

Starmer makes right-wing nationalist pitch for austerity

Thomas Scripps
24 September 2024

Keir Starmer used his party conference speech—the first by a Labour Prime Minister in Britain for 15 years—to make an appeal to big business, Conservative and Reform voters and the most backward and nationalist sentiments.

With Labour in government on a historically low share of the vote, it is seeking to gain ground to its right and to disenfranchise, to the point of denying the existence of, any trace of left-wing opinion, written off as the “politics of protest”. The one protester interrupting the speech, over Gaza, was violently bundled out of the hall.

Amid the usual promises to “work hand-in-hand with business... unashamed to partner with private sector”, and of “steadfast support for Ukraine”, the Labour leader delivered a one-hour address filled with anti-migrant rhetoric, promises of “stronger borders” and pledges to be “tough on crime”.

The only bad word Starmer had to say about the capitalist market was that it might aid the free movement of people. The value of the state was its ability to stop them.

Voters, he said, had demanded control of immigration “time and again... They weren’t just ignored after Brexit; the Tories gave them the exact opposite. An immigration system deliberately reformed to reduce control. Because, in the end, they are the party of the uncontrolled market.”

Action on “migration” or “law and order” required instead “decisive government, and that is a Labour government. ‘Taking back control’ [the slogan of the right-wing Vote Leave group in the Brexit referendum] is a Labour argument.” That was why Labour had achieved, Starmer crowed, “a 23 percent increase in returns of people who have no right to be here, compared with last summer.”

Having made clear the type of “concern” he was invoking, and in the context of a reference to the UK’s recent far-right riots, the Labour leader explained that he had “always accepted concerns about immigration are legitimate.”

He urged his intended right-wing audience to be reasonable and accept that the price of deporting thousands of vulnerable people was accepting a handful: “If we want to tackle illegal migration seriously, we can’t pretend there’s a magical process that allows you to return people here unlawfully without accepting that process will also grant some people asylum.”

This was one of the “challenges the Tories ignored” and “the trade-offs this country faces”, about which it was is “long overdue for politicians to level with you”. Others included: “If we want to maintain support for the welfare state, then we will legislate to stop benefit fraud”; “if we want justice to be served, some communities must live close to new prisons.”

The reference to stopping benefit fraud was spelled out to *The Times* ahead of the speech. Labour will give the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) the power to take control of fraud investigations, allow benefits inspectors to compel banks to hand over financial information and empower them to carry out searches and seizures at people’s property.

The DWP has been implicated in the suicides of people wrongly sanctioned. It was recently exposed for hounding carers for thousands, even tens of thousands of pounds in overpayments produced by its own error.

Starmer’s law-and-order, anti-migrant, anti-welfare screed was the core of a right-wing appeal designed to substitute nationality for class and package Labour’s austerity agenda in the language of “national renewal”. There were 49 references to “country” in the speech,

and 29 to “service”.

The “politics of national renewal,” said Starmer, “involve a shared struggle, a project that says to everyone, ‘This will be tough in the short-term, but in the long-term it’s the right thing to do for our country.’ And we all benefit from that.”

In an almost absurdist section of his speech, Starmer made a half-joke of the fact that he was repeating the same lying argument the Tories made coming to power in 2010, saying, “To coin a phrase: ‘We’re all in it together’. But that’s just it, isn’t it? People have heard it all before.”

The difference this time would be that “many of the decisions we must take will be unpopular... But the cost of filling that black hole in our public finances, that will be shared fairly.” To coin another phrase: “It’s déjà vu all over again.”

Just how “tough” and “hard” the Labour Party intends to make it for the working class was highlighted by how Starmer attacked the Tories: above all for “the politics of easy answers,” for not taking “tough decisions because the political pain is just too much to bear”. They were, in other words, too soft.

Labour, on the other hand, would not “duck the challenge of change.” Because “the risk of showing the world—as the Tories did—that this country does not fund its policies properly, that is a risk we can never take again.” For “world”, read “international finance”.

Around the globe in recent years, bourgeois governments historically labelled “centre left” have contributed to the growth of the far-right with their free-market destruction of working-class jobs, living standards and communities. Starmer is shortcutting the same process, meeting with Europe’s border-guard-in-chief Giorgia Meloni of the Brothers of Italy, spouting right-wing talking points and cracking down on migration while in office, and sowing the seeds for a stronger far-right.

Perhaps the clearest verdict was given by Patrick O’Flynn, a four-year Member of the European Parliament for the anti-migrant, pro-Brexit UK Independence Party and now columnist for the *Spectator*, who enthused that Starmer had delivered “a formidable speech”. On immigration, he “is in a far more comfortable place than are the Tories” and “has in his possession a cosh for beating the official opposition over the head with for some time to come.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact