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Tony Blair leaves 10 Downing Street by the back door after yesterday's meeting of the Cabinet.

Picture: Getty Images

Survival of New Labour in doubt as rebels declare war

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LABOUR rebels yesterday declared an end to Tony Blair's New Labour reform agenda, pledging to use their new-found Commons power to veto health and education plans and even insert their own legislation.

After reducing the Prime Minister's majority to a single vote on Wednesday, Labour rebels said they had now achieved a breakthrough where they could form alliances with Liberal Democrats and even Conservatives to paralyse 10 Downing Street.

This was grudgingly accepted by senior Labour sources, who privately admitted that Mr Blair must be told he now lacks the political capital to implement the radical reform he has outlined.

The Commons was yesterday still reeling from the rebellion over the Terrorism Bill - when the government postponed a vote on plans to detain suspects for 90 days without charge, after knowing it would lose.

The Campaign Group of Labour MPs - a socialist group aiming for a quick end to the New Labour project - said it had also moved its sights to forging new legislation.

Alan Simpson, Nottingham South MP and Campaign Group member, said it was "very organised" and after coming within one vote of altering the Terrorism Bill, was working out which amendments to choose next.

"We are witnessing a terminal disconnect between the ideas circulating in 10 Downing Street and what the Labour Party finds acceptable. A lot of those ideas are just barking mad - and we will not just stop them, but rewrite them," he said.

The Campaign Group plans to commission left-leaning academics to propose changes to the Education Bill - and thereby seek to steer government policy. To succeed, an amendment would need Tory support.

Mr Simpson said the group was ready to insert an amendment into the next Budget Bill to forbid the government to renew the Trident nuclear deterrent.

While such talk has been dismissed by ministers as sabre-rattling, Labour whips were forced to take the threats more seriously yesterday - realising that even new MPs were placing their bets against Mr Blair.

One well-placed Labour source said that Mr Blair faced a stark choice between watering down his agenda or jeopardising his position. "It's about whether Tony Blair wants to go on leading the Labour Party or if he wants to stick to his agenda come what may," said the source.

"As for these things with health, education and benefits, you can forget it because it's not going to happen. It looks impossible, because it is impossible."

With Mr Blair's majority of MPs down to 66, from 162 in the last parliament, he can now be defeated if 34 Labour rebels vote with all other opposition MPs. The Campaign Group has 24 core members.

At his weekly Cabinet meeting yesterday, Mr Blair admitted that "times are tough" due to the resignation of David Blunkett - now replaced by John Hutton as Work and Pensions Secretary.

Speaking outside one of his Sure Start super-nurseries yesterday, Mr Blair predicted more battles. "I've had difficult times before and will have difficult times again," he said. "It's important we get the reforms through on education, health and pensions - there's still a lot to do."

No 10 swept aside attempts by Charles Clarke, the Home Secretary, to compromise over the 90-day detention clause in the Terrorism Bill. Mr Blair challenged rebels to seek the views of their local police force and voters - believing the public opinion remains firmly behind him.

Labour MPs looked set to respond in kind, and were setting out their stall over the airwaves yesterday. Ann Cryer, a member of Labour's parliamentary committee, which forms the official link between the Prime Minister and his back-benchers, predicted Mr Blair will back down.

But Labour whips will be more disconcerted by back-benchers with no record of rebellion who have started to square up to the government.

Roger Berry, the Labour MP who chairs the cross-party disablement group, yesterday said he could not accept plans being floated by Downing Street to cut incapacity benefit payouts.

"I certainly don't think it would be progressive to reduce entitlement," he said.

Helen Jones, a member of the health select committee, said that she and many other MPs do not believe that Mr Blair has made the case for his plans to give English secondary schools unprecedented new freedom from local government control.

"The evidence is not yet there, and my impression is there are a number of my colleagues who have concerns," she said.

Mr Blair's white paper on education is expected next month, and a green paper on welfare reform next week. He had sparred with Mr Blunkett over whether a US-style time limit should be placed on benefits, after which they would cease. The Prime Minister believes welfare should be a safety net, but not an alternate way of life - which, he argues, it has become for the 1.1 million who have been living on incapacity benefit for more than five years.

Mr Hutton, a key reformer, is understood to agree with the Prime Minister that Britain should adopt the kind of time limit that Bill Clinton imposed on America in 1995 - so no-one could be in welfare for more the five years over a lifetime.

But with such a mutinous mood in the Labour Party, this may prove to be the first of the climbdowns Mr Blair will be performing as he adapts to his diminished majority.

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