

Britain: Queen's speech announces pro-business anti-worker legislative agenda

Jean Shaoul
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The Queen's speech announced a Conservative Liberal Democrat legislative programme whose priority is to cut "the budget deficit and restore economic growth". In plain language, this means boosting corporate profits at the expense of workers and their families beginning with the programme of an additional £6 billion spending cuts announced Monday.

The Queen unveiled the new government's proposals in the House of Lords on Tuesday, saying, "My government's legislative programme will be based upon the principles of freedom, fairness and responsibility".

"Freedom" means the corporate sector's freedom to access new sources of profit, while working people assume ever-greater "responsibility" for their survival when out of work, sick or old. This is what is meant by "fairness".

One of the new government's most important measures is the introduction of a supposedly independent Office of Budget Responsibility. In future, the OBR, not the Treasury, will carry out the economic forecasts that underpin government economic and financial plans and the annual budget put before parliament. It will "advise" whether the government's policies are likely to meet its targets. In effect, the OBR will determine whether the state can afford to pay for education, health or pensions and determine whether taxes need to rise to cover future bailouts for the banks.

The OBR will be headed by Sir Alan Budd, Geoffrey Dicks and Graham Parker. Budd was a founding member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee. Dicks was chief economist at Novus Capital and former chief economist of the Royal Bank of Scotland. Parker was the head of the Treasury's public sector finances team.

The outsourcing of policymaking that has for years been determined in the interests of the financial elite and managed by the international financial consultancies such as PWC, KPMG, Deloitte, McKinsey and the like, has now been put on a statutory basis. The OBR's composition ensures that the financial elite will now have complete control of the Treasury, which in turn controls all the other government

departments and taxpayers' funds. Its independence means that the OBR will be outside any democratic control or scrutiny.

The new Financial Services Regulation Bill will give the Bank of England overall responsibility for regulating the banking system and "oversight" over the regulation of individual banks, downgrading the role of the Financial Services Authority.

The government's attack on public services and welfare was prefaced by the Queen's statement about new measures "to build a strong and fair society by reforming public services and encouraging individual social responsibility".

The reform of public services includes expanding the already extensive privatisation of schools under New Labour. A new Academies Bill will extend the right of schools, including for the first time primary schools, to seek private sector funding and opt out of local government control. In return for some minimal level of sponsorship, the private sector will be able to take control of schools and receive funding to run the schools from central government. They are then "free" to set their own curriculum, pay rates and admissions policies. Parents and other groups will be able to set up "free schools" to be run by the private sector.

A further bill will give schools greater freedom over the curriculum and more powers to deal with troubled and disaffected children. In practice, this will mean a greater emphasis on employer-led "vocational training" and disciplining and excluding pupils.

There is to be a new framework for running the National Health Service, aimed at cutting administration costs by one-third.

The government is to press ahead with the sell-off of Royal Mail to private bidders and an employees' trust. It is also to cut the number of public agencies not directly under government department control (known as quangos), such as in the National Health Service, or merge them or limit their powers, under the guise of "cutting bureaucracy" and saving £1 billion a year. It has not said which are to go or how their functions are to be carried out.

The government is planning an assault not only on public services, but also on the social insurance system. A new Welfare Reform Bill will “simplify” the benefit system “to improve the work incentives” and replace the various welfare-to-work programmes with one programme. It will remove the right to unemployment benefits and income support as an entitlement, instead making them conditional on willingness to accept whatever work is offered. The aim is to get more than 5 million people—the unemployed, long-term sick, the disabled and single parents—off benefits and into mostly low-paid, or part-time work.

New legislation will phase out the default retirement age and raise to 66 the age that the state pension will be, pending yet another review of the pensions system.

With great fanfare, the government is to restore the linkage between the state pension and the average wage, the removal of which has seen the state pension fall to 25 percent of the average wage and made those without an occupational pension or a very small one dependent upon income support for survival. This measure will leave the pension rate set at a derisory £95.25 a week for a single person and £152.30 for a couple, which is only available providing payment of sufficient national insurance contribution years have been completed.

The National Insurance Contributions (NIC) Bill will stop the planned 1 percent rise in NIC for employers, which bosses had opposed, although workers will have to make increased contributions. The £9 billion raised will be used to fund an increase in the income tax personal allowance and an increase in the NIC threshold. More importantly, it will serve to limit the National Insurance Fund that pays out benefits, including pensions.

The government will reduce the annual number of immigrants allowed into Britain from non-European Union countries—a measure aimed at whipping up racism and chauvinism. To make sure that this does not inadvertently create any upward pressure on workers’ wages, there are plans to “remove barriers to flexible working and promote equal pay”. There is to be a dedicated Border Police Force, as part of a reorganised Serious Organised Crime Agency, to increase “national security”, improve immigration controls, and crack down on the trafficking of people, weapons and drugs.

As part of the deal with the Liberal Democrats, there will be token measures to dress up a pro-business programme of cuts with a democratic veneer. The government is to call a referendum on an Alternative Vote system for the House of Commons, although the Conservatives will argue against it. There will be fewer and more equal sized constituencies. In the wake of the parliamentary expenses scandal, constituents will be able to recall their MPs in the event of being found

guilty of serious wrongdoing.

More importantly, the government is to bring in fixed-term parliaments lasting five years, along with a requirement that a vote of no confidence required to bring down the government would need 55 percent of MPs’ support, not the customary simple majority. This is to ensure that a minority Conservative government can remain in office.

The government will scrap the Labour government’s scheme to introduce Identity Cards, a National Identity Register and the next generation of biometric passports. It promises to “restrict” the amount of time that the police can retain the DNA records of innocent people on the national database and to “tighten” regulations on the use of CCTV cameras, which are more prevalent in Britain than anywhere else in the world.

The legislation also promised to restore some civil liberties curtailed under Labour, including removing some of the limits on the right to protest. However, just hours before the Queen made this declaration, anti-war protestor Brian Haw was arrested along with one other person, at his protest camp on Parliament Square.

Under the new Police Reform Bill, the government is to adopt the US practice of directly elected Police Commissioners.

Such window-dressing measures will do nothing to detract from need to step up repressive measures, which are rooted in the aim of vastly accelerating the attack on the social position of the working class.



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