

Britain: Queen's speech outlines attack on students, immigrants and civil liberties

Julie Hyland
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The Queen's speech on November 26 outlined the Labour government's legislative programme for the next year.

Probably the last full legislative package to be unveiled before the General Election in 2005, the government's proposals were meant to flag the political programme on which it intends to run for office for a third term. For Prime Minister Tony Blair that meant drawing up policies that would win the approval of the financial oligarchy whose representative he is, even if this risks further undermining popular support for his government.

Labour's legislative package pressed all the right buttons for the likes of News International's Rupert Murdoch. The measures are easily the most right wing ever outlined by the government during its seven years in power.

At its centre are plans to allow universities to charge students top-up fees, the threat to separate asylum seekers from their children unless they leave the country, and draconian legislation suspending civil liberties under the guise of the "war on terror".

The key features of proposed legislation are:

- * Current upfront tuition fees of £1,000 are to be replaced in 2006 by charges of up to £3,000 a year deducted from graduates' salaries.

Most universities have said they will charge the maximum £3,000, although more than half of those surveyed by the BBC have said this was still not enough. Almost half also acknowledged that the proposed fees would deter poorer students from applying.

Just as importantly, the increased fees are intended to confirm that essential public services such as education and health are not a right but are subject to market conditions.

- * Asylum seekers were specifically singled out for attack, with measures to reduce the appeals process to a single tier. This is aimed at reducing the possibility of applicants winning a fair hearing in a set-up that is predicated on the government's right to refuse asylum, rather than upholding the democratic right to a place of safety.

The speech claimed that the measures are aimed at reducing "the scope for delay caused by groundless appeals, and to put in place a range of measures to tackle abuse of the system and fraudulent claims".

That the issue of asylum is presented in this way makes clear the political intent of the new measures, which are to portray all applications for asylum as suspect and to scapegoat immigrants for the social devastation being created by the government's policies.

In a particularly vicious move, the government intends to instruct those whose asylum application has failed to take "voluntary" flights home or lose their children.

Here again the government has sought to turn reality on its head, portraying the move as a child-protection issue. As failed asylum seekers lose their rights to welfare benefits, it may be necessary to remove children from their parents to prevent them being made destitute, Home Secretary David Blunkett claimed!

- * The anti-asylum proposals were part of a far broader assault on democratic rights, including bringing forward legislation giving police and ministers greater powers to deal with terror incidents and "other emergencies".

The speech claimed, "The threat of international terrorism and a changing climate have led to a series of emergencies and heightened concerns for the future."

In the case of "catastrophic incident", therefore, civil contingencies legislation is to be remodelled to enable

the government to rush through temporary legislation without prior parliamentary approval—with authorities having new powers to declare a regional state of emergency.

The draft Civil Contingencies Bill unveiled earlier this year extends the definition of emergency situations to include all those affecting national security, human welfare, the environment and “political, administrative or economic stability”.

A new structure of multi-agency Local Resilience Forums based on police force areas would be set up, with police able to order evacuations and seal off “sensitive sites”.

Once the queen declared an emergency, the government could order the destruction of property, order people to evacuate an area or ban them from travelling and “prohibit assemblies of specified kinds” and “other specified activities”.

The speech also set out plans to introduce a national biometric identity card system. Although this will take some years to implement fully, new legislation will establish a framework for beginning the process. This includes establishing a central database holding information on every legal UK resident, which public bodies such as the health service will be able to access.

Ministers are also to be given powers to prevent people from using specific services if they do not have a valid ID card, and to set a date for when the carrying or production of ID cards will be made compulsory.

The government’s much vaunted promises to bring forward legislation banning fox hunting was not included in the speech, however. Nor was its commitment to introducing a charge of corporate manslaughter, making it easier to prosecute businesses responsible for fatal accidents.

Health Secretary John Reid had claimed that the legislative package would give “clear definition between ourselves and other political parties.”

In reality, Labour’s agenda as regards social policy is barely distinguishable from that of the Conservative Party. The new Tory leader Michael Howard attacked the plan to remove asylum seekers children from their parents for going “further than any civilised government should go.” But he raised this while arguing that the government had to resort to such measures because its overall policy towards asylum was too weak.

So narrow is the political base of the Labour government that its legislative package manages to offend almost everyone.

Such is the level of outrage that has greeted the proposal to remove the children of asylum seekers that Blunkett was moved to write a self-serving defence of the measure in the *Guardian* newspaper under the headline, “I’m no Herod”.

The most contentious areas for the Tories in the speech were those relating to a possible referendum on membership of the European single currency, on plans to remove the 92 remaining hereditary peers to form an all-appointed second chamber, and to equalise relationship rights for homosexuals. But Howard was supportive of the new Civil Contingencies legislation.

Backbench Labour MPs signalled their opposition to the introduction of top-up fees, which the party has specifically ruled out in its 2001 manifesto, but made no mention of the legislation on asylum and emergency measures.

Some 120 Labour MPs have signed a House of Commons motion against top-up fee increases. Labour MP Ian Gibson, who tabled the motion, claimed that “this is the real battle. We shall fight to the death”. Combined with the opposing votes of the Conservative and Liberal Democrats, this holds out the possibility that the government could be defeated on the issue.

Gibson’s rhetoric notwithstanding, the Labour rebels have tried to make their point as gently as possible, simply requesting that the government “rethink” its position.



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