

UK: May dresses up policies of austerity and militarism in the language of fairness and opportunities

Robert Stevens
6 October 2016

Prime Minister Theresa May closed the annual conference of the Conservative Party with a sustained display of cynicism and hypocrisy.

In a speech pledging to “restore fairness” and spread prosperity, May proclaimed the referendum vote for the UK to leave the European Union as an opportunity to transform Britain into a country “where everyone plays by the same rules and where every single person, regardless of their background or that of their parents, is given the chance to be all they want to be.”

Seizing the opportunity provided by the slanders heaped by Labour’s right-wing on the supporters of party leader Jeremy Corbyn, she proclaimed Labour as the “nasty party” and the Tories as the defender of the “weak” against the “powerful.”

From here on in, the state would act as a “force for good” to help the working class and as the guarantor of a “great meritocracy”! May referred to the plight of the “working class” or “working people” on 13 occasions.

The rejection of the EU, she said, demonstrated not only a desire for greater control but also reflected the deep divisions that had built up in the country over generations, with working people too often ignored by the “privileged and powerful”.

“It was not the wealthy who made the biggest sacrifices after the financial crisis, it was ordinary working class families... If you’re one of those people who lost their job, who stayed in work but on reduced hours, took a pay cut as household bills rocketed, or—and I know a lot of people don’t like to admit this—someone who finds themselves out of work or on lower wages because of low-skilled immigration, life simply doesn’t seem fair.”

Given that the Tories have spent the last six years in government imposing exactly these conditions, May’s remarks were a farce. Gliding over the actual record of

her party, she claimed her government would protect jobs, “repair” free markets, and implement a new era of “responsible capitalism” where tax dodgers would be prosecuted and companies would be prevented from substituting “cheap foreign labour” for British workers.

“[C]ome with me and together let’s seize the day,” she intoned to her cabinet of millionaires and crooks. All that was missing was for May to quote St Francis of Assisi’s appeal for peace and harmony for the spectre of Margaret Thatcher to rise up before her disciples.

The reality is that the Tories had spent the past four days outlining a raft of policies that collectively make May’s government the most right-wing in British history. Theirs was an agenda for militarism, war and austerity, wrapped up in the naked promotion of xenophobia and nationalism.

The conference opened with May’s speech confirming that she would trigger Article 50 the European Union’s (EU) Lisbon Treaty by the end of March 2017 and introduce a Great Repeal Bill removing the 1972 European Communities Act, which took the UK into the EU, from the statute book.

In the real world, recession will bring yet more savage austerity. The International Monetary Fund cited Brexit as it downgraded its growth expectations for the UK economy next year. May’s speech prompted a further slump in the pound, which collapsed to its lowest level against the dollar since 1985 and the FTSE 100 began to fall back. The fall of the pound will increase the price of all imports, including foodstuffs and other essentials for working families that have already suffered an average fall in wages of 10 percent.

Militarism was the constant theme, with May given a rapturous ovation in her closing speech for promising a government “always committed to a strong national

defence and supporting the finest Armed Forces known to man.”

In his speech, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson declared that the disastrous and illegal invasion of Iraq could not be allowed to prevent further imperialist adventures. “It is simply not the case that every military intervention has been a disaster. Far from it,” he said.

Underscoring the squandering of vast resources on preparations for war, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon announced a £1.3 billion investment with BAE Systems to enable construction work to begin on a new generation of Successor submarines carrying Trident nuclear missiles.

In a de facto pledge to facilitate war crimes, Fallon stated that the UK military will opt out from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) during future conflicts. Legal claims made against the UK armed forces were “damaging our troops” and “undermining military operations.” The policy “would protect our Armed Forces from many of the industrial scale [legal] claims we have seen post Iraq and Afghanistan.”

A Foreign Office statement cited May who said, “Combined with the biggest defence budget in Europe, the action we are laying out today means we will continue to play our part on the world stage, protecting UK interests across the globe.”

May asserted in her own speech, “We will never again—in any future conflict—let those activist, left-wing human rights lawyers harangue and harass the bravest of the brave—the men and women of Britain’s Armed Forces.”

Schools will be made central to the promotion of militarism, with Fallon’s announcement that 150 extra army cadet units are to be based in state schools nationwide.

Even as the Tories attempted to portray Brexit as the basis for a new “Global Britain” based on “free trade” and prosperity for all, Chancellor Philip Hammond lauded six years of savage austerity cuts warning that “a country has to live within its means.” Austerity would continue, albeit without setting a target for achieving a budget surplus in 2020, as a “fundamental part of maintaining our global competitiveness is getting our public finances back in order.”

The Tories have fully adopted the anti-immigrant mantle of the UK Independence Party, with which a large section of the Conservatives were united in calling for a Leave vote in the referendum. A series of anti-immigration policies were announced. The already

restricted right of foreign workers to work in the UK is to be further curtailed. Home Secretary Amber Rudd said that foreign workers should not be able to “take jobs that British people should do.” The government is consulting on requiring all companies to publish the proportion of international staff they employ. Stricter mandatory immigration status checks come into operation in December.

Some of the policies announced by Rudd were first mooted by May in 2013, when as Home Secretary she declared the need to “create a really hostile environment for illegal migrants.”

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt announced that the government would fund 1,500 extra student places at medical school a year from 2018, with the declared intention of the NHS no longer being reliant on foreign doctors by 2025. Through such means, Hunt is paving the way for privatisation of the NHS by deliberately bringing about its collapse.

The pronounced shift to the right by the Tories vindicates the analysis made by the Socialist Equality Party of the Brexit referendum. In our campaign for an active boycott, we explained that this was the only basis on which the working class could assert its own independent interests from the contending right-wing factions of the ruling class, pro and anti-EU. The SEP opposed the pseudo-left groups in the “Left Leave” campaign, who declared that a Leave vote would result in intractable divisions within the Tories over Europe leading to the collapse of the government, a vast strengthening of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn and the imminent possibility of a Labour government.

Instead, the Tories have been left free to deepen their offensive against the working class. Virtually the entire Parliamentary Labour Party dedicated its energies to an attempt to remove Jeremy Corbyn while its right wing speaks of preferring another Tory government to any dilution of Labour’s own pro-austerity, pro-war agenda. Corbyn, whose mantra is the need for unity with his right-wing opponents, was notably silent on the Conservative Party conference and the noxious policies outlined.



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