

Queen's Speech 2015: UK Conservatives lay out agenda of austerity and repression

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Yesterday's Queen's Speech laid out one of the most politically and socially reactionary legislative agendas ever undertaken by a British government.

It was presented in the most cynical terms imaginable, with the Conservatives pledging to "adopt a one nation approach, helping working people get on, supporting aspiration, giving new opportunities to the most disadvantaged and bringing different parts of our country together."

In reality, though unspecified, the speech commits the government to tens of billions in additional spending cuts—in what was described as a "long-term plan" to bring "public finances under control and reducing the deficit, so Britain lives within its means."

Further attacks on essential social provision include a Schools Bill that contains a commitment to creating an extra 270,000 places in independent but state-funded Free Schools by 2020. A Housing Bill will extend the right of tenants to buy their home at a discount from council properties to cover 1.3 million housing association properties—threatening to eliminate vast tranches of subsidised public housing.

A desire to demonstrate a commitment to austerity and secure a base of support in the middle class is what motivates its pledge to enact "tax lock" to supposedly ensure that income tax, VAT and national insurance will not rise during the next parliament.

To impose the attacks outlined requires a raft of anti-democratic legislation, including a trade union bill introducing a 40 percent threshold for strike ballots to be recognised and stricter requirements still for strike votes in "essential services" that collectively will outlaw most strikes. The government is also set to lift the ban on use of agency staff as a scab workforce.

The austerity planned is savage and includes a planned cut of £12 billion for welfare which experts

predict will double the numbers using food banks to 2 million.

Claimants, particularly the young, will be victimised. Those aged 18 to 21 years old will be required to "earn or learn"—only able to claim a strictly controlled youth allowance for six months before they will have to start an apprenticeship paying only £2.73 an hour, or training to continue to receive money.

Immigrants will be witch-hunted. An Immigration Bill sets out new offences including "illegal working," allowing the police to seize wages paid that will be defined as the "proceeds of crime." The bill will allow for migrants to be evicted more quickly and for the policy of "deport first, appeal later" to be sped up and extended. Labour's proposal to make it an offence for businesses and recruitment agencies to hire abroad without first advertising in the UK will also be adopted.

Existing anti-democratic legislation built up under successive Labour and Tory administrations will be supplemented by a Counter-Extremism Bill. This will severely curtail freedom of speech, assembly and movement, introducing Banning Orders for organisations seeking to "undermine democracy or use hate speech" and Extremism Disruption Orders restricting the movement of individuals. The broadcasting watchdog Ofcom will be given the power to take action against channels broadcasting "extremist content", including the power to pre-vet and censor programmes.

The Communications Data Bill, known as the "snoopers' charter", will finally be put before parliament after being blocked by the Tories' former coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats. It will force data Internet and phone companies to store personal information for 12 months, including details of messages sent on social media, webmail, voice calls

over the Internet and on gaming platforms, as well as emails and phone calls.

A manifesto pledge to abolish the Human Rights Act within 100 days, replacing it with a British “Bill of Rights,” has been downgraded to a commitment to a one year consultation on the issue. The proposal was framed in anti-European rhetoric, stressing that it would “break the formal link between British courts and the European Court of Human Rights, and make our own Supreme Court the ultimate arbiter of human rights matters in the UK.”

This was opposed by some leading Tories for being too overt in exposing the government’s contempt for democratic rights—threatening its ability to pass the legislation with an already slim 12-seat majority.

Conservative Environment Secretary Liz Truss insisted the new legislation was “absolutely” going to be delivered at some point. But even this tactical retreat was met with a bitter attack by Rupert Murdoch’s the *Sun*, with a front page article denouncing the Human Rights Act because its provision for “securing the right to privacy and a family life... ended up being used to let illegal immigrants stay in Britain.”

The government will press ahead with its plan to hold a referendum on continued membership of the European Union (EU) before the end of 2017, as well as further devolution in Scotland, Wales and to English cities and regions—both of which involve an existential threat to the UK.

The Tories have not yet set a date for a referendum on Europe, but Prime Minister David Cameron will proceed with efforts to renegotiate British obligations to allow additional powers for parliament to block EU legislation and various measures to curtail freedom of movement of European citizens. These include limiting the right to benefits and no right of entry for accession countries to the EU.

This throws UK economic life into a long period of uncertainty, with some leading companies and banks threatening to leave the UK in the event of a vote against EU membership. Any retreat would bring further defections of Tory voters to the UK Independence Party.

Cameron has been helped by Labour, which has summarily dropped its opposition to holding a referendum after its election defeat. It will support EU membership, but Labour caretaker leader Harriet

Harman stressed that the party “shared” some of Cameron’s desire for change and reform. Beating the anti-immigrant drum, she stressed, “I think that we have got the same concerns that you should contribute into the benefits system before you take out.”

Devolution measures are headed by a Scotland Bill, guided by the recommendations of the Smith Commission formed in the aftermath of last year’s defeated referendum on Scottish independence. This includes proposals giving the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood the power to set income tax rates and bands, control over a share of VAT and some welfare benefits—but not corporation tax. This is, however, the key concern of the Scottish National Party (SNP) which has 56 MPs after all but wiping out Labour north of the border, and will be a contentious issue.

A Wales Bill will be enacted, alongside proposals to devolve more powers to England’s cities over housing, transport, planning and policing as pioneered in plans for Greater Manchester in two years’ time. The aim of all these measures is to encourage regional competition for the favours of big business, as well as to facilitate public spending cuts and the break-up of the National Health Service through localised funding allocation.

To further inflame nationalism, the government will bring in rules whereby only English MPs can vote on English laws—affecting those measures that fall within the remit of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.

The former leader of the SNP, Alec Salmond, linked the issue of EU membership to a threat to stage a second referendum on Scottish independence. “If we arrived at a situation where Scotland as a nation was dragged out of the European Union against the majority will of the Scottish people then that might well be the material change in circumstances that brought forward another referendum,” he said. The SNP would lobby for a “quad-lock” clause requiring a majority vote in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for an EU exit.



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