

Queen's Speech outlines offensive against workers' democratic and social rights

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Boris Johnson's Conservative government set out its authoritarian agenda in yesterday's Queen's Speech, including attacks on the rights to protest and vote, to free speech and asylum and on judicial scrutiny of the government and the armed forces.

The speech also announced plans to streamline the privatisation of the National Health Service and reduce the taxes paid by employers operating in newly created freeports.

Of the 30 proposed laws, the most significant is the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which has passed its second reading and is due to become law later this year. The Police Bill places draconian restrictions on protests and threatens protestors with large fines and long prison sentences.

Legislation continues the assault on the right to protest on university campuses, aiding right-wing forces to strengthen their position. A Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill will place requirements on English universities and students' unions to guarantee "freedom of speech" of staff and visiting speakers. Individuals who claim their freedoms have been infringed will be able to seek recompense through the courts. A "director for freedom of speech and academic freedom" will be given the power to carry out investigations and impose sanction through the Office for Students regulator.

These measures are intended to crack down on criticism and popular protest against reactionary ideologues and provocateurs—such as representatives of the Zionist lobby and far right figures.

Voting rights in the UK will be severely curtailed by plans to pass an Electoral Integrity Bill making photo ID mandatory for voting in elections. The move will disenfranchise swathes of working-class communities, especially ethnic minorities. Roughly 11 million voters, or 24 percent of the electorate, do not own the passport or photographic drivers' license that will be required to cast

a vote. More than 20 charities and civil society groups have opposed the plans, which they explain will "disproportionately impact the most marginalised groups in society".

It is likely that this shift will later be used to argue for the introduction of a state identity card, which has always met with staunch opposition.

A draft Online Safety Bill, announced last December, will empower Ofcom to level fines of up to £18 million or 10 percent of global turnover against social media companies that fail to regulate online "harms" according to government guidelines. This includes "disinformation and misinformation", handing the state the power to decide what is legitimate speech and what is "harmful" disinformation.

Fundamental changes to the UK's asylum laws are aimed at trashing democratic rights established in response to the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Under the New Plan for Immigration legislation, those who do not enter the country via a "legitimate route", i.e., through extremely restricted government schemes, will not be automatically entered into the asylum system. The government will seek to deport them if they are deemed to have travelled through a "safe country". Even those granted asylum after entering "illegally" will only be entitled to "temporary protection status", meaning they will be repeatedly targeted for removal from the UK, have their rights to family reunion limited and no access to benefits unless destitute.

The legislation redefines the criteria for asylum to require a "well-founded fear of persecution" to block "unsubstantiated" claims. Asylum seekers will have only one opportunity to present their case before appeal and lawyers will be issued with fines for pursuing "meritless" claims.

Prison sentences will be increased for migrants deemed

“illegal” and for deportees who return to the UK—in the latter case from six months to five years. The maximum sentence for people smuggling will be increased from 14 years to life. The government already brands any migrant—and jails them on this basis—who so much as places their hand on a boat tiller while making the perilous journey across the Channel as a “people smuggler”.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees expressed “serious concern” over these proposals, which it warns will “damage lives” with “real and harmful” consequences.

The Queen’s Speech introduced plans for a Judicial Review Bill limiting legal scrutiny of government actions. The Law Society has previously commented: “the most controversial proposals would allow unlawful acts by government or public bodies to be untouched or untouchable... The effect of the proposals would be a fundamental distortion of the protection judicial review is supposed to provide against state action, undermining the rule of law and restricting access to justice.”

In a future Northern Ireland Bill, the government intends to restrict or halt prosecutions of British soldiers for crimes committed during three decades of “The Troubles,” effectively extending the protections granted by the Overseas Operations Bill to UK soldiers who have served in other global military operations.

The government announced plans to enact its February White Paper giving ministers more direct control of the National Health Service to speed-up privatisation.

Amid worthless pledges to “level up” the country with a “skills revolution”, the Queen’s Speech indicated that employers operating in eight newly established freeports—established by the Tories as part of their plan for a globally competitive post-Brexit economy—will pay less national insurance tax for new workers.

The raft of anti-democratic legislation planned by the Tory government points to the savage class war agenda it intends to wage. Johnson is preparing to suppress growing resistance in the working class, in the face of the lifting of protections during the pandemic and under conditions of immense social crisis and an escalating assault on jobs, wages and conditions. The speech pledged that “public finances are returned to a sustainable path once the economic recovery is secure.”

Once again no opposition was offered by the Labour Party. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer opened the debate on the Queen’s Speech by accusing the Tories of “squander[ing]” a chance to “solve the social care crisis,

clean up our politics, clean up the mess of the past decade.” He almost entirely avoided comment on the government’s authoritarian agenda, offering only the mildest criticism of the Judicial Review Bill and Electoral Integrity Bill, as it would “suppress turnout in elections and weaken democracy”.

Earlier, Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy coupled token criticisms of the voter ID plans with an endorsement of the warmongering campaign alleging “Russian interference” in elections: “It has been 18 months since the prime minister was handed a report that said that Russia in particular was interfering in our democracy...”

“So in today’s Queen’s Speech what I will be looking for is not more action to make it more difficult for people in Britain to vote, but more action to make sure we don’t allow other countries to interfere in our democracy.”

Starmer promised to “work constructively” with the government, this time on a Counter-State Threats Bill, saying “action on Russian and hostile state interference is long overdue”.

Labour’s only criticism of the freeport plan is that employers may not be able to take full advantage of the tax breaks freeport zones offer thanks to the terms of some post-Brexit trade deals signed by the Tory government. Agreements signed by Britain with 23 countries prohibit UK manufacturers operating in freeports from benefiting from the favourable terms agreed in the trade deal. Labour’s shadow trade secretary, Emily Thornberry, told parliament Sunday she had urged her Tory counterpart Liz Truss ‘to go back to the negotiating table immediately with these 23 countries and get these clauses removed before Britain’s freeports come into operation later this year.”



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