

Queen's Speech: UK government programme and Scotland



Introduction

The Queen's Speech outlines the UK government's legislative plans for the coming session. As usual many of the Bills have limited relevance to Scotland because of devolution. In this briefing we highlight those that do apply to Scotland and have the greatest impact on UNISON members.

Bills that are relevant to Scotland

European Union Referendum Bill. This will pave the way for an in/out referendum on Britain's EU membership that will have to be held by the end of 2017. The franchise will broadly be the same as for the general election.

Investigatory Powers Bill. This brings back the 'snooper's charter' legislation on tracking individual web and social media use, plus the security services' powers of bulk interception of the content of communications.

Extremism Bill. Designed to "stop extremists promoting views and behaviour that undermine British values". It will cover communications, bans on extremist speakers on university campuses and employment checks. There are some devolved issues here that will require the support of the Scottish Parliament.

Immigration Bill. Creates a new enforcement agency to tackle the worst cases of exploitation as well as creating an offence of illegal working and enabling wages to be seized as the proceeds of crime.

Proposal for a bill of rights. This highly controversial manifesto pledge is kicked into longer grass with a consultation promised. A complex interaction with the Scotland Act is just one of many hurdles.

Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill. Despite the title this is mainly aimed at cutting the value of benefits including reducing the household benefit cap from £26,000 to £23,000 and a two-year freeze on the majority of working age benefits. This won't deliver the promised £12bn welfare cuts that are likely to fall on benefits for those in work, including many low paid UNISON members.

Trade Unions Bill. Aims to make strikes, particularly the public sector, difficult to call. First, more than 50% of a union's members must vote in order for the ballot to be valid, and second, at least 40% of those entitled to vote must be in favour of the strike. There is also to be a new time limit on the ballot for industrial action. The bill would also force trade union members to opt in if they want to pay a political levy.

KEY POINTS:

- The Queen's Speech outlines the UK government programme.
- Not all the plans apply to Scotland.
- The EU referendum will happen by end of 2017
- Trade Union Bill will curtail the right to strike
- A Scotland Bill will implement the Smith Commission agreement
- The planned attack on human rights has been reduced to a consultation.



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Scotland Bill. Implements the Smith Commission agreement, or arguably somewhat short of that. There will be attempts to extend these provisions, some of which UNISON will support in line with our submission to the Smith Commission. The promise of English votes for English laws (known as EVEL) will be implemented through changes to the standing orders of the House of Commons rather than a new bill. There will also be a revised Memorandum of Understanding between the UK and devolved governments.

Enterprise Bill. Reducing regulation on small businesses although could be used to damage employment rights even further. This bill will also cap redundancy pay to higher paid public sector workers. Some of the provisions are devolved so wont apply to Scotland.

National insurance contributions bill/finance Bill. Prevents the UK government increasing income tax rates, VAT or national insurance for five years. This limits the scope to address the deficit and is likely to mean even greater spending cuts in the planned summer budget.

Personal tax allowance. Designed to “ensure that future increases to the income tax personal allowance reflect changes to the national minimum wage”.

Energy Bill. The veto on new onshore windfarms won't apply to Scotland, but changing the way the North Sea is regulated will.

Commentary

UK media commentary on the speech will refer to plans for a 'right to buy' housing association properties, seven day NHS, childcare, city devolution, charities and schools. These are devolved matters that don't apply in Scotland.

Commenting on the Queen's Speech, UNISON General Secretary Dave Prentis said:

"The UK already has tough laws on strikes – there is no need to make them stricter still. Democracy won't be enhanced by raising thresholds but by bringing balloting into the 21st century."

STUC General Secretary Grahame Smith said:

"Despite the 'one nation' rhetoric, this is clearly a programme for government which would further divide the UK on the basis of class and nation. This is anything but a 'Queen's Speech for working people', it fails to offer real protection from zero-hours and low pay whilst attacking their democratic rights."

Further info

UK government briefings on each bill.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/430149/QS_lo_bby_pack_FINAL_NEW_2.pdf

STUC comment

<http://www.stuc.org.uk/news/1165/stuc-on-queen-s-speech>

Queen's Speech and Guardian analysis

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2015/may/27/queens-speech-what-it-means-analysis>



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