

Labour lays down pro-business agenda for new Scottish Parliament

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The Scottish parliament has confirmed its intent to champion the drive of big business for global investment at the expense of the working class. On June 17, Scotland's First Minister Donald Dewar announced eight bills to be discussed during the present parliamentary term. Measures include a "toll tax" on drivers using the busy M8 motorway, new measures to discipline teachers, an "anti-corruption" bill directed against local government, and an all-embracing finance act to maintain pressure on all areas of public spending.

Other measures intended to benefit the substantial tourist industry include the final abolition of feudal land laws and the setting up of a national park. A token measure to improve the rights of "incapable adults" was also included.

The proposals are a clear indication of the priorities of the Labour-controlled parliament. Infrastructure, education and social spending are to be reorganised to more directly reflect the needs of Scottish-based business. The cost of such changes will fall on the working class, directly in the form of further destruction of social provisions and indirectly through measures such as road tolls, which will impact on people commuting for work and travelling for leisure.

Absent is any measure that could be interpreted as a social reform. For many years, campaigners for the creation of a Scottish parliament claimed that it would provide a means to reverse growing social inequality. In the May election campaign, all that was left of this was the promise by all parties except Labour to abolish student tuition fees. In the aftermath of Labour's victory, the Liberal Democrats quickly dropped this in return for positions in a coalition government. There is to be a review of education during the parliament's first term.

Reaction to the legislation was revealing. Shelter, a

housing charity, denounced the lack of any measures to remedy the housing crisis. Immediately Dewar completed his speech, left-wing Labour MSP (Member of the Scottish Parliament) John McCallion, expressing similar concerns, asked him whether anything was missing.

Others were alarmed by the lack of more aggressive pro-business policies. Scottish National Party leader Alex Salmond complained, "There is nothing in this legislative programme that touches the commanding heights of the Scottish economy. How are we going to gain the comparative and competitive advantage that most of us would like to see in this parliament?" Recent statistics have shown that the flood of overseas investment, on which all parties base their programmes, has been drastically reduced. Last year, investment in Scotland was down 25 percent compared to the previous year.

The *Scotsman* fretted that "the legislative programme contains worthy things that have to be done, but as a statement of dynamic intent, as a symbol of what this parliament can do, it is functional, dry and, frankly, dull".

With Labour preparing to cut social spending, those MSPs deemed likely to advocate social reforms have been excluded from some of the 16 parliamentary committees. Independent ex-Labour MP Denis Canavan was barred from the education committee. Tommy Sheridan of the Scottish Socialist Party was excluded from the "social inclusion" committee. Robin Harper of the Green Party was initially barred from the environmental committee, but was later included. In contrast to Westminster, where parliamentary committees merely scrutinise legislation, the Scottish committees can initiate laws.

Sheridan and Canavan have protested against their

exclusion. Shortly before, in what is likely to be a feature of this parliament, they indulged themselves in protest antics inside the debating chamber over seating arrangements. Sheridan and Canavan had occupied front row seats, and the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition wanted them removed to the less visible back rows.

One cut the parliament would not countenance was any reduction in the amount to be spent on its own facilities and privileges. At present, MSPs meet in the famous general assembly building on "the Mound" in Edinburgh. Last week they voted to spend £110 million on a purpose built parliament in the shape of an upturned boat. Each MSP earns £40,000 a year; receives a further £36,000 for additional staff and between £3,000 and £10,000 for an office. Last week they voted themselves a two-month summer holiday.



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