1 *Introduction*

Yet day after day with a Prussian discipline [British MPs] trooped into the division lobbies at the signals of their Whips and in the service of the authoritarian decisions of their parliamentary parties … We are so familiar with this fact that we are in danger of losing our sense of wonder over them (*sic*).

(Beer 1965, pp. 350–1)

Beyond the party-as-unitary-actor assumption

On 9 November 2005, Tony Blair's government lost two successive votes on its Terrorism Bill. The government's sixty-five-seat majority in the Commons was entirely undercut by the rebellion of forty-nine Labour Members of Parliament who voted with opposition MPs, first to reject the government's recommendation of a ninety-day detention period for terrorist suspects, and then to force on the government an amendment limiting the detention period to twenty-eight days (Cowley and Stuart 2005). Immediately after the defeats, British odds-makers lowered the odds of Blair leaving office before the end of the year from three to one to seven to four (*Guardian*, 10 November 2005). This was a rare event inasmuch as it was the first government defeat at Westminster in ten years, but it was hardly novel or trend-setting. Blair's predecessor, John Major, had suffered four parliamentary defeats during his term of office, being forced on one occasion to use a confidence motion to force rebellious Eurosceptic Conservative MPs to support the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty, the measure the rebels had helped to defeat the previous day. This, too, was the continuation of a trend rather than a break with the past. On 14 April 1986, for example, the open rebellion of seventy-two Conservative MPs and the purposeful absence of a further twenty led to the defeat of the Thatcher government's Shops Bill (Bown 1990). James Callaghan's Labour government was undone in a similar fashion, when some of its own MPs allied with the

Conservatives to impose threshold restrictions on the Scottish and Welsh devolution referendums. Unable to surpass the mandated 40 per cent threshold, the Callaghan government lost the 1979 referendum in Scotland, and shortly thereafter, with its chief constitutional reform in tatters, succumbed to a Conservative non-confidence motion.

Parliamentary events of this sort – backbench MPs acting against their own parties – are hardly unique to the United Kingdom. On 24 February 2004, thirty Canadian Liberal MPs voted in favour of a Bloc Quebecois motion condemning American efforts to develop a continental missile defence system and demanding that Paul Martin's Liberal government refuse to participate in the programme. With Conservative support, the Liberal front bench saw off the motion – but consequences would still follow. Almost exactly a year later, with the Liberals now controlling just a minority government, the Americans brought the issue back to the fore: Would the Canadian government participate in the missile defence system or not? A definite answer was required, and a presidential visit by George Bush left no doubt as to the preferred reply. To refuse the American request would further damage Canada's already strained relations with its most important ally, and this after Martin had campaigned as the man to improve those relations. Martin had little room to manoeuvre, however. The election had not fundamentally altered the division of opinion over missile defence within the parliamentary Liberal Party. With a majority, Martin might have withstood the defection of thirty MPs; with just a minority, he would have had to rely on the Conservatives to pass the necessary legislation and to maintain the government.[1] This was too great a risk to take, and so on 24 February 2005, Martin formally rebuffed the Americans, in essence accepting the position outlined in the opposition motion that his government had defeated exactly one year before.

The orthodox view of parliamentary parties is that they are so highly cohesive that they can be considered unitary actors, MPs' deviations from the party line being so infrequent and inconsequential that they can safely be ignored (Franks 1987; Jackson 1987; Laver and Schofield 1990; Jaensch 1992, pp. 126–7). This view has its merits: across

[1] The talk in the parliamentary corridors was that Martin could expect approximately thirty MPs to vote against missile defence (personal communication, John Ibbitson, parliamentary correspondent for the *Globe and Mail*, 12 February 2004).

parliamentary systems, MPs overwhelmingly vote with, not against, their parties (Powell 2000, p. 60). Correspondingly, parliamentary leaders can typically rely on a modicum of party cohesion, and when it is not forthcoming, employ a variety of institutional tools to impose discipline. Nevertheless, as the examples above suggest, the orthodox view is overstated. Parliamentary parties are not perfectly monolithic entities: MPs can and do vote against their parties, sometimes to great effect. The more nuanced reality is that MPs' loyalty is not automatic, but must be constantly elicited.

The puzzle of backbench dissent

Students of British parliamentary politics are well aware of this nuanced reality. Prior to the 1970s, party cohesion in the House of Commons was so regularly close to 100 per cent that there seemed little point in using the division lists (i.e., roll-calls) to study or understand parliamentary politics or behaviour (Beer 1965, p. 350). However, extensive work by Philip Norton (1975, 1978, 1980) showed that the frequency with which British MPs voted against their own parties increased dramatically from 1970 onward. Whereas in the 1950s under one division in fifty saw a British MP vote against his or her party, in the 1970s almost one out of every five divisions witnessed this sort of dissent. Government defeats increased in lockstep, British governments suffering sixty-five defeats between 1970 and 1979 compared to just five over the previous twenty-five years (Schwarz 1980, p. 36; Norton 1985, p. 27; Cowley and Norton 1996).[2] The internal difficulties of the British Conservative Party over the issue of European integration, especially during John Major's tenure, and Tony Blair's battles with the left wing of the Labour Party over the invasion of Iraq, university tuition fees, foundation hospitals, and the prevention of terrorism indicate that this pattern has not abated (Cowley 2002, 2005).

Norton's work presented a provocative puzzle: why did backbench dissent in the British Commons surge in the 1970s? Authors have approached Norton's puzzle in a variety of ways. Some conceive of it as a purely British phenomenon, to be explained in terms of British

[2] Norton (1980, p. 336) records ten defeats between 1950 and 1966 and Norton (1981, p. 227) counts eleven between 1945 and 1970. Note that 45 per cent of the government defeats between 1970 and 1979 were due to backbench rebellions.

political personalities, issues, or history. Matthew Sowemimo (1996), for example, explains dissent in the British Conservative Party over European integration as a legacy of historically ingrained ideological tendencies in the Tory camp. Other authors offer more general explanations for the rise in dissent. For his part, Schwarz (1980) argues that the demise of the 'parliamentary rule' of governmental resignation upon a parliamentary defeat was the key to the increased dissension in the 1974–9 Parliament, backbench logic being that if the government did not collapse upon defeat, then cross-voting was less risky. Alt (1984) and King (1981), on the other hand, identify social rather than institutional changes as the cause of the dissent. Alt, in passing, casts the upswing in parliamentary dissent as symptomatic of a broader dealignment of the British party system. King focuses more closely on Parliament itself, arguing that the increasing domination of Parliament by career politicians infused parliamentary politics with a volatile combination of professional pride, restless ambition and ideological extremism that is difficult for leaders to control and which is frequently unsupportive of party cohesion (King 1981, p. 283). These dynamics are, in fact, reflected in Norton's argument that the surge in dissent was sparked by the abrasive leadership style of Edward Heath. Norton's depiction of Heath is that of a leader who dealt poorly with the new social reality of Parliament, who tried to run the Conservative Party in a rigidly hierarchical fashion, who sought to set policy unilaterally, and who failed to use his powers of appointment wisely (Norton 1980, p. 341; 1987, p. 146).

There is, in short, a variety of plausible hypotheses for the surge in backbench dissent in Britain – so many in fact that they overwhelm the available data. If, for example, institutional changes (the easing of the confidence convention – Schwarz's explanation) and social changes (the growing professionalism of British MPs – King's explanation) occur simultaneously, then it is difficult to establish which explanation is the right one – especially when particularistic explanations like Heath's poor leadership are always on hand as alternative hypotheses.

A comparative approach

There is no need to confine one's attention to Britain; as the example of the Martin government indicates, the experiences of other parliamentary systems are also germane. Once these comparative cases are

considered, one is pushed away from trying to explain why backbench dissent in Britain surged in the 1970s and toward considering parliamentary behaviour and intra-party politics in a more general light. Consequently, this book examines party discipline and parliamentary politics in four Westminster parliamentary democracies: Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The focus is on a single political act, the decision by an MP either to toe the party line or to break ranks and dissent.[3] Of course, MPs not only make this decision repeatedly throughout their careers, they do so alongside other MPs who belong to the same parliamentary party and in response to the decisions and actions of their leaders. Collectively, their decisions determine the degree to which their party is cohesive or disunited, and in this respect the focus is on party cohesion as well as the individual MP's decision to dissent.

Party cohesion and parliamentary behaviour have received a good deal of scholarly attention (e.g., Rice 1925; Duverger 1962; Cox 1987; Morgenstern 2004), but truly comparative work on the topic is rare (Patterson 1989; Mezey 1993), largely because the wide variation in national parliamentary practices and conventions poses a serious obstacle to valid comparison. Simply put, one cannot just run around collecting data on the assumption that all legislators everywhere are governed by the same rules, have the same preferences, face the same strategic choices, and therefore behave in the same way. In Great Britain, for example, voting in a division (i.e., a roll-call vote) involves having one's name checked off a list as one passes through a doorway to a lobby. The procedure is similar in the German Bundestag, save for the crucial difference that legislators' names are not recorded. This means that in Westminster voting is a public act while in the Bundestag it is an anonymous one (Saalfeld 1986, p. 533). For an MP to vote against his or her party is, therefore, a qualitatively different activity in Great

[3] *Dissent* occurs when a party member acts against his or her party. Dissent may take a range of forms, from speaking out publicly against one's own party to voting against one's party whip. *Cohesion* refers to the degree to which members of the same party can be observed to work together in pursuance of the party's goals (Ozbudun 1970, p. 305). In so far as legislative behaviour is concerned, this refers the extent to which members of the same party vote together. Party *discipline* is cohesion achieved by the application of sanctions or inducements. Studying discipline properly requires noting not only the degree of party cohesion but also the means by which it is achieved (Jackson 1968, p. 6).

Britain from what it is in Germany and to compare them as if they were equivalent would involve an undesirable degree of 'conceptual stretching' (Sartori 1991). In contrast, there is (for historical reasons) an extensive overlap in parliamentary practice, convention, language, and ethos between Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Importantly, even if Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand MPs do not file into lobbies to record their votes exactly as British MPs do at Westminster (they rise from their seats and declare their votes), voting in these Parliaments remains a public act.[4] Restricting attention to these four countries, taking what Lijphart (1975) terms a similar systems approach, is thus one way to facilitate valid cross-national comparison.

There are other reasons to limit the sample to Westminster-style parliamentary systems. Westminster parliamentary government is characterized by a double monopoly of power: first, the cabinet's near monopoly of executive and legislative power and second, a single party's monopoly of the cabinet itself (Palmer 1995, pp. 168–70). This double monopoly is generated initially by an electoral system that tends to manufacture legislative majorities, but it is sustained thereafter by cohesive party behaviour. In other words, a single party can form, control, and maintain the cabinet, and through it the content and timing of the legislative agenda – providing that it votes cohesively in Parliament. Party cohesion is, therefore, the central strategic problem of Westminster government.

Coalition government, on the other hand, presents parties with additional strategic challenges, most notably government formation and survival. Party cohesion remains a concern, of course, because undisciplined and fractious parties are not attractive coalition partners. What is important to realize, however, is that these strategic problems – coalition bargaining and party cohesion – are not independent of one another (Laver 1999). Unlike leaders of single-party governments, party leaders in multiparty governments have incentives to turn a blind eye to dissent in order to increase their leverage vis-à-vis their coalition partners. In simple terms,

[4] The New Zealand practice changed substantially when the New Zealand House of Representatives overhauled its standing orders in anticipation of the adoption of proportional representation in 1996. The new standing orders empowered the party whips to cast 'party votes' on behalf of all the MPs in the party. In effect, New Zealand MPs who wish to vote against the party position now have to reclaim their proxies from their party whips (S. O. 155, *Standing Orders of the House of Representatives*, 2005). In consequence of these important institutional changes, I limit my attention to New Zealand prior to 1996.

party leaders can use backbench dissent to make credible the plea that they cannot possibly get their MPs to go along with what their coalition partners are asking. This dynamic could occur outside the confines of a multi-party government, as when, for example, a single-party minority government bargains with non-government parties for legislative support – and these situations do occur in the Parliaments studied here (in Canada most frequently). Generally speaking, however, the prevalence of single-party majority governments in these Westminster systems allows one to study backbench dissent and party cohesion free from the additional complications of coalition formation and survival.[5]

A similar systems approach does have drawbacks, the chief one being a loss of variance on key variables. This turns out not to be a serious problem in this case. Table 1.1 shows the percentage of dissenting divisions – Norton's measure of dissent – for major parties in each country from 1950 onward.[6] In other words, these are the percentage of whipped divisions in which at least one MP voted against his or her party. Variance in the frequency of these dissenting divisions is evident, and it raises a host of interesting questions: why do Canadian and British MPs dissent so much more frequently than Australian and New Zealand MPs; why do Australian Coalition senators dissent more than Coalition representatives? Even this cursory look at the data should convince the reader that the raw material for extensive and rewarding research – interesting questions and variance in the dependent variable – is at hand.

The significance of backbench dissent

Of course, much is hidden by Table 1.1, such as the average number of MPs who engage in dissent in each parliament, the degree to which dissent is a government or opposition preserve, the use of alternative methods of dissent, and how often it translates into government defeats.

[5] The inclusion of the Australian Liberal–National Coalition in the study does provide variance on this front, however, and evidence (see Chapter 8) suggests that the contrast between single-party and coalition government should not be overdrawn. At the end of the day, parliamentary government, whatever its precise form, requires a high degree of party unity.

[6] A division is said to be *whipped* when the party has given its MPs express instructions on how to vote. A division is *free*, on the other hand, whenever party leaders allow their backbenchers to vote as they wish.

Table 1.1. ***The percentage of dissenting divisions by party in Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, 1950–2004***

Country	Party	Percentage dissenting divisions*
Britain	Labour	8.81
	Conservative	9.72
Canada	Liberal	8.77
	Progressive Conservative	15.11
	Bloc Quebecois	3.30
	Reform / Alliance	6.89
Australia	Coalition (House)	1.72
	Coalition (Senate)	2.85
	Australian Labor Party (House)	0.03
	Australian Labor Party (Senate)	0.47
New Zealand	National	1.57
	Labour	0.27

* Percentages are computed by dividing the total number of divisions witnessing dissent across all parliaments in the sampling frame by the total number of divisions. So, for example, the British Conservatives participated in 16,848 divisions between 1945 and 2004 and experienced dissent on 1,602 of those divisions.
Sources: Britain: Norton (1975, 1980), Cowley (1999, 2005); Canada: *Parliamentary Debates of the House of Commons of Canada*; New Zealand: *Parliamentary Debates* (*Hansard*); Australia: Lucy (1985), *Parliamentary Debates of the Commonwealth of Australia (House of Representatives)*; *Parliamentary Debates of the Commonwealth of Australia (Senate)*. See also: Hobby (1987); Cowley and Norton (1996); Cowley *et al.* (1996); Wearing (1998, and personal communication).The Australian statistics have been estimated to some extent by sampling (3,020 Senate divisions and 1,897 House divisions). The same is true of the Canadian figures for the period 1997–2004, for which I sampled 392 divisions.

This last aspect is worthy of immediate attention because it might be assumed that dissent is trivial unless it actually results in the government falling. This position ignores a number of facts and deserves a strong rebuttal. First, dissent may result in the defeat of specific government bills or policies without the government losing the House's confidence and collapsing. Indeed, the Blair government's defeat on its Terrorism Bill illustrates exactly this point. Second, dissension can have pernicious electoral effects on a party even if it does not immediately alter legislative outcomes (Franks 1987, p. 109). Backbench dissent hampers a party's internal operations by setting MPs against one another in the attempt to distance themselves from unpopular party policies. In this

sense, it ignites a simmering collective action problem in the party (Docherty 1997, pp. 169–70), one that undermines the electoral prospects of loyal MPs (who are stuck supporting an unpopular or contentious party policy) and sends a signal of disunity and disorganization to voters. Indeed, John Major himself worried that his government's policy initiatives were drowned out by his party's internecine squabbles (Major 1999, p. 610). There is empirical support for this effect: regressing the percentage of dissenting divisions that the parties in Table 1.1 experience during a parliament on their vote shares in the subsequent elections returns a coefficient of –0.2. In other words, a 1 per cent increase in dissenting divisions is associated with a 0.2 per cent decrease in the party's vote share. Questions can be raised about cause and effect here, but those questions recommend further study rather than dismissal of the topic as trivial.

Dissent can also destabilize a party's leadership. The rebellion by British Conservative MPs against the party's then leader, Iain Duncan Smith, over the Blair government's Adoption and Children Bill in November 2002 provides one example. The bill sought to permit adoptions by homosexual couples, and wishing to present the Conservative Party as the defender of the traditional family, Duncan Smith ordered Conservative MPs to oppose it. (The Labour government's more cautious strategy was to allow its MPs a free vote on the bill.) A number of Conservative MPs refused, and in the face of this pressure Duncan Smith half-relented, granting permission for Conservative MPs to absent themselves from the House should they not wish to vote against the bill (*Daily Telegraph*, 2 November 2002). The climb-down was widely interpreted as a sign of weakness and incompetence (*The Times*, 5 November 2002), and when several prominent Conservatives, including heavyweights such as John Bercow, Michael Portillo, and Kenneth Clarke, nevertheless ignored the party whip and voted for the bill, it was also seen as the beginning of the end for Duncan Smith (*The Economist*, 7 November 2002).[7] Canadian Alliance MPs went a step

[7] Duncan Smith managed to hang on to the leadership until 29 October 2003, when a scandal involving his wife finally pushed Conservative MPs to pass a non-confidence vote against their leader. (There were hints that the scandal was, in fact, manufactured as an excuse to dump Duncan Smith, and he was cleared of any impropriety (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3578323.stm). Without doubt, however, the rebellion on the Adoption and Children Bill was the turning-point in his leadership.)

further to depose their leader, Stockwell Day.[8] Dismayed by Day's lacklustre performance at the 2000 election and embarrassed by his repeated political gaffes, fourteen Alliance MPs, including Chuck Strahl and Deborah Grey, the party's chief whip and deputy leader, respectively, split from the party to sit as independents.[9] The tactic succeeded in forcing Day from the leadership despite the fact that party rules did not empower the parliamentary party to sack the Alliance leader. A more general if less dramatic result is provided by Kam and Indridason (2005), who show that surges in parliamentary dissent among governing parties is a leading indicator of cabinet reshuffles. Indeed, sometimes the mere appearance of dissent is sufficient to create instability. Several Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand MPs with whom I spoke talked of a tip-of-the-iceberg phenomenon where for every MP who votes against the party or speaks out in the media, ten more unhappy MPs are believed to exist.[10] This creates a perception that the party leadership is unpopular, that a 'spill' is imminent, and that some change in policy or personnel is required to avert a crisis. Perhaps because of these effects, the threat of dissent sometimes leads party leaders to compromise on policy (Butt 1967, chapters 6–8). Dissent is important, then, because it may lead to organizational tension, the amendment of government bills, electoral misfortune, or the replacement of one set of leaders with another.

The above arguments are quite valid, but they should not be taken to extremes. The vast majority of the time, parliamentary parties are highly cohesive, and the intention here is not to suggest that leaders are constantly being toppled, legislation altered, or elections lost because of dissent. To see the book this way is to mistake its purpose. The aim is to examine how parliamentary parties come to be so cohesive. This is a central puzzle of intra-party politics, but a difficult one to investigate because parliamentary parties go to great lengths to maintain façades of unity, airing internal grievances and hammering out

[8] The Canadian Alliance was simply a relabelled Reform Party. The Reform Party changed its name prior to the 2000 election as part of an attempt to rebrand the party and encourage a merger with the Progressive Conservative Party. The two parties merged formally into the Conservative Party of Canada in 2003.

[9] The defectors eventually organized themselves as a party to secure access to parliamentary resources and later coalesced with the Progressive Conservatives.

[10] I interviewed twenty-five Australian, eleven New Zealand, and thirteen Canadian MPs between July and November 1999.