Queen's Speech in Britain

Blair's third-term agenda: privatisations, attacks on civil liberties

Julie Hyland
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In the immediate aftermath of the May 5 general election, media commentators speculated that Prime Minister Tony Blair's much-reduced majority would result in a "softer," more conciliatory third term.

The May 17 Queen's Speech put paid to such speculation. The government unveiled a legislative programme that centres on the privatisation of essential services and further attacks on civil liberties.

The 45 bills outlined in the speech include plans to introduce identity cards, extend anti-terror legislation, clamp down on asylum and immigration, limit social benefits for the disabled and facilitate greater private sector involvement in health care and education.

The government packaged its plans as proof of its commitment to "creating safe and secure communities, and fostering a culture of respect." Noting that Blair's proposals covered many of the so-called "dog whistle" issues on which the Conservatives had fought the election, Tory leader Michael Howard said, "We had no idea he was thinking what we're thinking."

"Are you thinking what we're thinking?" was the Tories' main election slogan.

The programme includes measures that the government had been forced to retreat from previously. Legislation covering identity cards was withdrawn before the election due to opposition in the House of Lords. Now the government has said it intends to bring forward legislation that will allow the introduction of ID cards by 2008, with the option for these to be made compulsory by 2010.

The biometric cards will be linked to a National Identity Register holding data on all UK residents, including fingerprints. This information will be shared between border authorities and people's details will be checked on the national database before they will be allowed to use public services.

A new Immigration and Asylum Bill will establish a points system for work permits. Modelled on Australian statutes, the legislation will restrict temporary permits to those whose labour is required to fill certain shortages. Only highly skilled migrants will be able to settle permanently, and then only after having successfully passed a "Britishness" test.

Migrants from certain countries will be required to pay a financial bond to the government that they will lose if they fail to return home. Home Secretary Charles Clarke has also stated that he intends to remove the right of successful asylum seekers to remain in Britain permanently. Instead they will be given temporary leave to remain for up to five years, after which time their case will be reviewed.

The speech signalled that a Counter Terrorism Bill will be brought forward. The government has said that it will be aimed at remedying "gaps or deficiencies" in the Prevention of Terrorism Act passed by the last parliament, but it includes "scope for new offences which would assist in bringing suspected terrorists before the courts."

It is thought that the bill will create two new offences. An offence of "committing acts preparatory to terrorism" will make it easier to charge people that may not have actually committed terrorist acts. More sinister still, the offence of "glorifying or condoning terrorism" poses a grave threat to free speech. It is a catchall term that could be used against those defending Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation, for example.

The Incapacity Benefit Bill will be focussed on forcing the 2.7 million current claimants of the

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disability entitlement back into work. Under its proposals, initial disability benefit will be withheld for up to 12 weeks whilst a person's capacity to work is assessed. Only those who can prove they are actively looking for work will be able to go on to a slightly higher rate of benefit after this period, whilst those judged medically unable to work will still have to attend "work-focussed" interviews.

The Education Bill focuses on extending so-called "parent power," whereby parents are to have the right to instigate school inspections, whilst inspectors will be able to demand school closures and the sacking of "failing" teachers. But it also includes measures to facilitate greater private sector involvement in schools. Primary schools, for example, will be allowed to opt out of local authority control and become "foundation" schools with control of their own budgets. All that is required is a vote in favour by a meeting of the school's governing council, following parental "consultation."

The government also plans to create 200 city academies—another device through which state schools can be taken over and run by private operators. No new legislation is required for this.

Measures governing health care are also aimed at facilitating greater private sector involvement as a further step towards wholesale privatisation. Again under the banner of "choice," hospitals are to be encouraged to opt out of state control and new powers will enable hospitals to be closed if they are deemed to be failing.

The government also proposes legislation that will mean care home and NHS managers and even patients can be held liable and prosecuted for facilitating the spread of hospital-acquired infections.

Given the widespread hostility towards the government revealed in the general election—Labour has the lowest share of the vote of any majority government—the legislative programme is deeply provocative. Indeed, Blair has boasted that the measures represent a "quintessentially New Labour" programme.

The prime minister's conviction that he will be able to press ahead with highly controversial and unpopular plans is based upon the utter worthlessness of the parliamentary opposition in general, and the critics within his own party in particular.

Blair calculates that he will be able to rely on Conservative backing to carry out most of the proposals. On public sector privatisation and cuts in welfare benefits, Labour and the Tories are united. The Conservatives have also supported measures for ID cards previously, although there is now some debate within the party as to whether they should continue to do so.

The so-called "Labour rebels," those organised around the nominally left-wing Campaign Group, are a known quantity. In the past, they have opposed cuts in incapacity benefit and ID cards and, with a much-reduced Labour majority of just 67, a sizeable revolt by backbenchers could undermine Blair's plans.

This is what accounts for Charles Clarke's and Work and Pensions Secretary David Blunkett's pledges to "listen carefully" to any criticisms. The *Independent* reported that the government's aim was to soften up Labour critics with the promise of concessions elsewhere.

Given that the Labour lefts had all rallied around Blair to ensure his successful third term, it will not take much to bring them on board. The *Guardian* described the Labour rebels' response to the Queen's speech as "if not a whimper, then hardly a bang."

John McDonnell, chairman of the Campaign Group, said, "We are looking to negotiate for the best deal possible...

"The key issue now is whether the government will negotiate to build consensus.... On the left, we want to demonstrate that we are about serious government. It depends on the details—that's the whole point now."

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