

## Why was Starmer worried about a 'backbench revolt'?



Labour leader and current Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer was facing a potential **rebellion** from his own MPs over a controversial welfare bill due to be voted on in Parliament on Monday 30 June. While Labour holds a strong majority following the general election earlier this month, there was growing unrest among Labour backbenchers who opposed parts of the proposed legislation.

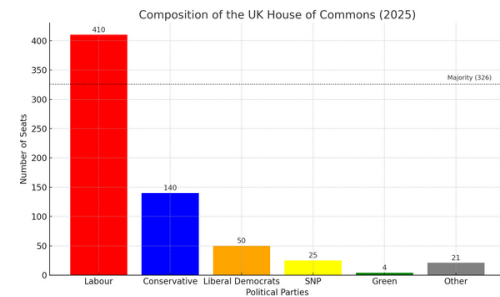
In the House of Commons, political parties such as Labour, the Conservatives and Reform, compete to form the government. The party (or group of parties in a coalition) that wins the most seats at a general election forms the government. A **majority government** means that party has more seats than all the other parties combined, so it can usually pass laws easily without help from rival parties, as long as all MPs from the governing party vote together in the same way. To pass a law in the Commons, a majority of MPs must vote for it.

There are 650 seats/MPs in the House of Commons. Labour currently has just over 400 MPs as of June 2025, well over the 326 needed for a majority. This should in theory make passing laws relatively easy, but only if Labour MPs vote together.

MPs from the same party usually vote the same way. This is known as party discipline; it is enforced by party **whips** – senior MPs whose job is to keep others in line. Most MPs are expected to support the government's bills unless they're given permission not to (such as last week's 'free votes' on assisted dying and abortion decriminalisation).

However, not all MPs from the governing party (currently Labour) are ministers or part of the actual government. Many are instead **backbenchers** – MPs who sit behind the front benches in the House of Commons and do not hold official government roles. These MPs are often more independent. They may support the party overall but feel free to speak out, and vote against, policies they disagree with. A **backbench revolt** happens when a significant number of these MPs refuse to support their own party's plans and vote against them.

The new **Welfare Reform and Fairness Bill**, being introduced by the Labour government, aims to limit the overall amount that can be claimed in benefits. It proposes tighter rules on disability payments and increased requirements for job-seekers to prove they are actively looking for work. Starmer says these changes are necessary to ensure the welfare system is "fair and sustainable" and are necessary to



encourage people to work and reduce spending pressures on the government at a time of high debt. But many Labour MPs, especially those on the party's **left**, saw the bill as too harsh. They argue it would punish vulnerable people and break promises made during the election.

Even though Labour has a big majority, a rebellion by dozens of Labour backbenchers would have made things difficult. If enough of them voted against the bill, and opposition parties (like the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, and Greens) also voted against it, the bill could have failed, causing major political embarrassment for Starmer, especially so early in his time as Prime Minister.

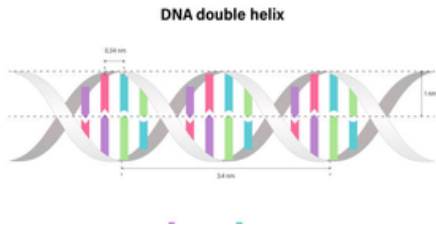
To avoid this, Starmer and his team had to make amendments to the bill, 'watering down' the disability benefits cuts and promising that current recipients would not see any reduction in their payments. Although he staved off a revolt, Starmer's position is still fragile.

### Key definitions

**Rebellion:** Where MPs from a party vote against the direction that their party leader wants them to vote in.

**Left (wing):** A political position which believes the government should act to reduce inequality and support society.

## Is it ethical to develop synthetic human DNA?



The Wellcome Trust has awarded £10 million to fund a bold new scientific project: building **synthetic** human DNA from “scratch”, using the ‘bases’ of cytosine, guanine, adenine and thymine. This is the first major UK-led attempt to create artificial human genomes, following earlier successes with simpler organisms like bacteria.

Researchers hope synthetic DNA could lead to major medical breakthroughs. One aim is to re-engineer human cells to better resist viruses, opening the door to personalised treatments for cancer, rare diseases, and even faster vaccine development. The project could also help in climate science and industry, using custom-built organisms to clean pollution or create sustainable materials.

However, the research also raises serious concerns. Experts warn of biosafety risks, such as synthetic organisms behaving unpredictably in nature, or even being misused for harmful purposes. Others question the morality of creating artificial human DNA, worrying it blurs the line between science and “playing God.” In particular, there is a concern that in future, there would be serious ethical quandaries about who ‘owns’ artificially created human body parts or organisms.

## Has Zohran Mamdani changed US politics?



In a major surprise that has sent shockwaves through American politics, Zohran Mamdani has won the Democratic **primary** for the New York City mayoral election.

In the US, political parties (such as the **Democrats** and **Republicans**) hold primaries – internal elections that decide who will represent the party in the main race. In New York City, where most voters support the Democratic Party, winning the Democratic primary is usually the same as winning the mayoralty itself. That means Mamdani is now the frontrunner to become Mayor of New York City when he faces the Republican candidate in November.

Mamdani’s win is significant for many reasons. He is not a traditional politician. Born in Uganda to Indian Muslim parents and raised in Queens, he represents a younger, more diverse generation of leaders. His campaign focused on issues that affect everyday people: housing, transport, policing, and public services. He ran on a platform of rent freezes, free public transport, and city-run grocery stores, saying the city should work for ordinary people, not just the wealthy. These represent what are known as **democratic socialist** ideas, which are more left-wing than what Americans typically vote for.



His campaign also stood out for its **grassroots** (community and locally-driven) energy. Rather than relying on expensive TV adverts or wealthy donors, Mamdani’s team knocked on doors, held community meetings, and built support from the ground up. While his opponents, including former Governor of New York State Andrew Cuomo, had name recognition and large budgets, Mamdani had “people power.” That turned out to be more important.

Opponents from both the right and centre have already begun to attack him, calling his ideas too extreme. Even so, his campaign has already changed the conversation. By winning the primary, Mamdani has shown that politics in New York and possibly across the US is moving in a new direction. Democrats nationally might see his policies and style as a way to challenge Trump and the Republican Party in the future.

### Discussion points

- Why do you think that Starmer’s control over Labour is so weak?
- Do you think that research into synthetic DNA is justifiable?
- Do you think politicians should promise bold change, even if it is more difficult to achieve?