

Queen's Speech 2016: UK Conservatives continue agenda of austerity and repression

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19 May 2016

Yesterday's Queen's Speech laid out 21 bills containing further reactionary measures to be enacted out by the British Conservative government over the next year.

Prime Minister David Cameron claimed the legislative programme represented a "progressive, one nation, Conservative government" that was setting out a "series of bold choices that will improve lives across the country."

This presentation was largely repeated by a complainant media, with the *Financial Times* heralding a "social justice agenda," while the *Guardian* proclaimed, "David Cameron places social reform at centre of Queen's speech."

Nothing could be further from the truth. The speech set out a raft of measures attacking democratic rights and imposing privatisation policies in education and prisons as part of the government's austerity drive.

The "war against terror" has been used by successive Labour and Conservative governments to establish the framework for a police state. This is to be accelerated through a Counter Extremism and Safeguarding Bill, which enacts a new "civil order regime" to restrict "extremist activity" and enable state intervention in schools "which teach hate."

The definition of "extremism" now includes those who are "nonviolent" and is so vague as to sweep up in its dragnet virtually anyone who criticises the government.

Cameron's notes to the speech said, "[E]xtremists—both violent and nonviolent—are trying to drive our country apart. So this Queen's speech stands up for our liberal values by taking on the extremists with new powers to disrupt their activities, while protecting young people in unregulated schools from those who preach a message of intolerance and separatism ..."

The government is also preparing to abolish the Human Rights Act, which incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights. The move is intended to placate those sections of the Conservative Party and the UK Independence Party who have long complained that the Act is an intrusion into "British sovereignty" by the European Union.

With an eye to the referendum on British membership of

the EU on June 23, which is bitterly dividing the Conservative Party, the Act's abolition is an olive branch to Cameron's opponents in the Leave campaign.

The claim is that it will be replaced by a "British Bill of Rights," but any such legislation would be largely meaningless as the bourgeoisie dispense with democratic norms.

It was only due to the provisions of the Human Rights Act that the families of the 96 Liverpool Football Club supporters who died in a crush at Hillsborough football stadium 27 years ago were recently able to have the original inquest verdicts of "accidental death" quashed and replaced with a one of "unlawful killing."

The Act's abolition threatens a constitutional crisis as it is embodied in the Scotland Act, under which the 1997 Labour government established the Scottish Parliament.

These moves are buttressed by plans to hand vast surveillance powers to the police and intelligence agencies. The speech noted that a bill will "modernise the law governing the use and oversight of investigatory powers by law enforcement, security and intelligence agencies." This is a commitment to pass the Investigatory Powers Bill, introduced in March. The ITB is a far-reaching attack on privacy and democratic rights, as it brings the current diverse rules governing state surveillance into one piece of legislation. It enshrines in law the previously hidden mass gathering of everyone's Internet data by the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) spying agency, as exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013. The government also intends to bring forward what is described as the greatest prison "reform" since the Victorian era.

Prison "governors will be given unprecedented freedom..." to establish "reform prisons," with "old and inefficient" prisons to "be closed and new institutions built where prisoners can be put more effectively to work." Prisons will be modelled on academy schools (centrally funded but privately run) and rated via league tables. In a speech last month, Cameron declared that prisoners were "potential assets to be harnessed" for profit. The changes are to be

trialled at prisons in the east Midlands, the northeast and London, including HMP Wandsworth.

Prior to the speech, the Labour Party and the unions declared that Cameron had been forced to retreat on his government's plans to force all schools to become academies.

Academisation involves giving individual schools control of their budgets, in an effort to drive down wages and conditions and encourage the further marketisation of education. Earlier this month, the government said academy status would no longer be compulsory, in the face of significant protests by parents, teachers and governors.

But the Queen's Speech set out that this is to continue in another guise. Instead of all schools being forcibly converted, "new laws to expand the academies programme in the poorest performing local authority areas" will be implemented. Legislation is also slated to make it easier for other schools to become academies.

The speech inaugurated a National Funding Formula for schools that imposes the biggest real-terms cut for school since the 1970s.

Massive attacks on higher education are outlined in the programme, with legislation to be introduced "to support the establishment of new universities and to promote choice and competition across the higher education sector." The aim is to allow private institutions to be given university status.

While not announced in the speech, central to the Tories' plans is its announcement this week allowing universities in England to increase tuition fees above £9,000 from autumn 2017. Based on their offering "high quality teaching," based on inspections, with academics compelled to provide more teaching, select universities will be allowed to increase fees. This will exclude even more people from a working class background from a university education.

This is especially the case under conditions in which the government committed to continuing its austerity measures in order to "bring the public finances under control so that Britain lives within its means..." The aim is to establish a "lower welfare economy where work is rewarded." Despite the ongoing offensive against the working class and young people announced in the speech, sections of the Tory party immediately aimed their fire at Cameron for "watering down" its legislative programme.

Iain Duncan Smith, a prominent supporter of the campaign to leave the EU, complained, "Many Conservatives have become increasingly concerned that in the government's helter-skelter pursuit of the referendum, they have been jettisoning or watering down key elements of their legislative programme. Whether it is the trade union bill or the BBC charter proposals, it seems nothing must stand in the way of winning the referendum."

Prior to the Queen's Speech, the government, in collaboration with the trade unions, amended some sections of the Trade Union Act to ensure it was passed.

The new anti-union law illegalises strikes if fewer than 40 percent of union members, and 50 percent in "important public services," vote for action. It also enables the use of agency workers as strike-breakers and makes picketing a criminal offence.

But the government retreated from plans to abolish the "check-off" system, where union subscriptions are deducted automatically from wages. This was the quid pro quo required for the unions and their allies in the Labour Party to pledge their support to Cameron's pro-EU campaign. Labour won the support of nine million voters at the last general election and the Party's support is seen as critical to securing a vote to Remain in the referendum.

Commenting on the speech, the *Financial Times* warned that such were the divisions within ruling circles over Europe that "If Mr Cameron survives the result of the referendum, regardless of what decision voters take, his main preoccupation will be putting his party back together."

It added, "mutterings continue on the Conservative backbenches that Mr Cameron is a lame duck and there will be a swift challenge to his position after June 23. If the result is close, Brexit or no Brexit, disgruntled Eurosceptic MPs will probably do their utmost to eject him from Downing Street and bring in a new leader."



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