

UK Conservatives pledge deeper austerity

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The Conservative Party conference met behind a “ring of steel” to isolate delegates from those protesting against their austerity agenda.

But inside the conference, for the most part, it was as if the Tories believe they inhabit a world in which they are the most popular, dynamic government in history—opposed only by a few deranged “crusties” and “Trots” to cite Boris Johnson—and ideally positioned to win the support of all those who have so far resisted their siren call.

This was an assembly of cynics, intent on imposing yet more savage cuts, while insisting that they are the party of working people.

The tenor of the event is best encapsulated by the speeches of its four leading figures, Home Secretary Theresa May, Chancellor George Osborne, outgoing London Mayor Boris Johnson and Prime Minister David Cameron.

Osborne and Johnson are frontrunners to replace Cameron prior to the 2020 general election.

May’s speech was a naked display of xenophobia, so far to the right, that James Kirkup in the Conservative-supporting *Daily Telegraph* called it “awful, ugly, misleading, cynical and irresponsible”. Simon Walker, director general of the Institute of Directors called it, “yet another example of the Home Secretary turning away the world’s best and brightest, putting internal party politics ahead of the country, and helping our competitor economies instead of our own.”

May declared that there is a limit to the amount of immigration any country should take because, “when the pace of change is too fast, it’s impossible to build a cohesive society.”

Most of those seeking access to Britain were not genuine refugees, but “economic migrants.”

Their presence meant that “for people in low-paid jobs, wages are forced down even further while some people are forced out of work altogether.”

Immigration cannot always be managed, she added. Migration from Europe was “unsustainable and the rules have to change,” by clamping down on welfare payments.

The asylum system was being “abused.” There would be no common European Union asylum system—“Not in a thousand years”—but a British approach including stepped up deportations and “retaliatory measures” for any “home country” that refused to accept those returned. She warned, “if other governments don’t play by the rules, there will be consequences.”

May wanted a new definition of refugee status, including automatic rejection of any application from an EU country. She even pledged to include overseas students in government figures and make sure they returned home if they did not have a job immediately after graduation: “And the universities must make this happen.”

Maurice Wren of the Refugee Council said that May’s “clear intention to close Britain’s border to refugees fleeing for their lives” was “thoroughly chilling, as is her bitter attack on the fundamental principle enshrined in international law that people fleeing persecution should be able to claim asylum in Britain.”

“Some want to knock things down,” Osborne declared, “But we—we are the builders. And let me tell you who we are building for. The working people of Britain.”

What then was being built? A “budget surplus” and “lower welfare... For we are the builders. And there are few things harder than repairing the public finances.”

“We’ve got to find more than £20 billion of savings,” he said, demanding “tough choices this autumn.” As part of his plans for regional devolution, he would also “abolish the uniform business rate entirely... Any local area will be able to cut business rates as much as they like... Power to the people. Let the

devolution revolution begin.”

Osborne’s boast of being the party of working people was not helped by reports that more than 1 million households will lose an average of £1,350 a year due to the abolition of working family tax credits, which could not be compensated under any circumstances by the increase in the minimum wage to £7.20 an hour from April next year. Nor was he helped by Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt stating at a fringe meeting that tax credit cuts are partly about teaching the British that they must be “prepared to work hard”, like workers do in China and America.

Johnson, too, tried to play to the gallery, warning of Labour under Jeremy Corbyn “fermenting [sic] the destruction of capitalism”. But he nevertheless felt obliged to warn his co-thinkers of the political dangers posed “if the economic gap between us is allowed to grow too big.”

“In 1980 a chief executive of a FTSE 100 company earned about 25 times the average pay—the average pay—of his or her employees,” he said. “What do you think the multiple is today? 130 times; and there are some who pay themselves 780 times.”

He urged Cameron and Osborne to reconsider their plans to eliminate tax credits.

Such warnings did not faze Cameron, who instead exclaimed, “Wages are rising. Hope is returning. We’re moving into the light.”

The “one-nation modern compassionate Conservative party” would now build “affordable homes” for first-time buyers, not to rent—meaning just 20 percent below market value and with a maximum price of £450,000 in London and £250,000 elsewhere. (The charity Shelter noted that £450,000 is 11.5 times the average full-time London salary and £250,000 nine times the average full-time English salary.)

More dramatic still would be the Tories’ “all-out assault on poverty.”

What this meant in practice was a turn to social policing of problem families—such as a plan to either take fines out of child benefits from parents whose children are persistently truant, or withdraw the benefit altogether. This was coupled with a declaration that “the best route out of poverty is work.”

Without blushing, he informed delegates: “Listen to this: Britain has the lowest social mobility in the developed world.”

This would all supposedly be changed by the spread of “academies and free schools,” with head teachers “growing in confidence as they throw off the shackles of local council control” and raise “the aspirations of children, parents, communities.”

Cameron’s free-market social nostrums were wrapped up in a noxious mixture of repression and militarism. He would “really confront” the “epidemic” of extremism “infecting minds from the mosques of Mogadishu to the bedrooms of Birmingham”—by launching inspections of madrassas.

He would in turn move militarily against the Islamic State, spend 2 percent of GDP on defence, launch “the biggest aircraft carriers in our history,” a “new class of Hunter Killer submarines,” new Joint Strike Fighter jets; improved Apache helicopters; a new fleet of drones and order four new Trident [nuclear] submarines.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic reaction to Cameron’s speech and to the conference as a whole came not from the Tory right, but the Blairite wing of the Labour Party. Jonathan Freedland in the *Guardian* wrote gushingly of how:

“David Cameron did exactly what Jeremy Corbyn failed to do a week ago. He reached out beyond those who already agree with him and sought to persuade those who don’t... Cameron is calculating that, with Labour having shifted leftwards, a vast swath of terrain has been vacated—and he intends to command all of it.”

Freedland’s verdict only shows how far removed he is from the sentiments of millions of workers and youth.

The “vast swath” of social terrain to which Cameron supposedly appeals exists only in the minds of the politically blind—those whose privileged existence leaves them unable to comprehend the deep well of hatred felt towards the Tories. It is a view of contemporary society comparable only to that from the windows of the royal palaces at Versailles in the 1780s and Tsarskoye Selo in the 1900s.



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