

Britain: Labour government outlines law-and-order election platform

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The Queen's speech on December 6 opening parliament announced the Labour government's legislative programme for the forthcoming year. It was widely interpreted as signalling a general election in Spring 2001.

Although the Queen delivers the speech, the government writes it. It contained just 15 bills and four in draft form—compared to 22 bills in 1997 the year Labour came to office, 26 in 1998 and 28 in 1999. Several of these will probably never reach the statute book if, as expected, Prime Minister Tony Blair cuts short the parliamentary session for an election in April or May next year.

Some political commentators complained that the Queen's speech had been used as a virtual mini-election manifesto by the government. As such, it gave advance notice of the policies on which Labour intends to fight their campaign, and further evidence of the inexorable drift of official British politics to the right.

The Queen's speech was touted as the "fourth chapter of the government's story". A government spokesman explained that chapter one had centred on the economy, chapter two on work and unemployment, and chapter three on education. This latest instalment was about "matching the opportunity economy with the responsibility society".

"Opportunity" and "responsibility" are favourite buzzwords for the Blair government—most often appearing in conjunction—but like the "Third Way", their precise meaning is never spelt out. This is not surprising, as these rather innocuous sounding terms are the ideological catch-all through which Labour has sought to justify the overturning of long-standing social and democratic rights.

According to Blair's mantra, "citizenship rights" are dependent upon fulfilling certain obligations to the state. Access to social security benefits depends upon an applicant proving they are actively seeking

work—regardless of the wage rate on offer—or accepting a place on the government's "New Deal" workfare schemes. Democratic rights have fared even worse. Under Labour, people must first prove they are "law-abiding" and "responsible" before being allowed to exercise them. The government is fond of this theme because it enables them to make greater inroads into public spending, and plays well to disgruntled former Conservative voters and the wealthy elite, whose support Labour has cultivated and is desperate to cling onto.

In keeping with this, six bills outlined by the Queen relate to law-and-order measures—more than one third of the government's entire legislative programme. The Queen's speech announced a crackdown on social security fraud. Under a "two strikes and you're out" system, people who have been convicted twice of committing a benefit offence within a three-year period can have their benefits stopped altogether or reduced. Employers who collude in benefit fraud can now be fined. In order to crackdown on supposed fraud, every benefit recipient will be treated as a potential criminal. New powers will enable banks, credit card companies and other agencies to share information in order to detect benefit fraud.

The government will reintroduce legislation further curtailing the right to trial by jury, which has twice been rejected by the House of Lords this year. Some 18,000 defendants who are charged with middle-ranking offences will no longer be able to opt for a jury trial. John Wadham of the civil rights group Liberty said that the government was confusing being "tough on crime" with being "tough on human rights". However, for the government, those facing criminal prosecution should not enjoy automatic access to such rights because—although technically innocent until proven guilty—as it argues that there is "no smoke without fire". Criminals are abusing the jury system, Labour claims, and, moreover, their new measures will save £128m each year.

Labour also plans to introduce child curfew schemes.

According to the government, British society is in urgent need of protection from a veritable plague of children who are out of control and intent on committing crime. But it is specifically working class children who will be the brunt of the new measures, as the curfews will be targeted on "hard"—read poor and deprived—neighbourhoods. Labour previously introduced targeted curfew powers for those aged 10 and under. The fact that no English authority has used the power subsequently proves just how false government claims are. Crime statistics also disprove the existence of a "child crime wave". Children are more likely to be the victims of crime than its perpetrators. Nonetheless, Labour aims to extend the power of curfew to those aged below 16 years. To be young, working class and out on the streets unsupervised after 10pm is tantamount to criminal activity in Labour's book.

The curfew powers were packaged as part of clamping down on "yob culture". Other measures include introducing £100 fixed penalties for offences of disorderly behaviour—once again removing the need for the "costly" process of formal charges, a trial, etc—a ban on drinking alcohol on the streets, empowering the police to close "rowdy" pubs and clubs and to seize the assets of criminals.

Any legislation that smacked of progressiveness —such as its previous election commitment to overturn the anti-homosexual "Clause 28" introduced under Conservative rule—was ditched. So was the pledge to introduce a bill to conduct a referendum on a system of proportional representation. Even the commitment to bring forward legislation outlawing fox hunting with hounds—which had enraged Britain's landed gentry—was neutered. Legislation will now depend on a free vote in parliament, but even then it is unlikely to pass, as it will meet opposition in the House of Lords and run out of parliamentary time.

There was not much else in Labour's Queen's speech. An assortment of plans for the partial privatisation of inner-city doctors services, a ban on tobacco advertising, a vague commitment that elderly long-term care patients will not have to finance their nursing costs (just their accommodation) and the further deregulation of business "red tape".

With Blair putting the finishing touches to his right-wing election agenda, Conservative leader William Hague was anxious not to be outdone. He pledged that a Tory government would introduce £8bn of tax cuts in the first two years, to be financed primarily by cutting "red tape"

and social security spending.

Despite the similarity of Labour and Conservative policies in many areas, several newspapers claimed that election battle-lines had been clearly drawn. Commenting on the Queen's speech, the *Financial Times* opined that "On the ideological plane, certainly, both parties have reclaimed their traditional colours", arguing that Blair was reverting to the "tax and spend" agenda of old, in contrast to Hague's preference for "smaller government".

Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper went even further. According to its political editor Trevor Kavanagh, "New Labour is in fact an old-fashioned, socialist, tax-and-spend administration". Its editorial complained that in the last three years Labour had failed to "tear apart the bloated welfare system", "revolutionise the NHS [National Health Service] with private care", and "tackle crime".

Such claims are necessary if the media are to maintain the pretence that the body politic remains in good health, despite the growing gulf between rich and poor under Labour. Britain's ruling elite also intends them as a warning shot across Blair's bows. The Conservative Party has little chance of winning a general election next Spring—having barely registered any improvement in its electoral fortunes since being decimated at the polls in 1997. Big business calculates that even with a much-reduced turnout by ordinary working people on polling day, Blair is likely to be returned. However they are seeking to spell out as plainly as possible just what they expect from a second term Labour government.



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