

The parliamentary party

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Introduction

A political party's parliamentarians are one of the leadership's key resources and constraints. They are the face of the party and the focus of attention for the national media. The costs of a divided parliamentary party were made painfully clear the last time the Conservatives had been in power during John Major's premiership when the Conservative Party, once commonly portrayed as united instead became widely seen as deeply divided (Cowley, 1999). In legislative terms, the parliamentary party is, or should be, the bulk vote that will deliver the government's programme. If it splits, then promised (or hoped for) legislation may not be delivered. Loose canons, therefore, are dangerous, whether they are in the House of Commons lobbies or the Millbank Television Centre, broadcasting their opinions to the nation. And third, parliamentarians form the talent pool from which members of any incoming government must be recruited. Ministers come from, and remain in, Parliament. Those handful of exceptions – such as peerages being created for the purpose of bringing individuals into government – merely go to prove the centrality of the institution in the formation of governments at Westminster.

For much of the 2010 parliament, the PCP was more constraint than resource. Key to the parliamentary arithmetic throughout the parliament was the fact that even if every backbench Liberal Democrat MP rebelled on an issue, there were not enough of them to defeat the government; but there were enough backbench Conservative MPs to do so. This meant that Coalition measures could be blocked if enough Conservative backbenchers were willing to join forces with Labour, but they could not be blocked if Lib Dem backbenchers were similarly annoyed.

This chapter discusses the composition of the parliamentary party, along with its behaviour in the divisions lobbies. We discuss whipped votes, where the Party's MPs rebelled in record-breaking numbers and prevented key parts of the government's Coalition Agreement making it onto the statute book. We then discuss the key divisions within the Party on free votes. The chapter ends with a discussion of the ideological factions within the parliamentary party. David Cameron may have been a moderniser, as were some of his MPs – but he, and they, were very much in a minority.

The face of the Party

The most striking thing about the PCP that gathered after the 2010 election was how different it was. The combination of a large number of retirements in advance of the election, driven in large part by the expenses scandal, and the Conservatives' successes at the polls, meant that almost half (48%, some 148 MPs) of the parliamentary party were newly elected (Criddle, 2010: 306–7). All occasions when a party enters government from opposition see a large number of new MPs elected; but the Conservatives in 2010 were doing so from a lower base than any other party entering government since 1945. In terms of experience of government, they were not quite as inexperienced as had been the mass of Labour MPs elected in 1997 (when just 10% had experience of a Labour government), but it was not far off; just over a quarter of Conservative MPs had experience of sitting on the Treasury benches.

In David Cameron's first speech as party leader in 2005 he had pledged to change the Party: 'We will change the way we look. Nine out of 10 Conservative MPs, like me, are white men. We need to change the scandalous under representation of women in the Conservative party and we'll do that.' Some of the new MPs were indeed visibly different from their predecessors. As a result of the changes to the Conservatives' selection procedures used between 2005 and 2010 (Childs and Webb, 2011), there were more Conservative women MPs (49, up from 17 in 2005) as well as more from ethnic minorities (11, up from just two). Both were historic high figures for the Party. The majority of the parliamentary party, though, remained white and male, something which was especially true at the higher levels of the government.

Ironically, despite repeated claims of social exclusiveness that would dog the Party throughout the parliament, the number of privately educated Conservative MPs after 2010 hit an all-time low – with the new intake splitting roughly evenly between those educated at state and private schools – but the privately educated were still heavily over-represented (and, again, especially on the frontbench). The near total absence of working-class MPs on the Conservative side of the House continued. The rare exceptions – such as Cameron's first Chief Whip, Patrick McLoughlin, a former miner – merely proved the broader point. In 2010, the Conservatives gained over 30% of the C2 and DE vote (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010: 341). Almost no efforts had been made to ensure that this segment of the population – and of the Conservatives' own supporters – received representation on the Conservative benches.

At each of the last three elections there have been claims about how the new intake of Conservative MPs would be more socially liberal, and help to shift the balance of power in the Party. The reality has always been more mixed, as it was to prove in 2010. This large intake of new MPs should, however, have been good news for the party whips, as new MPs are traditionally less difficult to manage, at least initially. Again, the reality proved more mixed.

Managing the backbenches

The Coalition Agreement specified that the Conservative Chief Whip would serve as the government's Chief Whip; the government's Deputy Chief Whip would be the Liberal Democrat Chief Whip. Although the two parties would consult, they were responsible for the internal organisation and discipline of their own MPs. Throughout the Parliament there were criticisms made of the whips – especially the Conservative whips and/or the Number 10 machine – for mishandling relations with backbenchers. They were accused of being heavy-handed or aloof, of not listening or of only promoting MPs who had been to school with the prime minister or were allies of the Chancellor.¹ Some of these criticisms were valid, but they often failed to appreciate the broader structural difficulties that the party managers were working under. The Conservatives got through four Chief Whips during the Parliament; each time a new Chief Whip took office there was discussion of how he (it was always a he) would shake up the Whips' Office and solve the party management problems the Party was facing; each time, it made little difference.

In part, the difficulties the Party faced were merely the latest manifestation of a long-term development seen over the last 40 or so years: the rising independence of MPs, a trend first identified in the 1970s and which has been increasing, in fits and starts, since then (Cowley, 2005). But in addition, there were multiple factors which made things worse for the Conservatives after 2010.

First, that the Party was in government in Coalition with the Lib Dems was a crucial aspect of party management during this period. The government's MPs occupied a broader ideological range than any other government in the post-war era (even the broad churches that are British political parties are not quite as broad as the range between the left of the Liberal Democrats and the right of the Conservatives). Whatever it did, therefore, it was bound to alienate one wing or the other. Indeed, one of the other paradoxes of the 2010 Coalition was that members of the public did not tend to think the Lib Dems achieved very much as a result of being in government, whereas many Conservative MPs frequently blamed them for preventing the government being more right wing. Both cannot be true. Second, many of the rhetorical weapons that would normally be deployed by the party whips (especially during the early stages of a parliament) were absent as a result of Coalition. It was, for example, no use the party managers telling would-be rebels that they needed to support legislation because it was in the Party's manifesto – a traditional whipping tactic – because in many cases the Coalition were doing things that were not in a party's manifesto, and sometimes indeed things that were the opposite of manifesto pledges. In some cases it was the would-be rebels who were able to claim the legitimacy of the manifesto. Nor was it any good, for example, telling Conservative MPs that they needed to support the prime minister who won them the election – given that he had not. Indeed, some Conservative MPs blamed

the prime minister for not winning the election, and did not see that they owed him much loyalty as a result.

Then, third, there were the problems of managing such a large number of new MPs. It is hard enough for prime ministers to fill all the positions in government under normal circumstances. Doing so with such an unbalanced parliamentary party, and trying to reconcile the demands of the newly elected for advancement with fair treatment for the longer-serving, especially those who have worked hard for the party in opposition, was near to impossible. One senior figure in the Parliamentary Labour Party, when discussing the problem of dealing with a large intake of new MPs in 1997, simply shrugged his shoulders and said, 'What the fuck do you do?' Conservative whips after 2010 found themselves thinking similar thoughts. Things were made even worse by the involvement of the Lib Dems: it is not difficult to imagine the disgruntlement felt by Conservative MPs who served their party loyally during opposition and had expected a position in government, only then to discover that not only were they not going to get any such post, but they were going to lose out to a Lib Dem instead.

And fourth, whereas Lib Dem MPs had been part of a process to ratify the Coalition – thereby binding them to it, even when they disagreed with individual policies – Conservative MPs had been largely passive observers to the drawing up of the agreement, which was then presented to them as a *fait accompli*; they therefore felt more willing to ignore it when it suited them.

Fifth, matters were made worse by a pledge Cameron had given in 2009 that by the end of his first term a third of his ministers would be female. When he made it, people pointed out how difficult this would be to achieve, given the usual lag between initial election as an MP and ministerial office (Cowley, 2009), and so it proved. Throughout the 2010 Parliament Cameron was routinely criticised by (some) male MPs for over-promoting women MPs *and* routinely criticised by (some) commentators for not having enough women on his frontbench and in Cabinet. He received little thanks or praise for his efforts to deal with the latter, whilst the former perception just stored up more resentment on the backbenches.

Combined, the result was a record high level of dissent. There were some 1,239 divisions (votes) in the House of Commons from 2010 to 2015. Of these, there were rebellions by Coalition MPs in 438, covering a wide range of issues and bills. The first rebellion, which came within a month of Parliament meeting, was on the government's control of time in the Commons; the last was on the draft Infrastructure Planning (Radioactive Waste Geological Disposal Facilities) Order. En route, the whips faced rebellions on everything from the Academies Bill to the Postal Services Bill, from welfare reform to localism, from HS2 to Syria, from voting systems to the Finance Bill, as well as student finance and Europe (the last occurring repeatedly).

As a percentage of divisions, these 438 rebellions constitute a rebellion by Coalition MPs in 35% of divisions, a figure without precedent in the post-war era.

In the first four parliaments after the end of the Second World War, 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, 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% (2001–05) to a post-war peak of 28% (2005–10). A rate of 35% was therefore extremely atypical.

These data are for the Coalition as a whole, including the Liberal Democrats.² But even the data for Conservative MPs alone demonstrate the scale of the problems that David Cameron and his party whips faced with their MPs: Conservative MPs broke ranks in 25% of votes. Even this separate figure is higher than the rate of rebellion by government MPs in all but one post-war parliament.

This high level of dissent ran for the entire parliament. Contrary to usual practice, there was almost no honeymoon for the new prime minister. First sessions, especially first sessions after changes in government, 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. This was absolutely not true of 2010. The rate of rebellion in the first session (44%) was higher than in the second (27%), third (31%) or fourth (27%) session; indeed between September 2010 and February 2011, the rate of dissent consistently exceeded 50%, with rebellion becoming the norm, cohesion the exception.

The previous record for a first session was 28%, for Labour MPs in the 2005–06 session, as the party entered its third, and most troublesome, parliament under Tony Blair. Prior to 2005, the most rebellious first session was that of 1992–93 (in which Conservative MPs rebelled in some 23% of divisions). The figure for Conservative MPs alone during the 2010–12 session was 28%. In other words, even when measured separately Conservative MPs rebelled more often than did John Major's backbenchers as he struggled to pass the Maastricht bill. The contrast becomes even clearer when you compare the behaviour in the first session of the 2010 parliament to the first sessions of parliaments following a change in government. Between 1945 and 1997, the six sessions immediately after a change in

government saw rates of rebellion between zero (1964) and 6% (1979). The total rate of rebellion in the first session at 44% was therefore more than seven times what had been the post-war peak for a first session after a change of government; and even the figure for the Conservatives alone (28%) was more than four times the post-war peak.

One of the few bits of good news for the whips was that things could have been even worse. The two wings of the Coalition rarely coalesced in opposition to the government. The bulk of Conservative rebellions came from the right. The bulk of Lib Dem rebellions came from the left. And the two wobbly wings of the Coalition mostly did not rebel at the same time. Around half of rebellions saw Conservative MPs rebel alone; around a third saw Lib Dem MPs rebel alone, and around one in five saw a rebellion by both Lib Dem and Conservative MPs. This was because the two groups generally rebelled on very different issues. Lib Dem rebellions tended to be on social policy (broadly defined), whereas Conservative rebellions were much more likely to be constitutional policy (broadly defined), such as the bills relating to the introduction of AV and fixed-term parliaments. Of this last category, a big chunk (around one in five of all Conservative rebellions) were on Europe, an issue the leadership had explicitly been keen to avoid in opposition (in his first conference speech as leader Cameron had said that the Party should avoid 'banging on about Europe'), but which were more than double the average size of all Conservative rebellions.

The key rebellions

In common with other parliaments of recent years, most of the backbench rebellions that occurred were small and of little or no policy significance. Many comprised lone backbenchers, rebelling on causes that mattered to them, but which were not of a scale to concern the party whips. But periodically they were large (several were of record size), on major policy matters, and had serious consequences. Moreover, the combined policy impact of the rebellions was probably greater than in any parliament in the post-war era. This section identifies the five most significant Conservative rebellions of the period.

The largest rebellion of the first session came in October 2011, when the government comfortably saw off a backbench business motion calling for a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, winning by 483 to 111.³ A total of 81 Conservative MPs defied a three-line whip to vote for the motion, with another 14–19 abstaining.⁴ This was a larger rebellion than almost all of the Conservative rebellions in government from 1945 until early 1997, topped only by a handful of revolts over gun control during the Major years. It also constituted the largest rebellion on the issue of Europe of the post-war era, an issue which had caused problems for many previous prime ministers. Although the government won – Labour voting with the government – it was a sign of troubles to come; many of the subsequent larger rebellions were also to involve Europe.

For all the rebellions in the first session of the Parliament, they generated no defeats.⁵ The Parliament's early rebellions might, conceivably, have been dismissed therefore as mostly sound and fury. The rebellions in the later sessions, however, were to prove more consequential, generating both outright defeats along with retreats more substantial than those in the preceding session.

The largest rebellion of the Parliament came in July 2012 over the Second Reading of the House of Lords Reform Bill. Some 91 Conservative MPs voted against the Bill's Second Reading. This was the largest rebellion on the issue of Lords reform in the post-war era, almost double the 47 Labour MPs who voted against Richard Crossman's white paper on the subject in 1968. It was also the largest rebellion by government MPs on the Second Reading of any Bill in the post-war period, easily outstripping the 72 Conservative MPs who voted against the Shops Bill in 1986 or the 72 Labour MPs who voted against the Higher Education Bill in 2004.⁶ With the support of the Labour frontbench, the Bill's Second Reading was secured relatively easily, by 462 votes to 124, a majority of 388. But Labour's support did not extend to the bill's programme motion, where the whips faced a similar-sized rebellion; knowing that they would go down to defeat, the government pulled the programme motion rather than see it voted down. Trying to legislate on Lords reform without control of the timetable would have been next-to-impossible – as Harold Wilson had discovered in the 1960s – and so shortly afterwards the Bill was abandoned. The government's retreat on the programme motion means that this was, technically, not a government defeat, but no one was in any doubt what would have happened had the vote gone ahead, and the effect was the same: the government withdrew their Bill in the face of backbench opposition.

The medium-term consequences of that vote, however, were just as significant. Together with the announcement that the bill would be withdrawn came the announcement that the Liberal Democrats were, as a consequence, withdrawing support for the government's proposed constituency boundary changes. As a result, in January 2013, a vote to overturn a Lords amendment to the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill failed by 334 to 292. Four Conservative MPs voted against their party line, but the reason the vote failed was because the Liberal Democrats were whipped to vote against.⁷

The first government defeat as a result of backbench dissent occurred in October 2012, when 53 Conservative MPs voted against their whip on an amendment moved by Mark Reckless calling for a reduction in the EU budget. Although smaller than the first session rebellion identified above, this was still a larger revolt than any Conservative rebellion over Europe before 2010, including any of the Maastricht rebellions; and, whereas the European referendum rebellion in 2011 had seen Labour join forces with the government to defeat the rebels, on this occasion Labour opposed the government, and the combination of official and backbench opposition was sufficient to defeat the government (by 307 votes to 294). It meant that David Cameron joined the list of prime ministers defeated in the House of

Commons as a result of their own MPs rebelling, a line which dates back unbroken to Edward Heath.

The third session began with yet another rebellion over a referendum on EU membership – this time on an amendment to the motion on the Queen’s Speech. Faced with the possibility of a very large rebellion, the Conservatives promised support for a private members’ bill on the subject (although, as a result of Lib Dem opposition, such support did not extend to any government *time*). Despite this, the rebels pushed ahead with their amendment, and faced with what would have been an enormous rebellion, the Conservatives allowed a partial free vote on the issue: ministers would abstain, backbenchers could do what they liked. More than 110 Conservative MPs went on to vote for an amendment ‘regretting’ the absence of a referendum bill from the Queen’s Speech. The amendment was defeated, as a result of Labour and Lib Dem votes, by 130 to 277 (it was another vote – like that over boundary changes – where the Coalition parties ended up in different lobbies). Technically, this was not a ‘rebellion’, because it was a (partial) free vote. But it had been made a free vote because the government knew they faced an enormous rebellion. The size of the vote was another reminder of the scale of Conservative divisions over Europe, but the most striking feature was that this was on the Queen’s Speech. Rebellions on motions on the Queen’s Speech are extremely rare. Even more rare – we cannot find a precedent – are occasions where the government (or at least the largest party of the government) *abstain* over the Queen’s Speech. The prime minister declared himself ‘relaxed’ about the outcome, which is a curious position for a prime minister to take over a vote on the government’s legislative programme, if an accurate acceptance of the political realities he faced.

The largest Coalition rebellion of the 2013–14 session occurred in August 2013 over possible military action in Syria. Having recalled Parliament to debate the situation in Syria, the government whips discovered such unhappiness amongst a large number of its MPs over the possibility of military action that the government was forced to retreat, promising that no action would take place without a further vote – which left it in the curious position of having recalled Parliament to have a vote that would not achieve anything even had it been passed. But despite this retreat, 39 Coalition MPs – 30 Conservatives, nine Liberal Democrats – voted against a government motion condemning the use of chemical weapons in Syria and planning for a further vote on the use of military force in the country. Others abstained. The government was defeated by 283 to 270, a majority against the government of 13. The government then abandoned all plans to intervene militarily in Syria. As the prime minister put it, immediately after the vote, ‘I strongly believe in the need for a tough response to the use of chemical weapons, but I also believe in respecting the will of this House of Commons. It is very clear tonight that, while the House has not passed a motion, the British Parliament, reflecting the views of the British people, does not want to see British military action. I get that, and the Government will act

accordingly' (HC Debs, 29 August 2013, cc. 1555–6). The crucial factor distinguishing this vote from previous votes on military engagement – such as Iraq – was the behaviour of the Official Opposition, who opposed the government on such votes for the first time since Suez. But Labour opposition was a necessary but not sufficient condition for defeat; defeat also required the rebellion by a sufficient number of government MPs. No British government has lost a comparable vote over matters of defence or military involvement since at least the mid-nineteenth century. The fact that the only comparable votes involved Lord Palmerston, Lord Aberdeen and even Lord North is a sign of just how significant the vote was, an indicator of the Commons' developing independence.

Taken together, these were not minor or insignificant matters. During the parliament, opposition from Conservative MPs derailed one part of the Coalition Agreement (consequently derailing another part), blocked the UK taking military action and significantly steered government policy on the EU in a more Eurosceptic direction.

Free votes

As noted above, the government repeatedly allowed MPs free votes on topics which would not normally be considered suitable for free votes. It also did so on several more conventional matters. Indeed, the very last vote of the Parliament – on a motion that the re-election of the Speaker at the beginning of a Parliament should be conducted by secret ballot – was a free vote, and one which caused much embarrassment to the government.⁸

By far the most tricky issue was the passage of the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill – the Bill to introduce civil marriage for same-sex couples. Whilst the Conservative Party's relationship with the issue of gay rights is more complicated than it first seems (McManus, 2011), the stance of the majority of Conservative MPs in recent decades has been predominantly hostile towards moves to liberalise the law. That remained true between 2010 and 2015.

The key votes on the Bill were free votes for all the three main parties (albeit after some argument in the case of Labour and the Liberal Democrats), but they only produced significant divisions on the Conservative side. The Bill's second reading, for example, saw the Party split down the middle (127 Conservative MPs voting for, 137 voting against), with the prime minister siding with a minority of his party. With large majorities of Labour and Lib Dem MPs supporting gay marriage, the vote on the principle of the bill was passed by 400 to 175. Deep splits on free votes are not that unusual – indeed, one of the reasons some issues are made free votes in the first place is that they have historically divided the parties – and it was not unique to find party leaders voting with a minority of their MPs. As prime minister, Tony Blair had found himself in a similar situation (indeed, numerically even worse) over fox hunting.⁹

The Conservative MPs who voted for same-sex marriage were disproportionately female, younger and from the new 2010 intake. Of those to vote at Second Reading, Conservative women split in percentage terms 61:39 in favour of same-sex marriage; men were split 46:54 against. Those Conservative MPs born before 1970 split 45:55 against, but those born in 1970 or after split 58:42 in favour. And those from the new 2010 intake split exactly 50:50, whereas those from earlier intakes were 46:54 against. To that extent, therefore, the new parliamentary party was a more socially liberal one than before. The problem for David Cameron was that two of these groups of disproportionate support are relatively small whilst amongst the numerically large 2010 intake, support was stronger than amongst the old lags but it was still only evenly split. It was more socially liberal perhaps, but not very socially liberal.

What made the passage of the bill more unusual was the venom that accompanied these splits among Conservative MPs, given that the issue was being decided by a free vote and no one was being whipped to take up a position they opposed. Free votes normally take the poison out of arguments like this; in this case they did not. Partly this sprang from a feeling amongst some Conservative MPs that the issue was, as one senior member of the 1922 Committee put it, being done 'to generate division, and to demonise bits of the party. It was to denigrate the dinosaurs who took a different view.' In addition, many Conservative MPs reported receiving considerable pressure from their activists over the issue, and some reported being leant on to support the prime minister's position (not all free votes are all entirely free, and this one was no different). The prime minister was later variously quoted as saying that had he known the difficulties the issue would cause, he would not have taken it on, a claim he disputes – although he does accept that he underestimated the extent of unhappiness the issue would cause amongst his party.¹⁰

The issue of gay marriage therefore showed the clear limitations on any future Conservative prime minister in embarking on any further socially liberal reforms. It was achieved, but only at considerable cost.

People

That most MPs who defied the Coalition on whipped votes in the 2010–15 parliament were Conservatives should not be a surprise, given that there were (roughly) six times more Conservative than Lib Dem MPs. But Conservative MPs also rebelled more often than Lib Dems, and most of the more rebellious MPs were Conservatives. Some 163 Conservative MPs voted against the whip at some point.

Most of the more rebellious MPs could indeed have been predicted before the 2010 election; most had 'form' and were well known in the Whips' Office even before the Conservatives entered government. What was more striking, from the position of the government whips, was the behaviour of their newer MPs. Of the 163 Conservative rebels, 94 (or almost six in ten) came from the new intake.

Of the new intake, some 64% rebelled at least once, and of those who had been on the backbenches throughout the parliament, the figure rises to over 90%.

Based on a combination of division lists, including the free votes discussed above, and others, along with analysis of debates, and examination of the known membership of parliamentary groups, we constructed a typology of the Conservative parliamentary party during the 2010 parliament. We identify eight groupings, described briefly below.

Modernisers (14%). These MPs were fully signed up to the Cameron programme for government and supported the Coalition in most of its actions. They were socially liberal and believed in free markets. Although Eurosceptic, theirs was a soft Euroscepticism, and they remained mostly loyal to the party whip on votes on Europe. If they were in party groupings they were in groups such as Bright Blue, or 301 or 2020.

Traditional right (12%). The opposite of the modernisers. These were hard Eurosceptics, who favoured exit from the EU. They rebelled repeatedly on Europe and supported a referendum as soon as possible. They were the most socially conservative group of Conservative MPs, opposed both to same-sex marriage and to a raft of other social measures. Some favoured the restoration of the death penalty. Many will have been in Cornerstone, whose motto was 'Flag, Faith, Family'. Some saw their role as defenders of the constitution. Few voted for David Cameron as leader, almost none prospered under his leadership. They saw modernisation as unnecessary and were many of Cameron's most strident critics.

Thatcherites (22%). The largest single grouping, these MPs were economically liberal, prioritising Thatcherite economic principles, in groups such as No Turning Back or Conservative Way Forward. Many could also be found in the Free Enterprise Group. They were socially conservative but less stridently so than members of the traditional right, and Eurosceptic, but of a softer variety than the traditional right. They were more likely to be concerned with reforming Britain's membership of the EU than withdrawal. Many will have been supportive of Cameron's leadership initially, but more questioning of it as the parliament progressed, and were less hostile to the process of modernisation.

Radicals (19%). The radicals were as concerned with economic policy as the Thatcherites – and formed the core of the Free Enterprise Group – but coupled this with more socially liberal views. They were a bridge between the Thatcherites and the modernisers, although they expressed more concern over Europe than the modernisers, as shown by their membership of the Fresh Start Group or occasional rebellions over Europe.

Libertarians (5%). A small group: social liberals, but who coupled that with diehard economic liberalism and hard Euroscepticism. Not all will have supported same-sex marriage, but their opposition was on the basis of perceived threats to religious freedom rather than opposition to the measure itself. It was from this group that the two defectors to UKIP, Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless, originated.¹¹

Populists (3%). The smallest category of all: socially conservative, but more statist or interventionist than most other Conservative MPs. Often in trade unions and quite vocal, they were not especially hostile to the Cameron project per se, but tended to pursue their own issues and causes. They had a habit of going over the heads of, and occasionally against, the party machine, but usually on their own, somewhat idiosyncratic, causes.

Pro-Europeans (11%). Europhilia was practically non-existent with the parliamentary party, but this group were at least broadly happy with Britain's current relationship with the EU. They were members of groups such as European Mainstream and did not participate in the multitude of rebellions on Europe. They also tended to hold reformist beliefs towards the electoral system and/or the House of Lords. They often intersected with the One Nation grouping, such as the Tory Reform Group. Most were socially liberal, although around a third of this group were more socially conservative. This group used to be the core of the Wets (and what Philip Norton in 1990 called the Damps), although most have dried out somewhat over the years. They comprised the oldest and longest-serving MPs of any group; they were – literally – dying out.

The remainder, some 13%, we class as *Party faithful*, a term used by Norton (1990). This group encompassed those who have shown insufficiently consistent views to achieve membership of any of the above groups. As with Norton's grouping, this does not mean that these MPs lacked views on individual issues – sometimes views they held firmly – but they did not hold them in conjunction with views on other issues. Moreover, they chose not to align themselves openly with any of the Party's groupings; if they had a loyalty it was to the Party, and not to the leader.

It is often difficult to compare typologies across time, as the method of calculation is rarely the same, but we suspect that this exercise indicates that the Party does appear to have become more factional in recent years.¹² When Norton constructed his typology in 1990, some 58% of the Party were classified as party faithful. We now class just 13% in that way. In itself, this helps explain some of the difficulties the party leadership faced during this period. But perhaps the most important finding is that David Cameron's own grouping, the modernisers, made up just 14% of the parliamentary party. This is a small band with which to try to change the attitudes of the Party. Even when combined with the radicals, many of whom were not hostile to the Cameron project initially, the total still only reaches a third of the parliamentary party. On core economic matters, there was relatively little dispute anymore, but on both Europe and social liberalism, the divisions ran deep.

Conclusion

'Prediction is very difficult', said Niels Bohr, 'especially if it's about the future' – but much of what happened to the Conservative parliamentary party after 2010 was predictable (Cowley, 2009). It was pretty clear before the 2010 election that the

Party would look different afterwards; it was clear that there were a significant number of recidivist rebels who would be unlikely to change their habits; and it was clear that certain issues – Europe, Lords reform, abortion, gay rights – had the potential to cause division and would need handling carefully.

What was less predictable was the scale of the divisions that being in government and Coalition would unleash, and the extent to which the parliamentary party would be able to operate as a break on the Party's leadership. Nor, perhaps, was its effect. By 2011, a YouGov poll found that 64% saw the Conservatives as divided; by 2013, that figure had risen to over 70%. And in October 2014, a ComRes poll for ITV News found that the one phrase most associated with the Conservatives – out of a list of eight – was divided. The public had noticed.

The election of 2015 resulted in a Conservative majority government, but with a nominal majority of just 12, the smallest majority of any government since October 1974.¹³ There were a total of 110 occasions during 2010–15 when seven or more Conservative MPs voted against the party line, enough in theory to defeat the new government. Of the top 30 Conservative backbench rebels during the Coalition, all but three – all of whom retired – were re-elected. They are unlikely to become supine just because the government has a small majority. Indeed, as the example of John Major from the mid-1990s shows, a small majority can lend huge power to some otherwise insignificant backbenchers. Just as the likes of Tony Marlow and Sir Teddy Taylor held considerable sway in Commons votes under Major, so Philip Hollobone and David Nuttall are likely to exercise a disproportionate influence while the government has such a small majority.

And yet the good news for the government whips is that in practice the new government will have a larger majority than 12. Add in the fact that Sinn Fein do not take their seats, and the nominal majority rises to 16. But more important, in terms of day-to-day business, is that the opposition parties will not coalesce against them on every vote. The (massive) new SNP bloc and the (reduced) Labour Party will not always vote together; and the attendance of Northern Irish MPs is always low (and those who do vote may well vote with the Conservatives as much as with Labour). Moreover, for backbench rebellions to threaten the government they have to be on issues where the rebels are willing to vote with the opposition. By definition, that is not true of most rebellions by MPs on the right of the Conservative Party (or, similarly, when in government, for MPs on the left of the Labour Party). All of this gives the whips slightly more wriggle room than the government's nominal majority indicates.

The EU referendum was enough to prevent Cameron's critics from doing anything too destabilising in the first year of the Parliament. It was however that referendum which led to his downfall. Whatever short term honeymoon Theresa May might enjoy with her backbenchers, once that fades she will face the same structural constraints that caused such problems for Cameron. The new prime minister stated that 'Brexit means Brexit'. But Brexit means different things to different people and

her more Eurosceptic Brexit MPs will be alert to any signs that May's version of Brexit is different from theirs.

Notes

- 1 Particularly crass was an early attempt to change the voting rights of backbenchers on the 1922 Committee; the prime minister was forced to retreat (Norton, 2013: 39–40).
- 2 It might be objected that comparing the data for one party in government (1945–2010) with two parties (after 2010) is not a like-for-like comparison. Nor, though, is comparing data for just *a part* of the government (for example, the Conservatives after 2010) with *all* of the government (between 1945 and 2010). Either way, the comparison is not like-for-like. Thankfully, in this case it does not matter very much. However you slice the data, the conclusion is much the same.
- 3 A particular problem for the party whips was the establishment of the Backbench Business Committee after 2010. The whips began the Parliament approaching backbench business as if it was 'normal' business: as resolutions in the House of Commons they should not endorse something contrary to the position of the government. But the nature of the issues the committee showed itself willing to discuss soon put this to the test. In February 2011, facing almost certain defeat over a Backbench Business Committee motion on voting for prisoners, the government decided to absent itself from the vote, ministers abstaining en masse, and allowing a free vote for backbenchers and PPSs. Some 165 Conservative MPs voted for the motion, which was passed 234 to 22. This is a tactic governments have used in the past, if only rarely, but as the Parliament went on, it became one increasingly employed with backbench business. Having initially treated votes on backbench business as if they had to win, the government soon resorted to shrugging their shoulders, and admitting defeat.
- 4 We discuss this rebellion in more detail in Cowley and Stuart (2012).
- 5 The only Commons defeat in the first session came in December 2011 on the motion that the House had considered the economy – as a result of an old-fashioned Labour ambush, with Labour MPs hiding until enough Conservative MPs had gone home. Defeats caused by such tactical manoeuvres are embarrassing for any government (and especially the whips) but they do not represent a systematic problem with their party.
- 6 Still just shy in absolute terms of the largest Conservative rebellion in government on any subject in the post-war era (John Major suffered larger rebellions over gun control, one of which saw 95 Conservative MPs voting against their whip), measured as a proportion of the parliamentary party the 91 Lords rebels represented a larger proportion of Cameron's parliamentary party than did the 95 gun control rebels of Major's, and so it was also the largest Conservative rebellion in government of the post-war era on any subject measured in relative terms.
- 7 The vote on boundary changes was interesting as an example of how Coalition has changed some of our assumptions about what is, or is not, allowed when it comes to voting in the Commons: it saw government MPs whipped, in different directions, and with the Lib Dems voting in direct contravention of the Coalition Agreement. It was not the first time the two Coalition parties had had different whipping arrangements

- on measures in the Commons – the Coalition Agreement specifically allowed for the Liberal Democrats to abstain on specific issues – but this was the first time they were whipped in opposite directions, and (moreover) in contravention of the Coalition Agreement.
- 8 The vote, on 26 March 2015, was dropped into the agenda at very short notice by the outgoing Leader of the House, William Hague, in an attempt to ambush both the Speaker and opposition MPs. The hope was that insufficient Labour MPs – who were more supportive of the Speaker – would be around to block the measure. In the event, Labour whips managed to recall sufficient of their MPs to defeat the motion, helped by a significant number of Conservatives MPs who, on a free vote, decided either to vote against the Leader of the House’s motion or abstain. It was widely felt not to have been William Hague’s finest hour.
 - 9 Nor was it the first time David Cameron had found himself in a minority of his parliamentary party over gay rights. In March 2007, for example, Conservative MPs divided in percentage terms 25:75 against the draft Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations. David Cameron was one of just 29 Conservative MPs to back the measure.
 - 10 See for example the Andrew Pierce article in the *Daily Mail* (‘I never expected gay marriage to cause such an uproar, admits Cameron in private meeting at party conference’, 8 October 2013), but also its later correction (see ‘*Daily Mail* apologises for wrongly stating that David Cameron “regretted” equal marriage’, *Pink News*, 8 October 2013). But also see the claim in D’Ancona: ‘If I’d known what it was going to be like, I wouldn’t have done it’ (2013: 350).
 - 11 Whilst other MPs were approached by, and considered joining UKIP, these two were the only ones who defected – and the only two where the Conservative Whips Office estimated their chances of defection at 50% or more.
 - 12 For a similar attempt at a typology of the parliamentary party, see Heppell, 2013. Our figures and his are not massively dissimilar, but we differ both on some individuals and the size of some groupings.
 - 13 The failure of the government to enact the proposed boundary changes (as discussed above) was frequently cited as one of the things said to be preventing the Conservatives from winning a majority in 2015; in retrospect, it is clear that its impact was rather to prevent the Conservatives from winning a more comfortable majority.

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