

UK Labour's King's Speech promises nothing for workers

Thomas Scripps
17 July 2024

The trick attempted by the new Labour government in Wednesday's King's Speech was to give some impression of attending to Britain's deepening social crisis while reassuring big business that almost no government money will be spent.

This left Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer with the task of promoting Labour's grandiose claims of "national renewal" while insisting in the same breath that there would be "no quick fix" on offer for any of the problems confronting the working class.

Austerity and cuts were hardwired into the new Labour government's legislative programme. The first bill announced by King Charles III—the monarch reads the speech, written by the government—was the Budget Responsibility Bill. This would ensure "all significant tax and spending changes are subject to an independent assessment by the Office for Budget Responsibility".

Given that the UK's creditors will allow no increase in government debt, as was made clear by the markets torpedoing former Conservative prime minister Liz Truss's short-lived premiership for her unfunded tax cuts, and Labour's promise of no additional taxes on the rich and the corporations, every other spending pledge was rendered moot.

Most high-profile has been the promise to build 1.5 million new homes this Parliament, or 300,000 a year—versus the roughly 235,000 a year built by the Conservative government in the last five. But there is no money whatsoever allocated to fund even this modest increase. It relies entirely upon a directive issued to local authorities to drum up private development, with a minor increase in the number of planning staff and a loosening of restrictions on planning law.

The homes built by the private sector are overwhelmingly at market rates, well beyond the means of most. Social housing providers like local councils and housing associations have had their budgets eviscerated.

A letter sent by the National Housing Federation (NHF), representing 600 housing associations, and the Local

Government Association during the election campaign warned of a £2.2 billion black hole in housing budgets and pleaded for additional funding, warning, "New-build projects are already being delayed and cancelled across the country due to significant financial pressures and uncertainty."

Much of Labour's agenda has been taken over lock-stock-and-barrel from its Tory predecessors. The 300,000 homes a year target was announced in Boris Johnson's 2019 manifesto, though never achieved and dropped at the end of 2022 under pressure from Tory backbenchers.

Plans to grant renters more rights against their landlords—notably ending no-fault evictions—were being slowly marched through parliament by Michael Gove but were ground to a halt by the landlord interest among MPs. Rishi Sunak's government was also in the process of enacting the rolling age ban on smoking, now put forward by Labour, when he announced the snap election.

Labour's plan for a state-managed Great British Railways organisation overseeing train services is near identical to the scheme established by then Tory transport secretary Grant Shapps—working with prominent businessman Keith Williams, who has endorsed the new government's strategy.

The additional step planned by Labour of allowing the various regional franchises run by private operators to return to public ownership at the end of their contracts has been accepted as inevitable by all but the most frothing free market Tory MPs. Private franchises have been a disaster, with four networks already abandoned by their owners and now run by the government.

Starmer's plan, in other words, is for a more smooth-running capitalism, shorn of some of the most egregious abuses and parasitic excesses developed under 14 years of Tory rule, the better to maintain the brutal exploitation of workers, underfunding of public services and a punitive welfare regime.

Nothing was said in the King's Speech, for example, about the crippling crisis in the National Health

Service—only anodyne promises to “reduce the waiting times, focus on prevention and improve mental health provision”. Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting has made clear this reduction in waiting times is based on stepped-up privatisation and enforcing longer hours of work for NHS staff.

Nor was there even a passing reference to the looming bankruptcies facing councils, schools and universities across the country—a signal that Labour will allow this to proceed.

One of the few mentions of education was a reference to how removing the VAT sales tax exemption from private schools would fund 6,500 new teachers—in a sector suffering the worst staff burnout and retention crisis in its history, in buildings falling apart for lack of maintenance. The new staff promised by Labour will not be enough to replace the numbers expected to be leaving the profession every single year after just 12 months in the job by the middle of this parliament.

Similarly hollow is the pledge to found Great British Energy, “a publicly owned clean power company headquartered in Scotland, which will help accelerate investment in renewable energy such as offshore wind.” It will supposedly achieve these ends, in alliance with the private sector of course, with just £8.3 billion over five years.

There was no serious reference at all to poverty—affecting roughly one in five people in the UK—or Britain’s welfare system. Despite noises from some Labour backbenchers, no reference was made to ending the two-child benefit cap, preventing households from claiming universal credit or child tax credit for a third or any subsequent child.

Dozens more cruel restrictions and caps could be listed for scrapping, but the brutal architecture of welfare payments established by the Tories will be in safe hands under Work and Pensions Secretary Liz Kendall, a Blairite who used the election campaign to challenge “Tory claims about being tough on benefits” and rail against “life on benefits”.

Labour’s preferred method for dealing with the consequences of poverty and inequality is police repression, with the government promising to “make streets safer” and “give the police greater powers to deal with anti-social behaviour.” It intends to hire an additional 3,000 police officers and 4,000 police community support officers.

The most vicious law-and-order rhetoric was directed against asylum seekers. The King’s Speech reiterated Labour’s commitment to “strengthen” the border by “establishing a new Border Security Command and delivering enhanced counter terror powers.”

Measures meant to provide a progressive window dressing to Labour’s new government were a transparent fraud.

The pledge “to introduce a new deal for working people to

ban exploitative practices and enhance employment rights” referred to an Employment Rights Bill promised in the party’s manifesto rammed full of loopholes and pruned by the day. Among them is the rewritten promise to end only “exploitative” zero hours contracts, rather than the practice altogether.

Plans to scrap the Minimum Service Level (Strikes) Bill—but not any of the older anti-strike laws—are bound up with Labour’s strategy for closer corporatist collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy to suppress strikes, as has already begun with the British Medical Association over the junior doctors’ action and with Unite calling off strike action over the closure of Tata Steel at Port Talbot, Wales.

There is no reason to believe that even the paltry agenda set out by Starmer’s Labour Party will be met, given the crisis-ridden world situation and the government’s total commitment to British imperialism and its escalating, ever more expensive, wars.

Starmer has, for example, pledged his support for a refitting of Britain’s nuclear weapons and to lift military spending to 2.5 percent of GDP when possible. The King’s Speech announced the establishment of a new statutory position of “Armed Forces Commissioner to act as a strong independent champion for our gallant Armed Forces and their families,” to keep these commitments on track.

Labour conclude the speech with the pledge that “Its commitment to NATO will remain unshakeable. It will maintain a strong Armed Forces, including the nuclear deterrent” to match “global strategic threats”. This included continuing “to give its full support to Ukraine” and playing “a leading role in providing Ukraine with a clear path to NATO membership,” as well as committing to a “secure Israel”.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact