Handle with care: the 2015 Parliament

With a working majority of 16 in the Commons and no majority in the Lords, the Government is coming to terms with how to deal with Parliament. This is even evident in the language used to describe the approach to parliamentary business, with Prime Minister David Cameron recently saying that “what matters is building a majority in the House of Commons” in relation to a vote on military action in Syria.

This statement reflects an acknowledgement that – given likely rebellions on his back benches – the PM’s own narrow majority is unlikely to be enough to secure such a vote. But the possibility of building a consensus with potential rebels on the Labour backbenches opposed to Jeremy Corbyn’s pacifism could still enable him to achieve the outcome he wants. This sort of consensus-building strategy is one the whips will now need to adopt whenever the prospect of a backbench government rebellion threatens the Government’s plans.

The Government’s first Commons defeat of this parliament was the result of its failure to achieve such a consensus over the rules around purdah for the Europe referendum – despite having attempted to build bridges by accepting a backbench manuscript amendment in the course of the debate. There have been other occasions in this parliament when a failure to build a consensus has compelled the Government to withdraw or delay planned business. Examples include the withdrawal of a planned vote on repeal of the Hunting Act, and delays to the introduction of new Standing Orders to make provision for English Votes for English Laws (EVEL).

Another strategy adopted by the whips has been to avoid potentially contentious issues reaching the floor of the House at all – note the relative dearth (apart from the EU Referendum Bill itself) of recent opportunities for the Commons to discuss, in government time, issues relating to Europe – and therefore expose Conservative divisions on the issue.

Optimists within the Government might argue that there are not, realistically, very many issues on which all the opposition parties will align to create a serious possibility of defeat. That possibility may have receded somewhat further following Corbyn’s election as Opposition Leader – his support for a united Ireland probably makes it less attractive for the Democratic Unionist Party to go through the lobbies with Labour.

The number of instances on which government defeat actually threatens seems likely to depend on the extent to which MPs opt to vote on tactical grounds, rather than on principle. Although governments in recent history have not expected a majority in the Lords, the shift from coalition to majority government has had an obvious impact on the current Government’s ability to secure its business there. As we discussed in a previous blog, the absence of a majority in the Lords has led to an increase in the number of government defeats there – the tally now stands at 10 since the election.

At a recent Institute for Government event the Cabinet Secretary, Jeremy Heywood, conceded that the Civil Service had “become a bit rusty, particularly on Lords handling. I think Lords handling is even more important for a government with a small majority in the House of Commons and no majority at all in the Lords.” Now more than ever, parliamentary handling should be a serious consideration for all civil servants thinking about how to ensure the Government achieves its business in either House.

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