

How do the whips persuade people to vote their way?

We should expect plenty of stories about how the whips try to reduce the numbers of Conservative MPs planning to vote against the Withdrawal Agreement. I was surprised to be contacted by a journalist on Monday who asked me if I had changed my mind about voting against the Agreement, and who went on to ask what the whips had offered me to change my mind. I was able to say I did not plan to change my vote and I had not been offered anything.

Let me reassure some readers who take a low view of what goes on. I have never been offered an honour or some other gift by the whips on any occasion to get me to change my mind and vote for the party line. There have been various times over the last 8 years when I have not supported the government on EU matters, as I took seriously the promises we made in each Manifesto not to transfer more power to the EU. If anyone in future did suggest I might receive an honour to switch my vote I would say No and explain why that would be an abuse of the system. Honours are not tools for whips to use to secure a vote.

There have been some suggestions in the press that maybe others are being offered honours or inducements. It is difficult to see how this works for the government were they to be susceptible to such bad practice. Once they have announced an honour they cannot withdraw it, and the individual in receipt of it cannot be contracted to behave in a certain way thereafter. There have been plenty of cases where MPs have received honours, only to be very critical of the government and leadership shortly afterwards, as the two issues are not related and should be unrelated.

I have even seen it claimed some are offered peerages. That sounds ludicrous. If anyone were to be offered an immediate peerage they would of course have to resign from the Commons and create a by election. I can't think of any example when it has been alleged an MP was offered a peerage to get through a particular Commons vote.

So how do whips try to get MPs to vote the party line? The first round is to put the government's case in more detail and more strongly to the MP to consider. This may include inviting the MP to have a meeting with the PM or relevant Minister, to hear directly why they want them to vote a certain way. Junior and ambitious MPs may well be told that their path to Ministerial appointment will be easier and smoother if they travel the loyal road, though history shows some rebels also have to be given jobs to provide some balance in the team and to bring some rebels into line by accepting the discipline of Ministerial office. Then there are arguments about the political consequences for government and party from defeat, use of friends of the MP to try to persuade them, and threats of consequences for the policy/party/government if the proposal is defeated. Good whipping is ad hominem. Different MPs respond to different types of pressure or appeal.

The PM seems to want to try to put pressure on MPs by seeking to persuade the party and the voters to back her deal, over the heads of the MPs. This is a route fraught with difficulty. MPs resent fellow MPs trying to whip up their constituents against them, whilst it looks as if the Conservative party membership is more strongly against the Withdrawal Agreement than the MPs on average.