

Starmer pledges UK Labour government to “drain the swamp”

Robert Stevens
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UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer used a speech Thursday setting out new “milestone” policies, on the National Health Service, housing, education, etc., to shift the government sharply to the right.

The “Plan for Change” speech at Pinewood Studios, near London, was billed as a relaunch of his government amid polls showing plunging popularity among workers and discontent expressed by Labour’s big business backers. Starmer made clear again that he only has ears for the City of London and Britain’s boardrooms.

Starmer’s leadership was proof that the Blairite right was firmly back in the saddle, having decisively reversed the brief interlude of nominally “left” rule under Jeremy Corbyn. But his speech did more than regurgitate the Thatcherite nostrums of Tony Blair’s New Labour. It confirmed that there is no limit to the lurch rightwards of Starmer’s declared “party of NATO”, of Zionism and the most “business friendly government” in British history.

Starmer went as far as parroting the oft-repeated threat of fascist US President-elect Donald Trump to “drain the swamp” in attacking the 500,000 strong civil service workforce and demanding of public sector workers that productivity be ramped up. He warned, “Make no mistake, this plan will land on desks across Whitehall with the heavy thud of a gauntlet being thrown down.”

Starmer’s “gauntlet” is already a metaphor for his savage imposition of austerity in Labour’s first budget in October, Health Secretary Wes Streeting’s identical threats to National Health Service workers that the “begging bowl culture” is at an end and privatisation the order of the day; and, above all, Starmer’s decision to allow Ukraine to fire UK Storm Shadow missiles into Russia that risks all-out war between nuclear-armed powers.

Starmer’s fawning before Trump was preceded by his speech at the Lord Mayor’s Banquet in London Monday, where he rejected calls to prioritise relations with the

European Union—Britain’s largest trading partner (£318 billion in imports, £186 billion in exports) at the expense of the United States under Trump. Britain’s “national interest demands that we work with both”, he said, and “Against the backdrop of these dangerous times, the idea that we must choose between our allies, that somehow we’re with either America or Europe, is plain wrong.”

In an attempt to appease Trump, who has described the EU as a “cartel” and a “mini-China” and is threatening trade war against the bloc, Starmer declared, “There will be no return to the [EU’s] freedom of movement, no return to the customs union and no return to the single market. Instead, we will find practical, agile ways to cooperate which serve the national interest.”

In his Thursday speech, Starmer declared again that he stood for “country first, party second. Because this is something we’ve totally lost sight of in British politics, and, to be honest, across Whitehall [the seat of government departments] as well.”

Previously such language was the preserve of the most avowed Thatcherite sections of the Tory party in their demands to slash costs and cull the civil service workforce. Starmer’s predecessor Rishi Sunak left office with a pledge to cut 66,000 jobs in the civil service.

Starmer declared, “Change and reform are coming,” as he complained that “Productivity in the public sector is 2.6 percent lower than this time last year... 8.5 percent down compared with just before the pandemic. That wouldn’t be accepted in any other sector or walk of life”.

Turning to his law-and-order pledge of “13,000 extra neighbourhood police ... visible on the beat”, he stated, “That pledge is only made possible because we are matching investment with reform.”

Starmer boasted of “£25 billion invested in the NHS”, while warning, “There’s no investment in our public services, without difficult decisions.”

He presented the civil service as embodying a broader

opposition to his “reforms” (read, privatisations and partnership with big business). Therefore, he was sending “a very clear message... to the nimby [not in my back yard], the regulators, the blockers and bureaucrats, the alliance of naysayers, the people who say no ‘Britain can’t do this’; we can’t get things done in our country. We say to them—you no longer have the upper hand”.

Starmer was on message that the funding of the vast rearmament required by British imperialism must come from the backs of the working class in an austerity offensive that will dwarf that imposed over 14 years of Tory rule.

The relentless austerity imposed by the Tories was accepted by the “British people”, he said, because they understood the need for national sacrifice. They “know in their bones ... that this is a great nation. No matter how tough things are for their family and their community”.

Presenting austerity as the tough medicine required to fund war, he declared, “After all, even in the last fourteen years... they tightened their belts when they were told ‘we’re all in it together’, they closed ranks to defeat a deadly virus, never once wavered in their commitment to stand with Ukraine.”

Starmer gave a stark preview of what this means when he linked the need to slash spending on vitally needed public services to funding the military. Coming to power Labour had found “a £22 billion black hole in our public finances, which, just to put it into context is nearly half what we spend on the defence of our country.”

A Downing Street document accompanying Starmer’s speech noted that “national security underpins all our missions. The threat to the UK is growing, driven by global instability, conflict, Russian aggression, the systemic challenge posed by China...”

His government “will work tirelessly to enhance the UK’s security, maintaining the transatlantic alliance and our unshakeable commitment to NATO, deepening co-operation with the EU, continuing our steadfast support to Ukraine for as long as is needed, and maintaining our commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

Labour has been subjected to sustained criticism for not committing his government to a timetable for increasing military spending to 2.5 percent of GDP and beyond. It will almost certainly announce a timetable next spring, with a move to 3 percent estimated to cost a further £157 billion. This means a war at home against the working class.

Turning to Labour’s ruthless assault on migrants, Starmer boasted, “We’re not hanging around. We’re

clearing the asylum backlog” and “Processing thousands more claims than when we came to office.” Asylum seeker returns were up 53 percent and “This government will reduce immigration—legal and illegal.”

Starmer has developed close relations with Italy’s fascist leader Giorgia Meloni and spoken in favour of her anti-immigration policies. A week prior to Thursday’s speech, he denounced previous Tory governments for a supposed “open borders experiment”.

Two days later, following a debate on assisted dying in parliament, he made a point of crossing the floor from the front bench to the opposition benches to greet Nigel Farage, leader of the anti-migrant Reform UK. After a brief conversation Starmer walked away giving Farage a thumbs up.

Starmer’s right-wing programme never commanded any widespread support in the working class. He came to office because the ruling class wanted him in place, relying on widespread hatred of the Tories among millions and the backing of the trade union bureaucracy and Britain’s pseudo-left organisations who insisted that Labour was the lesser of two evils.

The Socialist Workers Party, who backed Labour except in a few constituencies where anti-Gaza genocide protesters were standing, responded to Starmer’s speech by claiming, “Labour’s ‘plan for change’ offers more of the same.” Labour was trying to “water down it’s mild election promises,” the SWP continued.

The Socialist Equality Party refused to back a vote for Labour and warned the working class that what was to come under Starmer was continuing austerity and war. We stood candidates against Labour in the general election, with SEP Assistant National Secretary Tom Scripps standing against Starmer in his London constituency. Workers must act with urgency and join the party that told them the truth.



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