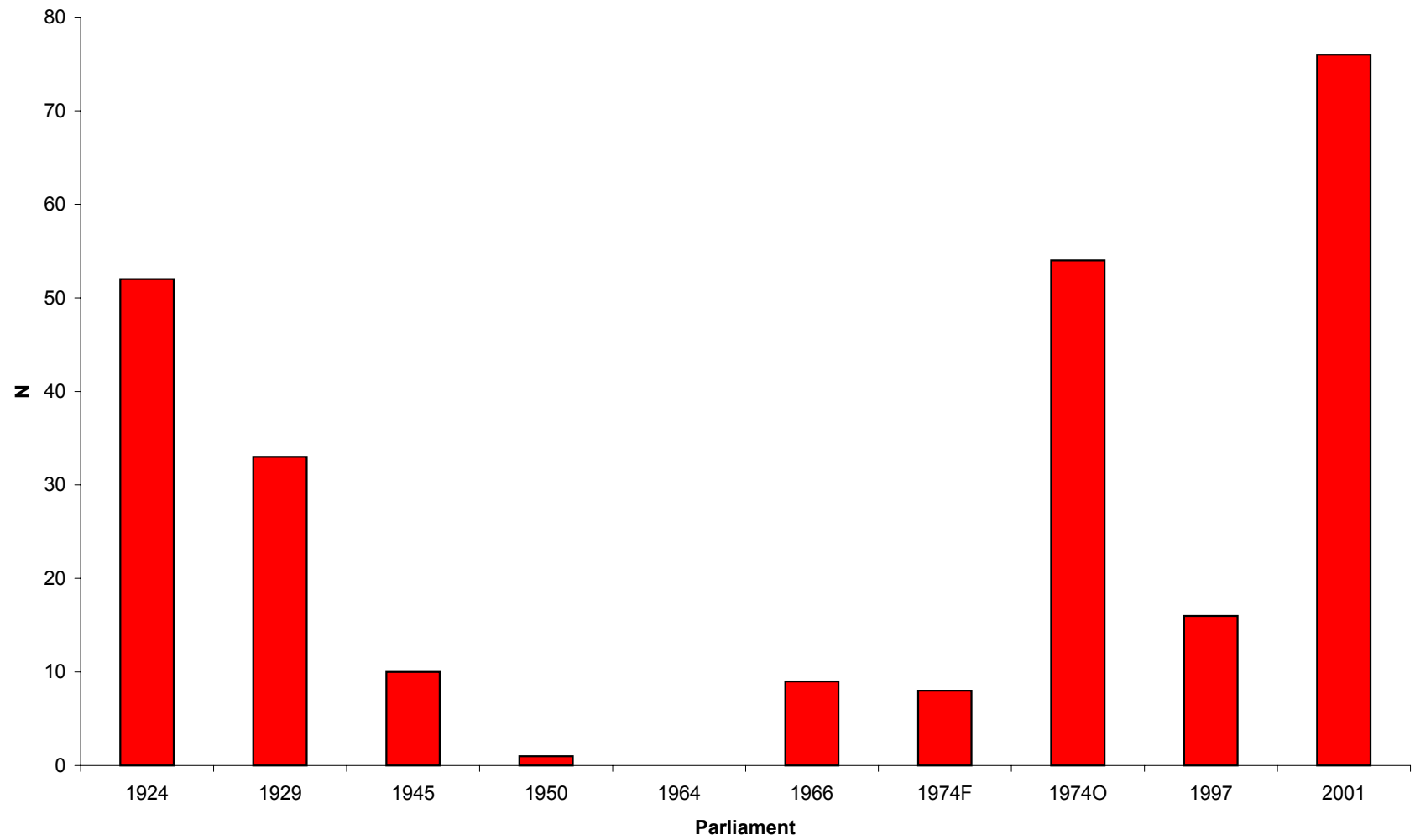


Figure 2: Number of rebellions, first two sessions, 1945-2003

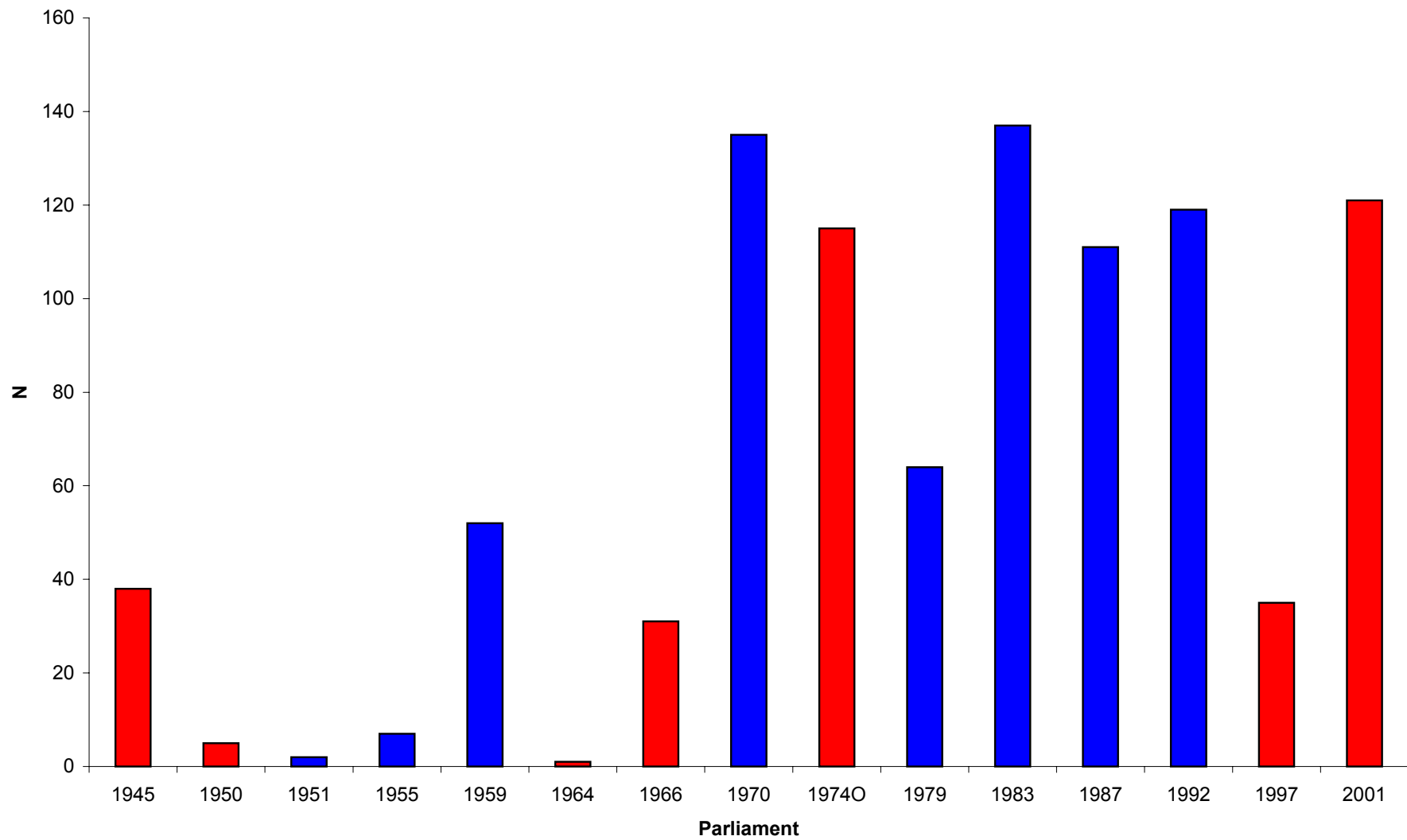


Figure 3: Average size of rebellions, first two sessions, 1945-2003

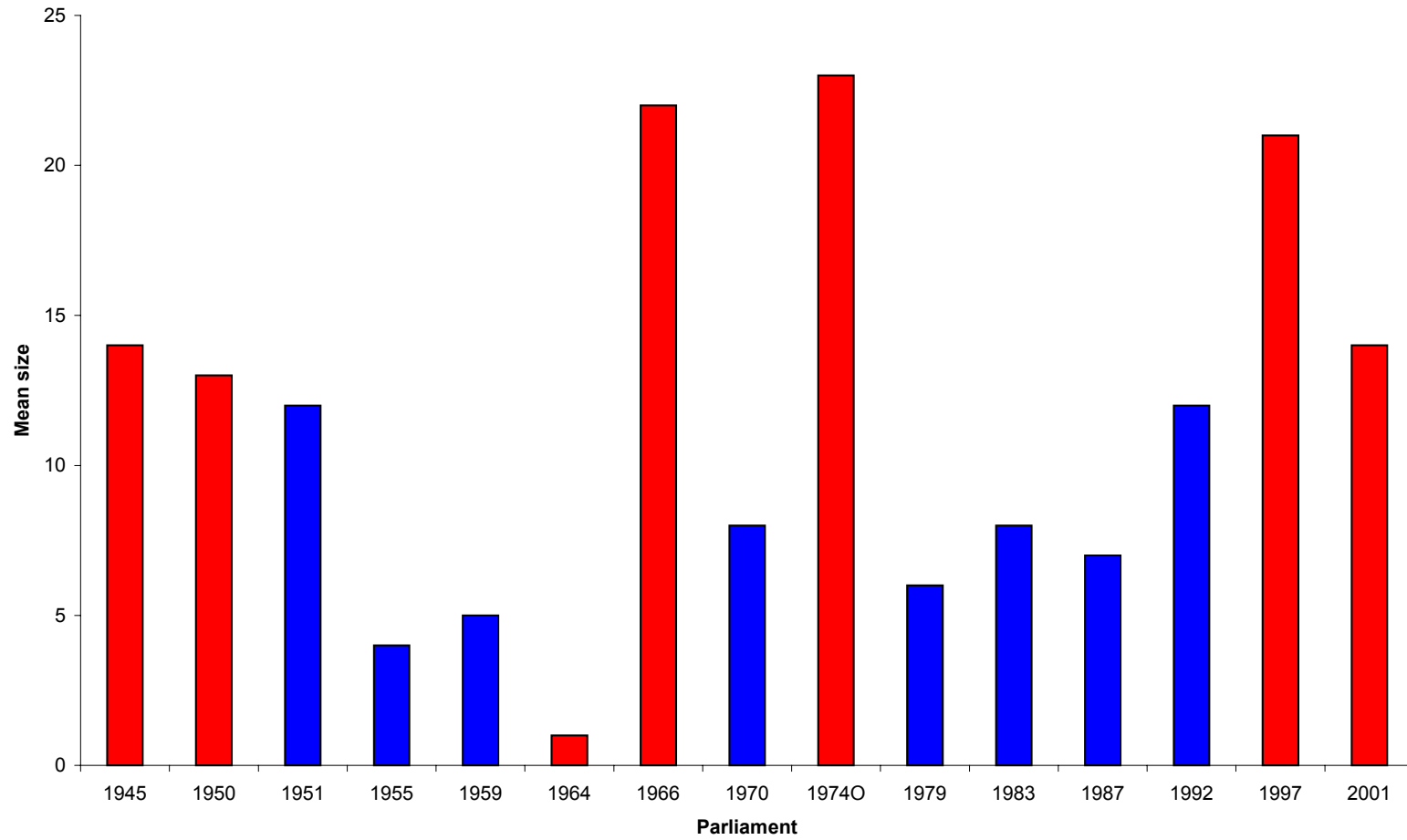


Figure 4: Number of Labour MPs to have voted against the whip, 1997-2003

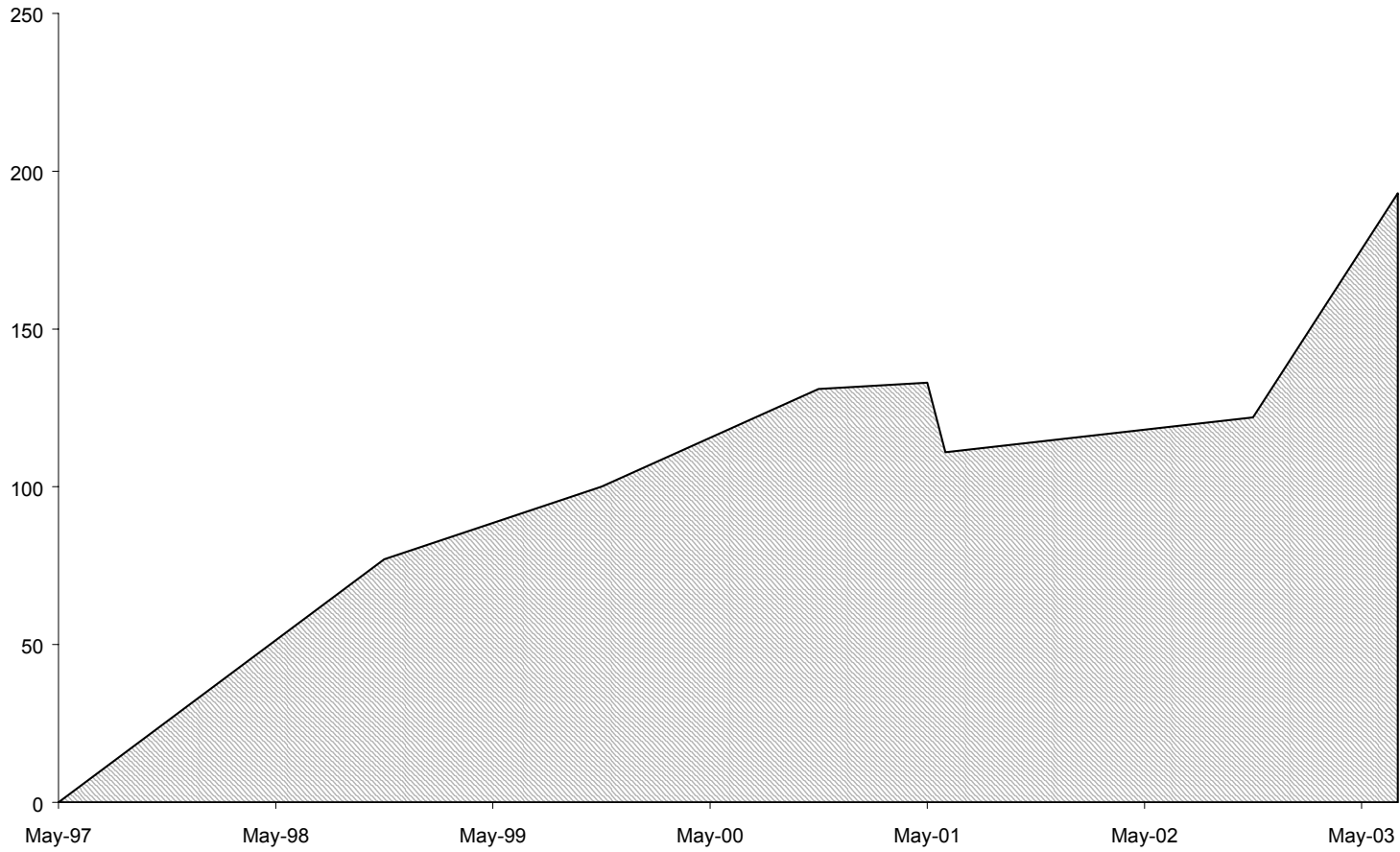


Table 1: Size of Labour backbench rebellions, 2001-2003

<i>Number of MPs voting against the whip</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>As % of revolts</i>
1-9	72	59
10-29	31	26
30-50	11	9
50+	7	6
Total	121	100

Table 2: 22 most rebellious Labour MPs, 2001-2003

<i>Name</i>	<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Number of votes against the whip</i>
Jeremy Corbyn	Islington North	79
John McDonnell	Hayes & Harlington	71
Dr Lynne Jones	Birmingham, Selly Oak	44
Robert Marshall-Andrews	Medway	44
Brian Sedgemore	Hackney South & Shoreditch	44
Alan Simpson	Nottingham South	41
Robert Wareing	Liverpool, West Derby	39
Harry Barnes	Derbyshire North East	37
Kelvin Hopkins	Luton North	37
Neil Gerrard	Walthamstow	35
Denzil Davies	Llanelli	33
Dennis Skinner	Bolsover	33
Alice Mahon	Halifax	32
Andrew Bennett	Denton & Reddish	31
Diane Abbott	Hackney North & Stoke Newington	28
Jim Marshall	Leicester South	28
Llew Smith	Blaenau Gwent	28
George Galloway*	Glasgow Kelvin	27
Kevin McNamara	Hull North	27
Terry Lewis	Worsley	24
Tam Dalyell	Linlithgow	22
Mark Fisher	Stoke-on-Trent Central	22

Note: * includes only votes cast whilst in receipt of the party whip. Galloway has not cast a single vote – with or against the government – since his suspension from the PLP on 6 May 2003.

Table 3: The behaviour of the 2001 intake

<i>Name</i>	<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Cast rebellious votes</i>	<i>Absent over Iraq</i>	<i>Backed 100% appointed Lords</i>	<i>Backed Cook on select committee reform</i>
Vera Baird	Redcar	•	•	•	•
Ian Lucas	Wrexham	•	•	•	•
Dai Havard	Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney	•	•	•	
Khalid Mahmood	Birmingham, Perry Barr	•	•	•	
Kevin Brennan	Cardiff West	•	•		•
Colin Challen	Morley & Rothwell	•	•		•
Parmjit Dhanda	Gloucester	•	•		•
Paul Farrelly	Newcastle-under-Lyme	•	•		•
Hywel Francis	Aberavon	•	•		•
Mark Lazarowicz	Edinburgh North & Leith	•	•		•
Rob Marris	Wolverhampton South West	•	•		•
Ann McKeichin	Glasgow Maryhill	•	•		•
Albert Owen	Ynys-Mon	•	•		•
David Heyes	Ashton under Lyne	•	•		
David Wright	Telford	•	•		
Anne Picking	East Lothian	•		•	•
Kevan Jones	Durham North	•		•	
Iain Luke	Dundee East	•		•	
John MacDougall	Fife Central	•		•	
David Hamilton	Midlothian	•			•
John Lyons	Strathkelvin and Bearsden	•			•
Chris Mole	Ipswich	•			•
Mark Tami	Alyn & Deeside	(•)	•	•	
Paul Daisley*	Brent East		•		
Tom Harris	Glasgow Cathcart			•	•
James Sheridan	Renfrewshire West			•	•
David Cairns	Greenock & Inverclyde			•	
Tony Cunningham	Workington			•	
James Purnell	Stalybridge & Hyde		(•)	•	
Sion Simon	Birmingham, Erdington			•	
Tom Watson	West Bromwich East			•	
Chris Bryant	Rhondda				•
Andrew Burnham	Leigh				•
David Miliband	South Shields				•
Meg Munn	Sheffield, Heeley				•
Jon Cruddas	Dagenham				
Wayne David	Caerphilly				
Huw Irranca-Davies	Ogmore				•
Jim Knight	Dorset South				
John Mann	Bassetlaw				

Note: * died on 19 June 2003.

Table 4: Factor analysis of 11 issues

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Component</i>	
	1	2
Business of House	.569	
Anti-Terrorism	.495	.575
CHCs	.408	.603
Education Bill	.585	
Immigration Bill	.707	
Enterprise Bill	.572	
Iraq	.479	
Firefighters	.406	.653
Criminal Justice Bill	.710	
Foundation Hospitals	.658	
Europe		.886
% of variance explained	41	9

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Table 5: Number of issues over which Labour rebels dissented, 2001-2003

<i>Number of issues</i>	<i>Number of rebels</i>	<i>% of rebels</i>
1	69	37
2	40	21
3	21	11
4	14	7
5	14	7
6	6	3
7	5	3
8	4	2
9	6	3
10	6	3
11	2	1
Total	187	98

Table 6: Labour MPs who rebel on more than half of main issues, 2001-2003

<i>Number of issues rebelled on (out of 11)</i>					
6	7	8	9	10	11
Harold Best	Andrew Bennett	Diane Abbott	John Austin	Harry Barnes	Kelvin Hopkins
Ronnie Campbell	Michael Clapham	Ian Gibson	Neil Gerrard	Jeremy Corbyn	John McDonnell
Michael Connarty	Harry Cohen	Jim Marshall	Terry Lewis	Lynne Jones	
Gordon Prentice	John Cryer	Llew Smith	Alice Mahon	Brian Sedgemore	
David Taylor	Kate Hoey		Bob Marshall-Andrews	Dennis Skinner	
Mike Wood			Alan Simpson	Robert Wareing	

* Nottingham University. This paper, which was presented at the PSA Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Conference, in Cardiff, 12-14 September 2003, draws on research funded by the University of Nottingham's Research Strategy Fund and the ESRC (RES-000-23-0028). We are grateful to all those MPs who have helped with the research, in whatever capacity. Please send any comments to: philip.cowley@nottingham.ac.uk.

¹ See Philip Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions: Parliamentary Voting Under Blair*, London, Politico's, 2002, pp. 37, 41, 96.

² Michael White, 'Why Labour MPs are the new opposition', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2001. Also see Rachel Sylvester, 'Labour grumbles are emblems of a deeper unease', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 July 2001.

³ The very first PLP meeting after the election, for example, saw criticism from several normally loyal MPs, such as Peter Pike (who spoke about conditions on council estates in his constituency) and Debra Shipley (who spoke passionately about the state of her local hospitals).

⁴ Philip Cowley, 'Don't Panic! Putting those select committee votes into perspective', *Renewal*, 9 (2001), 102-105.

⁵ See Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart, 'Parliament: More Revolts, More Reform', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 56 (2003), esp. pp. 192-193.

⁶ This was widely (but erroneously) reported as the lowest parliamentary majority since 1997: in February 1999, the Government had been ambushed during the passage of the Rating (Valuation) Bill, resulting in an even lower majority. The Tory whips had ordered their MPs to leave the Commons. Labour MPs followed, only for the Tories then to return *en masse*, frightening the life out of the government whips. The Government scraped in with a majority of just 25, ten smaller than over Foundation Hospitals.

⁷ Anthony King, 'Modes of Executive-Legislative Relations', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 1 (1976). He continued: 'One discounts the disapproval of the other party; the disapproval of one's own is harder to bear' (p. 16). See also Douglas Hurd, 'The Present Usefulness of the House of Commons', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 3 (1997), esp. p. 3.

⁸ E. Rekosh (ed), *In the Public Eye: Parliamentary Transparency in Europe and North America*, Washington DC, International Human Rights Law Group, 1995, pp. 229-39, 294-5.

⁹ David Truman, *The Congressional Party: A Case Study*, New York, Wiley, 1959.

¹⁰ Such as the apparent (but incorrect) dissenting votes cast so far by George Howarth (Division 133, 15 January 2002), Paul Goggins (Division 170, 14 April 2003), and John MacDougall (Division 200, 15 May 2003).

¹¹ Proposals in 1998 to allow the recording of abstentions met with a largely positive reaction from parliamentarians, but nothing has as yet happened. See The Sixth Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, 'Voting Methods', London, The Stationery Office, HC 799, 1998.

¹² See Philip Norton, *Dissension in the House of Commons, 1974-1979*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, x; also Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, p. 12.

¹³ A total of 53 voted no, along with two tellers for the noes, and – in order to ensure a vote – one acted as a teller for the ayes.

¹⁴ The vote was on the adjournment: 42 Labour MPs voted aye, with a further two acting as tellers for the noes, in order to ensure a division.

¹⁵ The figure is normally listed as 122, since 122 Labour MPs (including tellers) voted in favour of the amendment. But one – Andy Reed – voted in both lobbies, in order to cast a deliberate abstention. He subsequently resigned from his position as PPS to Margaret Beckett.

-
- ¹⁶ Two subsequent rebellions – following a Liberal Democrat Opposition Day debate in June and a Conservative Opposition Day debate in July – were less spectacular, with 11 and eight Labour MPs rebelling respectively.
- ¹⁷ There was also a rebellion of a lone Labour backbencher over the Bill's programme motion.
- ¹⁸ The Bill's passage saw a further two rebellions, each consisting of one MP.
- ¹⁹ See especially A. L. Lowell, *The Government of England*, London, Macmillan, 1926 (Volume 2).
- ²⁰ See Norton, *Dissension in the House of Commons, 1974-1979*, esp. pp. 427-446.
- ²¹ For the record, it also exceeds the figure for the Government of May 1929-August 1931, which saw 95 separate rebellions.
- ²² Norton, *Dissension in the House of Commons, 1974-1979*, pp. 179-180; Philip Cowley and Philip Norton, 'Rebels and rebellions: Conservative MPs in the 1992 Parliament', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1 (1999), p. 93.
- ²³ See, for example, Iain McLean, 'Irish potatoes, Indian corn, and British politics: interests, ideology, heresthetics, and the Repeal of the Corn Laws', in A. Dobson and J. Stanyer (eds), *Contemporary Political Studies 1998*, Nottingham, PSA, 1998.
- ²⁴ Paul Regan, 'The 1986 Shops Bill', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 41 (1990); F. A. C. S. Bown, 'The Defeat of the Shops Bill', in M. Rush (ed), *Parliament and Pressure Politics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990.
- ²⁵ Indeed, as a percentage of the parliamentary party even the size of the Iraq rebellion becomes (just very slightly) less impressive. The largest Iraq revolt saw 34 per cent of the PLP vote against their whip. But in 1924, 73 Labour MPs – constituting 40 per cent of the PLP – voted against the MacDonald Government over the right of strikers to claim unemployment benefit. As a proportion of the parliamentary party, this still remains the largest revolt by members of the PLP.
- ²⁶ Of these, one (Ray Powell) has since died, one (Paul Marsden) defected to the Liberal Democrats (which is a sort of living death), and one (George Galloway) has had the whip removed (a sort of resurrection). This leaves 190 MPs sitting on the Government benches, and in receipt of the whip, who have rebelled.
- ²⁷ Philip Cowley, 'Chaos or Cohesion? Major and the Conservative Parliamentary Party', in P. Dorey (ed), *The Major Premiership*, London, Macmillan, 1999, p. 21.
- ²⁸ Also see Norton, *Dissension in the House of Commons, 1974-1979*, esp. p. 435; and Philip Norton, *Conservative Dissidents*, London, Temple Smith, 1978, esp. p. 214.
- ²⁹ Moreover, because some of the more rebellious MPs are often refused leave of absence from the Commons as a punishment for their actions, some of them argue that they in fact cast more 'loyal' votes in favour of the Government than do some of the less rebellious MPs.
- ³⁰ Philip Cowley, 'The Commons: Mr Blair's Lapdog?', in Pippa Norris (ed), *Britain Votes 2001*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 258.
- ³¹ 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. In addition, Huw Irranca-Davies and Chris Mole both came in at by-elections since 2001.
- ³² This figure includes those who were in the government (broadly defined) as PPSs.
- ³³ For more on this, see Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart, 'The relationship between Early Day Motions and rebellions – and why the Government should be very worried about top-up fees' (unpublished paper, University of Nottingham, 2003).
- ³⁴ See *The Guardian*, 5 August 2003.
- ³⁵ See, for example, R K Alderman and J A Cross, 'The Parliamentary Private Secretary – A Danger to the Free Functioning of Parliament', *Political Studies*, 14 (1966), 199-208.

-
- ³⁶ See, for example, Eric Shaw, 'New Labour: New Pathways to Parliament', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 54 (2001), 35-53.
- ³⁷ Parliament First, *Parliament's Last Chance*, 2003, esp. pp. 6, 26.
- ³⁸ See Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, p. 11.
- ³⁹ Tami had also once been in a dissenting lobby, albeit by mistake. On 26 November 2001, he was one of the first Labour MPs to arrive at the lobby to vote on introducing a new offence of religious hatred to the Committee stage of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill. One of the whips – who shall remain nameless – indicated that the Labour line was to vote against the clause, when in fact they were supposed to vote aye. Tami (along with Martyn Jones, who did the same) then had to cancel out their first vote by entering the aye lobby.
- ⁴⁰ Or 24, if one includes Paul Daisley, who would have done so had he been well enough.
- ⁴¹ See Iain McLean, Arthur Spirling and Meg Russell, 'None of the Above. The UK House of Commons Votes on Reforming the House of Lords', *Political Quarterly*, 74 (2003), 298-310.
- ⁴² See Alexandra Kelso, 'Where were the massed ranks of parliamentary reformers? 'Attitudinal' and 'Contextual' Approaches to Parliamentary Reform', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, forthcoming.
- ⁴³ Extending the analysis to include other unwhipped votes – such as those over whether Gwyneth Dunwoody and Donald Anderson were to remain on select committees – makes no difference to the analysis. All five of the MPs identified here had voted to support the whips' original nominations.
- ⁴⁴ The late Paul Daisley has been excluded from these calculations.
- ⁴⁵ Richard Rose, 'Parties, factions and tendencies in Britain', *Political Studies*, 12 (1964), 33-46.
- ⁴⁶ See, for example, Timothy Heppell, 'The ideological composition of the Parliamentary Conservative Party, 1992-97', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 4 (2002), 299-324; and Philip Cowley and Philip Norton, 'What a ridiculous thing to say! (which is why we didn't say it): a response to Timothy Heppell', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 4 (2002), 325-329.
- ⁴⁷ We excluded MPs who had been in Government for any of the period from 2001-2003.
- ⁴⁸ See, for example, Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart, 'In Place of Strife? The PLP in Government, 1997-2001', *Political Studies*, 51 (2003).
- ⁴⁹ Cowley, 'Don't Panic!', pp. 102-103.