

The EU Referendum rebellion has left David Cameron with little room to manoeuvre and is picking apart his liberal conservative project

While the House of Commons vote for a referendum on EU membership was easily defeated on Monday, it saw 81 Conservative MPs defy their party's 3-line whip. [Pete Redford](#) argues that this rebellion shows the growing differences between the Conservative front and back benches over Europe – differences that could cause considerable headaches for David Cameron in the future.



It can be said confidently that membership of the European Union is the most divisive issue there is for the Conservative party. The party, not so far back in history, campaigned for our membership, and for us to remain members in the Referendum of 1975. In the post-Thatcherite era they are now predominantly a Eurosceptic party. The party is no longer split between sceptics and non-sceptics but rather hard sceptics and soft sceptics.

Both in opposition and government, David Cameron has consistently stated that he would fight to take powers from Brussels back to Westminster but the realities of power are different. Cameron now finds himself stuck between 'Europe and a hard place'. A Eurosceptic leader of a Eurosceptic party is now, due to domestic and European issues, opposing a referendum on EU membership. At home Cameron is in coalition with the most pro-European party in Parliament, abroad the Eurozone is facing the prospect of collapse, and with British economic sustainability dependent on its close links with EU, Cameron has very little room to manoeuvre.

Monday night saw 81 conservative MPs defy a government three-line whip and vote in favour of a referendum on our membership of the European Union. This is not only significant in terms of being Cameron's largest rebellion to date but it is the largest ever Conservative European rebellion, almost double the 41 who rebelled during the vote on the Third Reading of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. In fact, it is the largest ever rebellion on Europe for any party in history. Macmillan faced only one rebel upon his decision to open negotiations with Europe over EEC entry. Heath faced the first major rebellion over Europe, albeit by a small group of determined opponents, with 18 MPs supporting an advisory referendum on EEC entry. Thatcher incurred only a minor rebellion during the passage of the Single European Act 1986, which was the largest transfer of powers to Brussels to date, with only 10 MPs rebelling. Her biggest rebellion consisted of 19 MPs that defied the party whip over the EC (Finance) Bill in 1985.



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Indeed, this rebellion is not even the first Europe rebellion of Cameron's government. Mark Stuart and Philip Cowley at the University of Nottingham and revolts.co.uk have [shown](#) that, since May 2010, there have already been 22 Conservative rebellions over the issue of Europe, accounting for 39% of all the dissenting votes cast against the Conservative whip. What is even more surprising is that of the 81 Conservative rebels, a massive 49 were new MPs, elected in 2010. Newly elected MPs can normally be more easily kept onside, but Stuart and Cowley's data shows that this is the most rebellious parliament of the post-war era, with a rate of rebellion easily beating any other Parliament since 1945. The future does not look bright for Cameron.

One useful comparison is with the first term of Tony Blair. Of course the situations were different; Blair had significantly more MPs and was not constrained by being in a coalition. However, Blair did face a large rebellion during the passage of the Welfare Reform Act 1999. Welfare Reform is a contentious and core

issue for Labour, just as Europe is for the Conservatives. In this case Blair had a rebellion of just 67 MPs and it wasn't until his second term that he had a rebellion of 80+ MPs. Conservative backbenchers therefore seem more prepared to assert themselves and with a large proportion of these rebels being from the 'class of 2010' questions should be asked as to the future implications for Cameron in what was always going to be a challenging term of office.

The new [liberal conservatism](#) (small 'l', small 'c') vision espoused by Cameron is becoming more skewed with every challenge it faces. Cameron's liberal interventionism in Libya discussed in my [previous post](#) was a success for Liberalism and the major achievement of Cameron as PM so far, big 'L', small 'c'. In contrast, much of August was spent arguing over the possible use of water cannons and plastic bullets to control the rioters in England as well as supporting 'tough justice' for those convicted of related offences, most definitely small 'l', big 'C'. Add to this the ever present confusion on what exactly is the '[big society](#)', the extensive [cuts to Defence](#) and many other issues you can be forgiven for being confused as to where Cameron's Conservatives stand in traditional Tory thought.

Europe is a prime example of this – a party which made a song and dance about a referendum on EU membership during the passage of the Lisbon Treaty, although in fairness did not commit to one in their 2010 election manifesto, now that is in power has suddenly had a change of heart. The realities of power have put Cameron and his cabinet in a policy cul-de-sac. Many of them would no doubt renegotiate our membership tomorrow given the opportunity but they are constrained by domestic and European realities. Eurosceptics at the top of the Conservative party are now supporting EU membership out of necessity, much to the frustration of the backbenchers. It is a potential powder keg waiting to explode and it may very well prove to be the decisive blow to Cameron's government.

Faced with both internal and external pressures, Europe has the potential to be the decisive issue that picks apart the liberal conservative project at the seams. The partnership of the most Eurosceptic and most pro-European in a coalition, combined with a Parliamentary party which is not afraid to assert itself on the backbenches is in no doubt problematic for Cameron's leadership. The realities of the Eurozone crisis, with the UK economy ever dependent on EU member states as trading partners, have put Cameron on a collision course with his own party. Despite his assurances that the time will come for the UK to renegotiate its terms of membership of the EU many members of his partner party will be questioning if this time will ever come. Disenchantment with Cameron's ideology and leadership will no doubt be not far behind.