

Britain's Queen's speech: Anti-immigrant rhetoric in support of austerity

Julie Hyland
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The annual ritual of the Queen's Speech to parliament, setting out the UK government's legislative programme for the year, presages a further barrage of attacks on the social and democratic rights of working people.

It was couched in punitive and racist anti-immigrant measures aimed, the Queen intoned, at ensuring "this country attracts people who will contribute and deters those who will not."

By scapegoating immigrants as undeserving "scroungers", the government intends to deny people, including European Union (EU) citizens, the right to access public services, including welfare, health care and housing.

Legislation is to be brought forward compelling landlords to check the immigration status of prospective tenants or face massive fines. Higher fines are also to be imposed against employers using "illegal labour."

Such measures are already in force, but are to become more systematised. Not only are landlords and businesses to be turned into de facto border guards, but doctors too. Non-EU migrants will have to prove they have private medical insurance or pay a bond of thousands of pounds before entering the country to cover the expense of any treatment they receive on the National Health Service (NHS). Medical staff will be expected to check this is in place before allowing migrants treatment.

EU citizens are also to be penalised under plans to restrict their access to unemployment benefits and social housing, and with the introduction of a residency test to qualify for access to legal aid. The government also intends to press for EU states to foot the bill if their citizens access NHS treatment.

These provocative measures were clearly aimed at

appeasing supporters of the anti-immigrant, anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) amongst Conservative backbenchers and the Tory party at large.

The speech came just days after the May 2 local elections in 35 English councils, mainly Conservative heartlands. With turnout averaging around just 25 percent, the UKIP was the main beneficiary of a fall in the Conservative vote, as well as a record collapse for its coalition partner in government, the Liberal Democrats.

The haemorrhaging of Tory support to the UKIP also accounted for the fact that the Queen's Speech made no mention of government plans to legalise gay marriage. Although still on the table, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill has bitterly divided the Tory party, which the UKIP, opposing the legislation, has successfully exploited.

Prime Minister David Cameron's efforts to placate his critics were not enough, however. Just the day before the Queen's Speech, former Conservative chancellor Lord Lawson added his voice to demands for Britain to leave the EU. Next week, Tory backbenchers intend to force a vote in parliament demanding a referendum on EU membership before the general election due in 2015.

Their opposition to the EU naturally has nothing to do with the savage austerity measures it is implementing across the continent. The "euro-sceptics" are the most enthusiastic supporters of this assault on the social and democratic rights of working people. What motivates them is their insistence that this attack should be "liberated" from the bureaucratic "red-tape" of Brussels and in so doing develop a competitive advantage on the world's markets. Lawson stressed that withdrawal would save the City of London from the "frenzy of regulatory activism"—in particular, EU

plans to impose a tax on financial transactions.

Notwithstanding the very real crisis facing the Tory party from the UKIP nipping at its heels, for the ruling elite as a whole its electoral gains provide a stalking horse for shifting the political agenda in Britain even further to the right.

That is why there was broad support for a legislative programme aimed at devastating workers' social conditions. In the name of strengthening "Britain's economic competitiveness", a deregulation bill will "reduce the burden of excessive regulation on businesses," including "exempting" the self-employed from health and safety legislation.

The Queen's Speech also set out plans to further "reform the benefits system, helping people move from welfare to work."

Central to this is an assault on pensions. The government is to scrap the existing system, which provides for a meagre basic pension that can be topped up by a second contributory component, in favour of a flat-rate pension worth a maximum of just £140 a week. The retirement age is to rise to 67 by 2016.

On social care for the elderly, the government said it intends to cap the amount that people are expected to contribute to the cost—expected to be at around £72,000. But the measure, universally lauded by the media, will not prevent thousands from having to sell their homes. Moreover, it comes under conditions in which government austerity measures have already seen the social care budget in England cut by 20 percent in the last three years.

This situation is set to worsen dramatically as further spending cuts are implemented. Under these conditions, the government's announcement of league table ratings for hospitals and care homes will be utilised to close and privatise NHS provision, just as they have been used to the same effect in schools.

Other measures among the 17 bills include legislation to enable "greater flexibility in pay for teachers" and the privatisation of 70 percent of the probation service, whose staff contracts will be on "payment by results".

The government had been forced to backtrack from a "snoopers' charter" which would have enabled interception of all communications and voice calls. This is to be revived by stealth, with unspecified plans for police and intelligence agencies to be able to identify Internet Protocol addresses.

There is to be an increase in the size of reserve armed forces, in keeping with what the queen described as Britain's commitment to support "countries in transition in the Middle East and North Africa"—i.e., its imperialist provocations in Libya, Syria and elsewhere—and "protecting the Falkland Islanders' and Gibraltarians' right to determine their political futures."

In response to the speech, Labour Party leader Ed Miliband pledged support for Britain's armed forces and promised to "look at the Government's proposals on immigration."

While Labour has made great play of denouncing Tory adaptations to the UKIP, it too is utilising the UKIP's gains to legitimise its own shift to the right, based on the slogan of "family, flag, faith" and "One Nation Labour".

Writing on the labourlist blog, Labour MP John Mann called on the party to "move fast" to address the "concerns" raised by the UKIP.

"It is not socially sustainable to allow flexible labour markets, free movement of labour and capital and have social justice," he wrote, demanding an end to the "open market in labour in the United Kingdom."



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