

Britain: Cameron outlines Conservative's "reform" agenda

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Conservative leader David Cameron is advancing himself as the ideal leader to "clean up" British politics in the wake of the scandal over MP's extravagant expense claims.

On Monday, the Tory leader trialed a major speech on the issue in the usually pro-Labour *Guardian* newspaper. Under the heading, "We need a massive, radical redistribution of power," Cameron argued that the "deep problems in the British political system" required "restoring local control in the spirit of glasnost."

His description is telling. Glasnost (and perestroika) was the term employed in the late 1980s by the Stalinist bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev to describe its "reform" of the Soviet Union. Under the banner of openness and transparency, the bureaucracy claimed it was engaged in democratic changes that would hand power to the people. In reality, the policy was aimed at restoring capitalist property relations, transferring the wealth and productive forces owned by the state into the hands of an aspiring capitalist class. As is known, the result has been a catastrophic decline in the living standards of the masses, and the assumption of virtually authoritarian powers by the political representatives of the financial oligarchy.

There is, of course, a vast difference between the former Soviet Union and Britain. But the social impulses behind Cameron's talk of "glasnost" for the UK are fundamentally the same.

While the Tory leader's agenda is long on rhetoric but short on concrete detail, it confirms the fact that by means of the scandal over MPs expenses, a section of the bourgeoisie is seeking to engineer a further shift to the right in the political agenda. Its primary target is the public sector, on which millions rely for jobs and essential services.

Cameron began by claiming that while the "immediate trigger" for public anger "is the realisation of what some MPs have been doing with taxpayers' money," the "fundamental cause is...different."

Making only a fleeting reference to "bankers who got rich while they were bringing the economy to its knees," the remainder of Cameron's "causes" all relate to administrative inadequacies/shortcomings in the National Health Service, local councils and parliament.

Public disaffection is the result "of people's slow but sure realisation that they have very little control over the world around them, and over much that determines whether or not they'll live happy and fulfilling lives," he said.

How does this lack of "control" manifest itself? In the fact that tens of thousands of people are now losing their jobs and, often as not, pensions that they have built up over years? That they are struggling to pay mortgages and bills? That a wealthy financial elite have basically plundered the economy—with the blessing of the political establishment—without anyone being held to account?

Not for Cameron. Instead he blames "a growing culture of rule-following, box-ticking and central prescription robs people of the chance to use their judgment or take responsibility."

This is absurd. It is not "box-ticking" that is responsible for mass layoffs, economic insecurity, lack of affordable housing—the issues concerning most workers. Cameron is deliberately silent on these issues, and he barely references the global economic recession that is fundamentally determining whether people can "live happy and fulfilling lives."

His silence is not accidental. As the man currently being courted by Rupert Murdoch as a future British Prime Minister, and a multi-millionaire and scion of the British upper class in his own right, he doesn't want any questions raised about who really controls things in the UK—the financial oligarchs and the City of London.

He claims instead that the problem is "the collapse in personal responsibility" that has followed the "leeching of control away from the individual and the community into the hands of political and bureaucratic elites."

The most damning example of a "collapse in personal responsibility" has been the actions of those financiers and bankers who have flagrantly plundered the economy for decades, and grown super-rich as a result. Does Cameron suggest that they be held to account? Not a chance.

His argument for a "radical redistribution of power: from the state to citizens" is instead a euphemism for a massive assault on the social rights of working people.

Cameron gives, as an example of his goal of "pushing power down," Tory policy on school reform. Education is to be taken out of the hands of local authorities, he asserts, and put in

“parent’s hands.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Under Tory plans, public education is to be placed in the hands of various businesses, “entrepreneurs” and religious institutions, while private education is encouraged for the few who can afford it.

“We’ll end the state monopoly in state education, so that any suitably qualified organisation can set up a new school,” he states.

Cameron admits that it is “not always possible to give power back to individuals,” so in this instance he proposes to “redistribute power to neighbourhoods and local government.” Localities are to be “empowered” by “cutting right back on all the interference from central government: the rules and restrictions, the targets and inspections.”

Councils will be required to publish details of any spending over “£25,000, and to get approval for any excessive tax increases in a local referendum.”

In addition, “sweeping new powers” will create a “new ‘general power of competence;’” allowing councils “to do whatever they like as long as it’s legal—creating solutions to local problems without getting permission from the centre.” A Tory government would legislate in order “to create a new power of citizen’s initiative, with local referendums on issues *where over 5% of the electorate have signed up*” (emphasis added).

This type of “local democracy” would provide for a vocal right-wing, upper middle-class lobby to push through cuts in services and all manner of regressive measures on issues such as education and policing.

As regards parliament, under the guise of loosening the grip of the traditional parties Cameron proposes measures whose end result will be to make the institution even more subordinate and malleable to the interests of a wealthy and powerful few. He proposes reducing the number of MPs, and changing electoral boundaries to make them “fairer”—i.e., to overcome the virtual monopoly Labour currently enjoys in the cities.

He had already announced he would introduce open primaries to select Tory candidates. Anyone could stand in elections for the Conservatives, he said, provided they agreed to abide by party discipline. His assertion was in reference to a plethora of minor celebrities, who have indicated they intend to stand as “independents” in any future election—many of whom offer a brand of right-wing populism little different to that of Cameron himself.

It is noticeable, however, that the one element missing from his “sweeping” reform agenda is the introduction of proportional representation. He asserts that PR means that, “Instead of voters choosing their government on the basis of the manifestos put before them in an election, party managers would choose a government on the basis of secret backroom deals.”

This is just eyewash. Cameron’s explicit rejection of PR underscores the fact that for his talk of ending political

monopolies, and delegating power down, he defends an electoral set-up that is fundamentally undemocratic.

Finally, Cameron serves time on British membership of the European Union. In addition to pledging a referendum on the EU’s Lisbon Treaty—long a demand of Murdoch—he sets out plans guaranteed to provoke tensions between Britain and its major European rivals, including the implied overturning of the Human Rights Bill enacted by Labour partly in line with EU law.

Cameron’s proposals have been broadly welcomed by the media. That they appeared in the *Guardian* is indicative of the “broad tent” now being constructed around the Tory agenda of massive public spending cuts. This agenda has won the support of a swathe of former liberals, who no longer trust Labour to safeguard their highly privileged lifestyles.

It fell to Fraser Nelson, political editor of the right-wing, pro-Tory *Spectator* magazine, to spell out more openly the real reasons for Cameron’s supposedly reforming zeal.

“As the economic outlook blackens, it is horribly clear to Mr Cameron that his destiny is to be hated,” he wrote in the *Telegraph*. “If the national debt is to be reduced, as Mr Cameron is promising, then his austerity agenda will have to go far deeper.”

“The country doesn’t have a vacancy for a nice guy—it needs a ruthless leader with a sense of urgency,” and armed with a “hatchet” he continued. “Cameron will be judged on how effectively he wields that axe,” he warned.

“A long painful battle” with much of the population lay ahead, Nelson wrote. It was this that explained Cameron’s promise to “fundamentally redesign politics. It is the only possible narrative to explain the harsh spending decisions he will have to make—that politics has failed, and therefore he is re-engineering the whole system.



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