

Weakened May government sets out plans for hard UK exit from the European Union

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22 June 2017

Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May set out her government's legislative agenda yesterday in the Queen's Speech. It is widely acknowledged to be her first and last one.

May called a snap general election in June, fully two years ahead of schedule, hoping to use the crisis in the Labour Party to secure a significant increase in her government's narrow 17-seat majority. This was so as to force through policies of greater militarism and austerity, especially in the wake of last year's vote for Britain to leave the European Union (EU).

Instead, popular disaffection over seven years of government spending cuts, saw her government reduced to a minority—seven seats short of the 326 required.

It is the first time in more than 40 years that a legislative programme has been set out by a minority government. The last was in 1974 when the then Conservative Premier Edward Heath also called a snap election, only to lose it to a Labour minority. In June's election, although Labour increased its number of seats to 262, it does not have enough to govern without support from the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party and others. Even then, it would still fall short of an absolute majority.

May had hoped to get a confidence and supply agreement with the 10 MPs from the ultra-right Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). This would mean the DUP backing May on key votes, crucially in preventing it being brought down by motions of no confidence. If May were to lose such a motion, or her legislative programme is voted down next week, the path would be cleared for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to form an alternative administration.

Eleven days ago, the government claimed it had reached agreement with the DUP but was forced to backtrack. Senior DUP sources complained they were being shown a lack of respect. This is in reference to criticisms of the party's hostility to gay marriage and abortion, amongst other democratic rights.

Sinn Féin and others have warned that any Tory/DUP deal would undermine the rigorous impartiality required of the British government under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. If any agreement is reached, it will face a legal challenge in the High Court on the grounds that it breaches the power-sharing arrangements.

Neither the threat of renewed conflict, nor the DUP's ties to loyalist paramilitary organisations, is what caused the

stalemate, however. According to reports, May is holding out against DUP demands for an increase in public spending in Northern Ireland, and cuts in corporation tax, which the government is concerned would ignite similar demands across the UK.

The state opening of parliament underscored the degree to which the prime minister herself is, to all intents and purposes, the political equivalent of a human shield. Her many opponents in the Tory party are keeping her in position only so long as it enables them to regroup and, especially, implement their demands for a hard Brexit.

In the period since May called the election, the UK has seen three terror attacks—in Manchester and London—and the terrible blaze at Grenfell Tower, in west London that killed at least 79 people.

Both have laid bare, in the most devastating way, the human cost of the foreign and domestic policy pursued by successive governments.

The war on terror has been used to dismantle democratic rights, while the security and intelligence agencies have cultivated a network of Islamic extremists that are allowed to operate without hindrance because of their use-value in British imperialism's regime-change operations in the Middle East.

Likewise, the Grenfell Tower inferno—in which the lives of working class people were knowingly jeopardised in the interests of cost cutting—stands as a grisly monument to the Thatcherite neo-liberal agenda enforced by the Tories, Labour and Liberal Democrats alike over the last four decades.

May had pledged to respond with humility and resolve to the message the electorate sent. She did nothing of the sort.

While the government has postponed its most contentious plans—such as junking free school lunches and forcing the elderly to agree to the sale of their homes in return for social care—there was no commitment to end austerity, or even to ease the freeze on public sector pay and welfare benefits.

The real attitude to working people was shown by the response to Grenfell Tower. While apologising for the failure of the state, local and national, to help people when they needed it most, May made no acknowledgement that it was the collusion between government policy and business interests that turned the high-rise into a death trap.

Nor was there any guarantee as regards future housing and compensation for all those affected, much less legal action against those responsible. All that was forthcoming was the pledge for a public inquiry that will produce yet another cover-up and the introduction of an independent public advocate, who will act for bereaved families after a public disaster—a sign that the ruling elite are fully reconciled to another such horror.

Most of the legislation outlined centred on the bourgeoisie's main preoccupation—Brexit. Negotiations on the terms of Britain's exit from the EU began on Monday. Having pledged to win a massive mandate that would force the EU powers to accept all of its demands, the government is now so weakened that Brexit Secretary David Davis had to carry out a u-turn and accept the EU timetable in which the terms of the divorce must be agreed before discussions on future trade terms commence.

A section of the Tory Party, represented by Chancellor Philip Hammond, want a softer Brexit, based around a comprehensive trade agreement, a transitional deal for when negotiations end in 2019, and an option to maintain open borders. Hammond had outlined this policy in his annual Mansion House speech Monday, which was backed by Bank of England chief Mark Carney and the Institute of Directors.

Their stance represents significant sections of the City of London and big business that fear being cut out of EU markets. Automakers have said the government must keep the UK in the EU single market and customs union for at least five years or risk permanent damage to the industry.

May's election debacle, however, has left her and the Tory Party even more beholden to its most extreme pro-Brexit wing, and right-wing billionaire media owners, such as Rupert Murdoch.

At the centre of the speech, and overshadowing everything, was the Great Repeal Bill. This is the largest legislative programme undertaken by a government and is intended to transfer existing EU laws and regulations—of which there are more than 19,000—into UK law when Brexit is finalised. Described as the largest power-grab by a government in history, it provides for the use of secondary legislation—so-called Henry VIII clauses—which will enable ministers and civil servants to decide which aspects of EU legislation to keep or discard without recourse to parliament.

In addition, separate customs and trade bills, and an immigration bill are to be brought forward. These indicate that May hopes to stick to her pledge to remove Britain from the single market and the customs union, and to overturn free movement.

To this end, it was announced that the Queen's Speech will not take place next year, as this parliamentary session will be extended for two years rather than one. This is because May does not expect to be able to get another legislative programme through.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats are to table amendments to the speech, which will be voted on next week. On Wednesday

morning, shadow chancellor John McDonnell said the Tories had no right to govern and that in the interest of the country, they should stand down.

Corbyn was more circumspect in parliament, presenting himself as a responsible Labour leader and prime minister-in-waiting. Claiming that austerity is a choice, he said a Labour government would ask big business and the rich to pay a little more. On anti-terror measures, he confined himself to criticisms of cuts in police numbers. No mention was made of the danger of war, while he insisted that immigration policy must be decided by what the economy needs.

In the 2016 Brexit referendum, Corbyn campaigned for a Remain vote. In the General Election, however, he said Labour accepted the Leave vote and would not seek to overturn it.

Asked in parliament to clarify the party's position, Corbyn said Labour would now fight for tariff-free access to the single market—an attempt to square the circle.

But a significant section of the Parliamentary Labour Party—led by many of the Blairites that have led the putsch attempts against Corbyn's leadership—are demanding he end such ambiguities and commit to remaining in the single market.

A letter in the *Guardian* Tuesday was signed by 51 Labour MPs, including Blairite coup plotters Chuka Umunna, Liz Kendall, Ben Bradshaw and Wes Streeting, under the heading, "As Labour politicians, we reject a hard-right Brexit, and defend the single market."

In a veiled threat, it set out the price of Corbyn's continued leadership. As an ambitious and confident alternative government—with Corbyn at the helm, it read, Labour should fight unambiguously for membership of the single market.



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