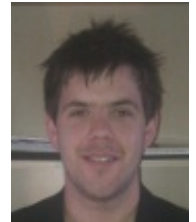


The Conservative 301 group of modernising MPs could create a powerful counterweight to the traditionalists in the 1922 Committee

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Pete Redford argues that the new 301 group of backbench MPs could allow David Cameron to create a tactical alliance with fellow modernisers that could help to keep the traditionalist 1922 Committee in check, and allow the party to firmly occupy the centre ground of British politics.



It would be easy to get lost in the plethora of Conservative backbench groups. From the traditional One Nation and the 1922 Committee, to the newer groups such as the Forty and the 2020. However, it is the emergence of a new group of ambitious, modernising Conservative backbench MPs, the 301 group, which has been attracting much attention recently. This new group – named after the number of seats the Tories need to gain an overall majority at the next election – can reportedly count around 120 MPs as members, and incorporates many of the class of 2010, highlighting the frustrations of a highly ambitious new intake.

Many new Tory MPs are frustrated with the limited opportunities for promotion within the Parliamentary party, and the message the party is sending to the electorate, and much of this frustration is aimed directly at the party's traditional backbenchers, the 1922 Committee. This backbench group has always maintained considerable influence in the party and many of the class of 2010 believe it is this group that is holding back their chances of promotion and taking the party away from the broader modern Conservative message they were elected on, to the more traditional appeal of anti-Europe, anti-immigration, and welfare cuts.

In a recent interview, rising party star Louise Mensch, asked, “[what do I have to do to get promoted over here?](#)” In doing so she was voicing the concerns of many in her intake. In creating the 301 group many of this class have made their concerns clearly known to No. 10. Cameron must take this new group seriously, as they may prove to be the nearest that the Prime Minister has to a loyalist backbench group and he would rightfully welcome a counterweight to the powerful 1922 Committee. His previous clashes with the Committee are well known and a difficult relationship with his traditionalist backbenchers remains.

The members of the 301 group that are known publicly include Jessica Lee (Erewash), Dan Poulter (Suffolk Central & Ipswich North) Laura Sandys (Thanet South), George Hollingbery (Meon Valley) and Damian Collins (Folkestone & Hythe). They are new and their voting records suggest that they are card carrying Cameroons.

With elections being held for the offices of the 1922 Committee at the end of this Parliamentary session there are some who would like to see members of the 301 group seek election. This would help Cameron by modernising the 1922 Committee and making it a more manageable group. It would also give



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members of the 301 group promotions to positions of authority within the party, thereby appeasing the ambitious new intake.

The 301 group believe that it is only through the broader commitment to the NHS, education, and issues of importance to women, families and BME groups that they will be able to gain an overall majority at the next election. Only by identifying with the middle ground and gaining the confidence of those who would not identify as traditional Tory voters do they believe they can win effectively.

Of course, their message is also a pragmatic one. Many of the 301 members will not just be focused on the Tories winning a majority but in also saving themselves. These members were elected on the centre ground policies that Cameron took to the public and now occupy marginal seats that Labour consider legitimate targets at the next election. Jessica Lee has a majority of just 2,500 and Anna Sourby has a majority of just 389 votes.

In comparison, many members of the 1922 Committee represent ultra-safe seats that would elect anybody as long as they wore a blue rosette. Bill Cash, the ring leader of the revolt on an EU referendum has a majority of over 13,000. He and many others in the 1922 Committee have no need to appeal to the centre ground.

In its creation the 301 group highlights the major problem faced by Cameron and the Conservative party as whole: the ideological battle between the traditional right and the modernisers. The frontline of this battle has emerged on the backbenches, with the 301 group raising the concerns of the modernisers in the party that the 1922 Committee does not reflect the issues of modern Britain.

Cameron's support of the 301 group could create a relationship of mutual benefit. The PM has a chance to have a supportive backbench group that can modernise the traditional right of the 1922 Committee. Election of members of the 301 to the 1922 executive will also help to appease the concerns of the ambitious new intake who crave promotion. With the support of Cameron the concerns of the 301 group regarding the party's message can also be addressed. A continuation of the modernising conservative principles will help members of the 301 group appeal to the centre ground they feel they need to occupy in order to keep their seats at the next election.

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