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The Labour programme in the king's speech: what next for the left?

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Dave Kellaway examines the Labour programme in the King's speech and how the left should respond

The State Opening of Parliament

The royal pomp and ceremony at the State Opening of Parliament and the delivery of the King's Speech express a very real political truth. Capitalist management and the British state's stability are ensured even with a change of government in a Labour landslide. Whichever party gets in, the King delivers the Labour programme as his speech, his laws. The archaic language reflects that too.

Starmer's team has been acting like a government in waiting for some time now. Any risks of a moderate challenge to the rule of capital have been ruthlessly eliminated from his party's ranks. A complete bipartisan foreign and defence policy has been established. Willingness to press the nuclear button, renew Trident, and align totally with US policy on Gaza has been enthusiastically taken up by Starmer. Strict adherence to the fiscal rules policed by the Bank of England and the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) has been trumpeted loudly for more than two years. Indeed, the OBR will be genuflected to even more piously as Labour proposes even greater reach for its powers. A new bill will enshrine its role in checking every bit of spending meets the fiscal rules. Labour blindly accepts that the OBR is 'independent,' whereas it reflects an acceptance of the rigid limits set by the way capital runs our economy.

Labour's Conservative Game Plan

Team B has come running off the sub's bench with the same game plan in their boots. All the key sectors of British capital have switched their financial support and coaching staff to the new team. Once they understood that the Tory team was going to be relegated, they started negotiating with the new manager and sent in their top staff pro bono to all the shadow cabinet areas.

The new management team, in fact, wants to keep the same playbook but without the turnover of players, their failure to perform, and their willingness to look for side bets and backhanders. Starmer, in his first week or so, wants to present the government as a competent, more honest, and coherent team. After five Tory prime ministers, countless ministerial changes, the COVID disaster, the cost of living crisis, and the Truss chaos, you can see why this was an obvious and relatively easy turn to carry out. The initial honeymoon for the government is all about public relief from all that.

Starmer has stated he wants politics to sit more lightly on the people's shoulders. He is happy for people to leave politics to clever lawyers and managers like him. Inside Labour, he is quite content to see over 200,000 members leave and for internal democracy to be reduced to less than the bare minimum. Most of the new MPs who were installed by his apparatus are in that technocratic, managerial image. A few troublemakers like Diane Abbott managed to hang on despite his best efforts, but with a whopping 174 majority, their voices will be drowned out.

Some Policies We Support – As a Start

Of course, a Labour government is never exactly the same as a Tory government. If it were, then the two-party system would work much less effectively in convincing enough people to think it is worthwhile voting for an alternative to the incumbent government. Socialists welcome:

- The end of the Rwanda racist project
- New labour laws that will help unions organise more easily
- The gradual renationalisation of rail and allowing local authorities to manage buses
- Lifting of the ban on onshore wind and the idea of a publicly managed British energy company
- The ban on no-fault evictions
- The tobacco bill
- Imposing VAT on private school fees and the extra teachers/breakfast clubs/nursery provision

We welcome all these measures but point out they only scratch the surface of the deep crisis facing most people. For example, education needs huge new money to pay teachers and other staff properly, to renovate buildings, and to reduce class sizes. The green energy project was formerly worth £28 billion, but it has been so scaled down that it will not help hit net-zero targets. Nowhere does Labour propose developing safe and secure routes for asylum seekers, which would stop people dying in boats; instead, it is spending huge sums on security forces. As *We Own It* has pointed out, while taking back the rail operators is a good first step, you also need to take the rolling stock back into common ownership. These companies make good profits for private shareholders which could instead be reinvested in public transport.

The Ideology of 'Grow Our Economy'

A lot of the other measures are aspirations based on supply-side reforms and public incentives to encourage private investment to 'grow our economy'. Every word of that refrain is quite ideological and misleading. Grow for what and in whose interest? We need to evaluate any growth in terms of the ecological impact. The growth of the Blair years actually increased inequality while very slightly reducing some absolute poverty. Then the economy is not 'ours' but is in the hands of the one percent. We have nil control over the economy; decisions are made in boardrooms – occasionally in liaison with government 'partners'. Finally, the economy appears as an ahistorical, fixed entity, almost part of the natural world that we cannot change. The law of value and the markets are seen as almost physical, natural laws. No, this is not some neutral economy but a capitalist system based on the exploitation of labour and the allocation of resources through profitability.

The proposals on housing seem to be all about changing the planning laws – and some of that may be necessary. However, very little public money is going into this; planning changes are seen as key because they do not involve tax and spend. Unlike the post-war New Towns programme, the government is not setting up Public Development Corporations that were able to buy up and manage land without giving owners and developers unwarranted windfall profits. Today, the whole operation is based on partnerships with property developers and building companies. Listening to the business news on Radio 4 one morning recently, you could literally hear the developers' representatives rubbing their hands at all the money coming their way. Their shares have been going up. Very little social housing is included in the plans – like much else, the figures are not there; it is all about vague aspirations. Local councils will still have to sell off social housing and will not be given money to build new ones. How will the homeless and the average worker be able to buy these so-called affordable homes?

The new Public Wealth Fund is not like the Norway one, where the oil/gas tax revenues were accumulated to be used for investment by the government. Labour will be pump-priming everything in partnership with business – a sort of massive match-funding operation. Despite many economic commentators predicting that it will be very difficult to break through the 1.5% growth barrier, Labour insists that only growth will allow them to release extra spending for

social programmes.

A massive hole in the legislative programme is social care. This affects nearly everybody – including relatively well-off people. If it is not sorted, you will not really be able to solve the crisis in the NHS because many old people who are not able to find social care provision are blocking hospital beds. Private companies are making massive profits in all areas of the social care system since local authorities were forced to outsource it. Social care is not in the programme because it needs massive social investment. In fact, one piece of reasonable Labour policy – facilitating sector pay agreements in social care – may well correctly increase the labour costs but would require more government spending. Even the Liberal Democrats were clearer on this issue and recognised during the election campaign that it needed increased taxes to pay for any reform.

Generally, the media have been supportive of the new Labour programme. It does not really affect the wealth and profits of the newspaper moguls who set the news agenda on the TV. Everything looks a lot more competent and more expressive of public service than the depths sunk to by the Tories. The ideological soundtrack to the measures pushed by Labour has been all about restoring trust and competency. It is hard to deny that reality – for the moment in any case. In fact, the idea that politics should be less loud and intrusive in people's lives was the way in which the whole speech was rather de-dramatised. Partly because there were no surprises at all and also the resignation of Gareth Southgate has been dominating the airwaves. Some coverage has also featured the presence of more ministers who are state-educated and of working-class origin in the cabinet. Even the media is temporarily relishing the changing of the guard.

Challenging the Labour Government from the Left

The one big controversy that has flared up has been the continued refusal of Starmer to end the two-child benefit cap. Kim Johnson, the Liverpool Labour MP, has been leading the fight over this in the media over recent weeks. Her community in Liverpool is badly affected by this callous rule. The Child Poverty Action Group says that ending the cap would be the quickest way of taking 300,000 children out of the worst poverty. It would directly benefit 1.6 million children. The actual cost of £1.7 billion, or 0.14% of government spending, is peanuts compared to the money the government will be handing out to private companies 'in partnership' through tax breaks or grants. When Labour talks about wealth creation, they do not mean creating more wealth for the poorest but rather lots of privately built houses or new factories for car batteries that boost profits for the few. The best working people can hope for is the crumbs of 'trickle down' benefits if growth is achieved.

The SNP has tabled an amendment to the King's Speech to scrap the two-child benefit cap, which has received cross-party support from the Green Party, the SDLP, Plaid Cymru, the Alliance Party, and independent MPs, including Jeremy Corbyn. Some Labour MPs have said they will support it or table their own amendment. In an effort to head off the revolt, Labour speedily proposed the setting up of a task force to review child poverty. So all you kids can wait months or years longer for the great and good to work out whether giving back £3455 a year will help families ease their poverty. Really, you need a commission of specialists and MPs to work that one out.

Socialists should welcome this challenge to Labour's new austerity and support any MPs or local campaigns working around it. It shows that despite a big landslide, there are voices to the left of Labour, either still in the party or outside it, who will not give this government a free pass. Piling in on this issue that can draw in a wide coalition is a good tactic. A victory on this would help build further battles. Paying a decent wage to public sector workers, funding, and defending our NHS from private profit are upcoming campaigns.

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The election results showed there is a broad constituency of activists who supported independent left or pro-Gaza candidates as well as those working with the remaining slim band of left Labour MPs inside Labour, like Momentum. Some of the Greens' activists and voters can also be drawn into such campaigns for more radical measures. We can be more hopeful that Starmer will not have it all their own way.

We should not limit ourselves to pressurising Labour. It is insufficient just calling for some of the first steps to be quickly implemented and then plaintively imploring Labour to go further; otherwise, Reform and the hard right will take advantage. Working alongside people like John McDonnell, who advocates such an approach, is useful but not enough. A more coherent left political alternative needs building nationally.

Jeremy Corbyn, in his post-electoral Guardian article, does not go so far as to call for establishing such a movement as clearly as he might. However, he does seem to finally accept that the doors of Labour are now forever shut to him. He recognises that alternative organisation outside the party is necessary, including through electoral challenges. Jeremy has called for monthly meetings of all progressive forces in his constituency to help organise campaigns and discuss politics. Also, he implicitly criticises operators like George Galloway who build undemocratic vehicles around their own personalities. All this is positive and we should welcome it.

We need to continue the debate about how Jeremy and other current initiatives (Organise, Many not Few, Transform, Collective, Owen Jones, just to mention a few) can take forward the project of a national left alternative. There is no reason why progress cannot be made on this while keeping a healthy non-sectarian approach to unity in action with Labour left MPs and Labour members.

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