**How effective are backbenchers in holding the government to account**

Parliament can be effective in blocking legislation, despite the power of party whips. However, the control of whips, through threats of demotion or promises of promotion, means that MPs often sacrifice their own beliefs and toe the party line. This was seen over Tuition fees where both Lib Dems and Conservative backbenchers were forced to make compromised of principles for the government. Moreover, the other reserve power of calling a vote of no confidence could remove the government if successful, therefore stripping them of their positions.

MPs do not always toe the party line and obey the party whip and this allows the HOC to act as a check upon the executive. Backbench Conservatives with significant revolts over the issue of a referendum on continued membership of the EU and House of Lords reform can be said to constrain the powers of the executive. Lord Hailsham stated that the UK has an “elective dictatorship" in the sense that the executive is able to dominate the legislature principally because parliament is unable to serve as an effective check. It could be argued that there are limits upon the power of the executive.

The influence of the whips ensures that the government wields great power and is able to avoid any significant defeats. The use of a three line whip means that MPs must toe the party line or face sanctions. This might be through the use of the “carrot" with the possibility of promotion to cabinet rank or the use of the “stick" with the withdrawal of the parliamentary whip. MPs could face deselection if they do not obey the commands of the executive.

Parliamentary sovereignty is also a key factor in the unchecked power of the executive. Not only do the government have the use of strict party discipline via the whips but they have an inbuilt majority in the House of Commons. The government has a virtual blank cheque to legislate how it chooses when in office and defeats are exceedingly rare as the House of Lords only has the power of delay after the Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949. In this sense Parliament is nothing more than a “rubber stamp" endorsing the decisions and policies made by the executive.

The power of the executive however should not be exaggerated. The government does face several real constraints and Parliament cannot be taken for granted. The Conservative backbenchers particularly have shown a tendency to revolt inflicting significant defeats on the government over House of Lords reforms and the issue of a referendum on the EU. The whips would seem powerless to keep Conservative Eurosceptics in line and MPs are more inclined to rebel today than in the past.

**1922 Backbench Committee**

The committee allows the leadership and the backbenches of the Conservative Party to keep in touch with each other’s opinions. The Committee meets every week while Parliament is in session, and provides a way for Conservative backbenchers to coordinate and discuss their views based on their constituents’ and personal views, independently of frontbenchers. It is a very influential committee within the party and the Committee Chairman has direct access to the party leader.

You can see just how important – and powerful – the 1922 Committee is; and it is not that surprising that the current Conservative Party leader (and Prime Minister) David Cameron tried to dilute that power a few years ago. In 2010, Cameron announced that there would be a ballot of the parliamentary party to establish whether or not members of the government payroll vote (the frontbenchers) would become full voting members of the 1922 Committee. This was a huge challenge to the power of the Committee. If the change was adopted, it would hugely limit the power of Conservative backbenchers to hold the government to account. As the voice of the backbenchers, it was how they held Conservative ministers and prime ministers to account. Cameron had to concede and agreed that only backbenchers could vote in the committee.

**Syria**

In August 2013 vote for British air strikes in Syria was defeated in a Commons vote after a rebellion of 31 Tory backbenchers and opposition from the Labour Party.

MPs complained that Britain’s mission in Syria was not clear. It damaged Mr Cameron and made him more cautious over such votes in the future. A key reason that Mr Cameron did not hold another vote on airstrikes in Syria until Dec 2015 was because was not willing to risk losing again.

**EU Budget**

On 31 October 2012 Mark Reckless, the Conservative MP who has since defected to Ukip was credited with masterminding the coalition’s first Commons defeat leading 53 Tory rebels to join with Labour to back a motion demanding a real terms cut in the European Union budget.

The vote came as an embarrassment to David Cameron on the eve of crucial talks in Brussels but the Prime Minister has since negotiated the first real-terms cut in the EU budget.

**Gay marriage**

The Prime Minister suffered one of his biggest rebellions over gay marriage with 134 of his MPs voting against in May last year.

Mr Cameron was in the Commons to hear that the bill had passed by 366 to 161 and despite the rebellion there was applause in the House when the result was announced.

**European referendum**

In October 2011 a total 79 of his MPs voted for a Commons motion calling for a referendum on Britain’s relationship with the EU, even though Mr Cameron had ordered his party to oppose it. Two tellers indicated they supported the motion.

In the vote another two Tories voted yes and no, the traditional way of registering an abstention. A further 12 did not vote.

MPs voting against Mr Cameron in such numbers meant that about half of all Conservatives outside the “payroll vote” of ministers and their aides scorned Mr Cameron’s authority. The call for a referendum was defeated only because Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs also opposed it. The motion was rejected by 483 votes to 111 in the late-night Commons vote. Earlier, during more than six hours of debate, a string of Conservative MPs accused Mr Cameron of mishandling the EU referendum issue by imposing a three-line whip on the vote, the strongest possible order to back the Government.

**Immigration**

In February 2014 the Prime Minister was faced with an 86-strong rebellion on an amendment to the Immigration Bill.

The amendment, crafted by Dominic Raab, a Eurosceptic Tory rising star, sought to make it easier to deport foreign criminals who claim a right to a family life as protection under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Theresa May said that the amendment would be illegal, but the Tory front bench abstained. In the end the Prime Minister was saved the embarrassment of defeat although he was forced to rely on Labour and Lib Dem votes to quash it.

**Attempt to unseat Speaker**

[William Hague](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/williamhague), the outgoing leader of the house, suffered a humiliating rebuff on his final day in the Commons when a Tory backbench rebellion saw off an attempt, engineered by Hague and the chief whip, Michael Gove, to start the ousting of the Speaker, John Bercow.

David Davis, the leading Tory rightwinger, told MPs he was also opposing the motion on a secret ballot, arguing: “This is a constitutional matter of some importance since it goes to the heart of the relationship between executive and parliament.” He said the planned reform needed to be debated in prime time and “not in a mean-spirited ad hominem manner”.

1. Explain the whip system. There is also information in the Red book and the booklet.
2. Explain the importance of backbenchers as a check on government.
3. Describe some examples of backbench revolts including their impact.