

May government's legislative agenda scrapes through UK parliament

By Julie Hyland
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The Conservative government's legislative agenda, outlined in last week's Queen's Speech, made it through parliament Thursday night by 323 votes to 309—a majority of 14. This was primarily due to the support of the 10 MPs from the right-wing, sectarian Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland.

Prime Minister Theresa May had struck a “confidence and supply” deal with the DUP after June's snap election slashed the government's number of seats to 318. The agreement gives May a working majority of 13. In return for keeping her in power, the DUP will receive £1.5 billion in additional “public expenditure” for Northern Ireland.

This is despite the deal jeopardising the British government's supposed “impartiality” as regards the power-sharing arrangements established in Northern Ireland under the Good Friday Agreement.

Northern Ireland's Stormont Assembly collapsed in January over a scandal involving the DUP. Talks Thursday between Sinn Fein and the DUP failed to find a resolution. If no agreement is reached on Monday, Westminster could impose direct rule.

So desperate is May that the government was forced to make a last minute agreement to help Northern Irish women forced to pay privately in England for abortions. This was in order to stymie a proposed Labour amendment aimed at challenging Northern Ireland's extremely restrictive abortion laws. If passed, it would have thrown the Tory agreement into danger as the DUP is anti-abortion.

May's tawdry, anti-democratic arrangements with ultra-right loyalists enabled her government to press ahead with its attacks on the working class.

Two weeks after the Grenfell Tower inferno in West London, the authorities have still not bothered to try to establish the final death toll. Officially, the number of fatalities choked and/or burned to death in the fire stands

at 80, but the Metropolitan Police said the true number will not be known until next year.

Every day brings further confirmation that the fire was no accident. Cheap cladding that was known to be combustible was installed across the building. It has since emerged that gas pipes were left exposed, despite instructions by a council fire safety consultant that they should be covered in “fire-rated” boxing.

Three months before the fire, Tunde Awoderu, vice-chair of Grenfell Tower Leaseholders' Association, had complained to the council that the exposed pipes put residents' “life in danger” and demanded that the building be made “secure by tonight before everybody goes to bed.” The letter was ignored.

Grenfell has become a national disaster with the government confirming that cladding from 120 high-rise blocks in 37 local authority areas tested do not meet fire safety standards—a 100 percent failure rate. Hundreds of schools, hospitals and other buildings are also high-risk.

Publicly, the ruling elite profess their sympathy for the victims and survivors of the blaze, while acting with utter contempt for them.

On Thursday, Grenfell survivors were banned from a meeting of senior councillors in Kensington and Chelsea council—which owns the tower—called to discuss the fire. The private session was open only to councillors and “invited guests” so as to avoid “disruption.”

Such is the Orwellian state of affairs in capitalist Britain that those who are culpable in mass murder can meet in comfort, without fear of challenge or censor, while those who have lost everything—including their loved ones—are treated as irritants at best, and have the door slammed in their faces.

This was also evident during the two-day parliamentary debate on the Queen's speech.

On Wednesday, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn said that the “tragedy of Grenfell Tower has exposed the disastrous

effects of austerity,” which had resulted in local authority expenditure being cut by 40 percent and “11,000 fewer firefighters.”

He was speaking to a Labour amendment on Tory public spending cuts and their role in the Grenfell Tower fire. The “humble address” by “Your Majesty’s most dutiful and loyal subjects”, “respectfully” called for a stop to cuts in the police and fire service and to end the public sector pay cap in force since 2010.

But his plea was rejected by May, who argued that the undermining of fire regulations had developed over decades, “under governments of both colours,” citing the Blair Labour government in particular.

In fact, the origins of the Grenfell Tower fire can be traced back four decades, starting with the Conservative Thatcher government in 1979. Under the banner of the free market, Thatcher declared there was no such thing as society and proceeded to smash up all the gains and conditions of the working class. It was under Thatcher that the compulsory use of fire-resistant cladding on buildings was jettisoned.

This sociopathic agenda was embraced by all the political parties, none more so than the Blair/Brown Labour governments (1997-2010). In addition to further watering down regulations, Labour massively expanded the Private Finance Initiative programme, enabling private contractors to make vast profits in housing by cutting corners. Five of the council blocks in Camden, London now declared unsafe were built under this scheme.

The dismantling of health and safety regulations was accelerated under the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition (2010-2015) as part of its austerity measures.

Even after the terrible loss of life in West London, nothing has changed. In parliament, May claimed the public inquiry she has convened into the fire would “leave no stone unturned.”

This is just more lies. The retired judge appointed to head the inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, is nicknamed the “social cleansing” judge after he ruled in 2014 that Westminster council—Kensington & Chelsea’s equally wealthy neighbour—could rehouse a single mother of five more than 50 miles away in Milton Keynes. Even before the inquiry has met, Moore-Bick said its remit could be “limited to the cause, how it spread, and preventing a future blaze.”

Amidst cheering from Tory MPs, the Labour amendment was defeated by 323 votes to 309.

The real concern of the powers-that-be and their big

business backers are securing favourable terms for Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union (EU).

May hoped the snap election would strengthen her push for the “hard-Brexit” favoured by much of her party; complete withdrawal from the Single Market and the customs union while insisting on protections for the City of London.

Instead, the election result has deepened tensions within the government, with a minority of the Tory party hoping to use May’s diminished authority to press for a “softer” exit involving, at least, staying in the customs union for an unspecified period of “transition.”

But for the time being, the Tory factions have united to keep May in place while Brexit negotiations proceed.

Labour’s right wing, however, have no such fealty to Corbyn. The party’s official amendment on Brexit upheld the vote to leave the EU while calling on the government to seek the “same benefits the UK has as a member of the single market and the customs union” and protecting the rights of EU nationals in Britain.

Through such ambiguity, Corbyn hoped to secure the support of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) that has sought twice to depose him as leader and who oppose withdrawal from the single market, in line with the majority position of big business.

This was not enough for the Blairite right wing. As an alternative, Blairite MP Chuka Umunna tabled an amendment calling on the government to explicitly “rule out withdrawal from the EU without a deal”, and “set out proposals to remain within the Customs Union and Single Market.”

Some 49 Labour MPs—one fifth of the PLP—defied Corbyn to back the Umunna amendment, which was defeated by a majority of 221. Labour’s official amendment also failed, by 323 votes to 297, a majority of 26. This meant that it was Corbyn, not May, who was forced to take action against his own MP’s, sacking three of his frontbench MPs—Andy Slaughter, Catherine West and Ruth Cadbury.

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