

# Britain: Queen's speech announces plan to end voting rights for hereditary peers

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Queen Elizabeth II, speaking on Tuesday in the palace of Westminster, announced plans to abolish voting rights for hereditary peers. The occasion was her annual speech officially opening Parliament and setting out the legislative programme of the government for the forthcoming year.

The monarch--the supreme embodiment of hereditary privilege--was reading an address prepared by the Labour government outlining its intention to end the rights of hereditary peers--barons, viscounts, earls and dukes--to vote in Britain's second chamber, the House of Lords. Labour claims that this measure, combined with other constitutional and welfare 'reforms' outlined in the speech, are part of 'the modernisation of the country.'

Accordingly, various changes were introduced to the semi-feudal ceremony that marks the opening of parliament. Instead of heading the royal procession, the Maltravers Herald Extraordinary, Bluemantle Pursivant and ten heralds effectively formed a procession of their own. Silver Stick in Waiting (commanding officer of the Household Cavalry) lost his place, leaving Gold Stick (Colonel of the Household Cavalry) alone. The Lord Chancellor--who hands the Queen her speech--was given a special dispensation, and did not have to walk backwards down the steps from the throne whilst keeping his respectful gaze on the monarch's feet.

The regal pomp and circumstance underscored the essentially conservative content of Blair's agenda. The Beefeaters, who normally guard the Tower of London, need not have made their annual search of Westminster Palace for evidence of 'gunpowder, treason and plot'. Labour poses no such danger. Blair assured the Queen that his denunciation of 'feudal domination' did not include her. He said his government made a distinction

between hereditary peers and monarchs.

Seven hundred and fifty hereditary peers--most of whom are Tories--are to lose their right to vote and speak in the Lords, a move which is supposed to make the Upper House 'more democratic and representative'. This, however, is not the case.

There are no plans to create an elected second chamber. Instead, the practice of appointing peers--selected by the Prime Minister--will remain. This prompted Simon Jenkins in the *Times* to comment that Labour had shifted from 'cronyism by descent' to 'cronyism-for-life'. Further changes to the Lords have been put on ice, pending a Royal Commission that is expected to report in two years time.

The Queen's speech also set out plans to conduct next year's European Elections on the basis of the 'closed-list' system of proportional representation (PR), as opposed to the current 'first-past-the-post'. Blair has selected this form of PR because it will further enable his leadership to exercise control over the party.

Other constitutional changes outlined were in a similar vein. A Greater London Authority Bill is to be introduced, which will set out a framework for electing a Mayor of London and a 25-strong London Assembly.

The government's much-vaunted 'people's' transport plan for the capital is a mess, and Londoners will likely have to pay more taxes to fund public transport in the city. A new bill will enable councils to introduce cuts in public services over a 'number of years instead of just one'.

Labour's devolution of government in Scotland, Wales and the English regions means that Local Authorities will be 'empowered' to decide how much they can cut and where. Central government will retain the right to impose budget limits, a measure introduced by the Tories, should the cuts proposed at the local

level not prove ruthless enough.

The anti-democratic character of Labour's planned legislation was emphasised by the dropping of a long-promised Freedom of Information Bill. The party has been formally committed to the introduction of such legislation for 20 years. However, former Minister David Clarke was sacked from the cabinet after he had brought the bill 90 percent to completion, which ensured that it not be ready for the new parliamentary session. Other promised measures that cut across vested interests, such as a ban on fox hunting and the creation of a Food Standards Agency, were similarly omitted.

The government's real target is not the wealthy elite, but the mass of working people. The speech began by emphasising that Labour has 'reduced government borrowing by £20 billion in its first year' and that it 'will continue to pursue sound public finances and abide by its fiscal rules'. Framing this central aspect of Labour's policy is a programme made up of 20 bills. These include:

- The 'Welfare Reform Bill', which will create a 'single gateway' for all benefit claimants, so that they will be compelled to attend job interviews. The measure both dilutes the payment of benefits as a right and extends Labour's 'workfare' policies to the disabled and single parents. The Bill will also introduce a series of as yet unspecified changes to the pension system. Labour has long been searching for a means of running down state pensions spending, forcing people to take out additional private provisions, euphemistically referred to as a 'Stakeholder pension'.

- The Immigration and Asylum Bill further undermines the rights of refugees. In the name of preventing 'economic refugees' from entering the UK, the system of appeals against deportation is to be tightened up, in a policy designated as 'Faster, firmer, fairer'. Cash benefits for asylum seekers will be replaced by food and clothing vouchers. Refugees will be dispersed around the country to hostel accommodation. The latter is aimed at preventing immigrants from staging public protests in detention centres.

- Education is to receive the biggest shake-up in 50 years. A consultation paper will aim at making teachers responsible for educational achievement. 'Performance

related pay' will introduce a two-tier wage system into schools, further widening the gulf between better-off schools, which achieve higher exam results, and those in more socially deprived areas.

- Changes to the legal system mark a serious intrusion into civil liberties. The right to Legal Aid is to be curtailed under a new government-run Criminal Defence Service. This will dispense fix-priced contracts to lawyers of their choosing. The Access to Justice Bill will also enable magistrates to hire private security firms, who will have the power to arrest fine defaulters and those in breach of court orders. The right to appeal in civil actions is to be further restricted. Those accused of sexual offences will also lose their right to cross-examine their alleged victims. In Youth Justice, the government proposes to speed-up punishments meted out to juveniles and impose a 'contract' on first-time offenders.



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