

Voting arithmetic on the Rwanda Bill

It is one thing for the Prime Minister to want to stop the small boats. Who sensibly disagrees? It is another to voice the right way to do this, and to gather the votes needed to bring it about. The draft law he has proposed now has to find its way through both the Commons and the Lords.

In the Commons the government has a current majority of 56, meaning it can carry any legislation as long as fewer than 28 Conservative MPs vote with the Opposition, or fewer than 56 abstain.

This Parliament has been characterised by more MPs than usual losing their party whips for actual or alleged misconduct. There are currently 18 Independent MPs though none were elected as that. One is an SNP MP who disagreed with his party whip and wants to be Independent. One is the former Leader of the Labour party, now in policy exile. There are 9 Labour MPs suspended from the whip and 7 Conservatives, with one from Plaid. This may give the government a little more leeway on its majority.

The small boats Rwanda Bill will be difficult for the government to whip. One group of Conservative MPs is annoyed that it does override some Human Rights legislation and gives stronger instructions to courts. Another group of Conservative MPs thinks the Bill needs to be tougher to rule out any legal challenge to the policy to ensure success. The attitude of Labour becomes an important consideration in working out what might happen. If 198 Labour MPs all oppose the Bill, with the other Opposition parties also likely to, then the government does need to reduce the number of rebels to under 28. If Labour abstain then the government can afford 126 rebels before losing.

There are 98 Commons Ministers who have to vote the government line. The last list of Parliamentary Private Secretaries to Ministers showed 41 in post. We are awaiting an updated list which may be longer. They too have to vote with the government. So to win a vote the government needs to persuade just 84 backbench Conservatives to support if Labour abstains, but 181 if Labour opposes.

The One Nation Group that wants a weaker Bill puts out it has 103 supporters. This is greatly overstated. I do not believe anything like 103 Conservative MPs will vote against the Bill because it is too strong. The likely effective rebel voting strength of One Nation is below the 28 vote threshold to overturn the majority. It also is the case that a disproportionate number of the One Nation group are Ministers so they could not vote against even if they wanted to. Of course if they staged a number of resignations to vote against that could destabilise the government badly. That seems very unlikely as they have a strong position within the government and seem to like being Ministers .

There are considerably more Conservative MPs than 28 who want a stronger bill than the government version . Whether they will allow 2nd reading of this bill and seek amendments remains to be seen. Some will think a quite strong

bill worth a try. Others will think it futile to enact another bill that just gets bogged down in courts again.

The Lords has its majority of peers who always want to do down the UK and who support every international criticism and attack on us. There are plenty of peers who put the wishes of lawyers acting for illegal migrants above the wishes and needs of legally settled UK workers and taxpayers. Getting any bill that toughens our law against illegal small boat operators and their paying passengers through the Lords requires good majorities in the Commons and plenty of political will by the government.

Tomorrow I will write about the PM's policy options.