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Queen's Speech 2017

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Overview

The Queen's Speech has set out the legislative agenda for a Conservative minority government under the leadership of Theresa May. However, with negotiations still on-going with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), it is unclear what level of formal support this government will receive, to enact their plans. It is evident that this uncertainty and the loss of their majority in Parliament, has forced Theresa May and her party to curtail their legislative ambitions, some of which were key pillars of the Conservative manifesto.

Delivering Brexit

Of the 27 bills and draft bills presented to Parliament, 8 relate to Brexit and its implications for key industrial sectors. Alongside the "Great Repeal Bill" to convert EU rules into UK law, there are measures on trade, customs, immigration, fisheries, agriculture, nuclear and sanctions.

This includes legislation that aims to:

- ❖ **Create a standalone customs regime on exit, with the flexibility to accommodate future trade agreements with the EU and others**
- ❖ **Enable changes to be made to the UK's VAT and excise regimes, as a standalone regime on exiting the EU**
- ❖ **Put in place the necessary framework to allow the UK to operate its own independent trade policy**
- ❖ **Allow for the repeal of EU immigration law – primary free movement**
- ❖ **Make the migration of EU nationals and their family members subject to UK law, once the UK has left the EU**

Health & Social Care

In the run up to the election, it was suggested that a majority Conservative government would introduce a new Health & Social Care Act, to embed the recent and planned reforms into primary legislation. With the unexpected outcome of the General Election and the difficulties that were experienced in getting previous legislation through both Houses of Parliament, it is highly unlikely that this will make it onto the legislative agenda in the near future.

Outside of a general commitment to improve people's standard of living and fund public services like the NHS, the only specific areas of legislative activity referenced in the Queen's Speech are mental health and social care.

Mental Health – As the Government works towards a new Mental Health Act, there will be a review of the mental health legislative landscape and recommendations will be published on where new policy could provide greater rights for those experiencing mental health problems, so they can live lives free from discrimination.

Social Care – The Government will work to address the challenges of social care for the ageing population, bringing forward proposals for consultation to build widespread support.

Although not stated in the Queen's address to Parliament, there is a possibility that the NHS will receive an increase in funding as a result of the current negotiations between the Conservatives and DUP. It has been reported by the BBC that the DUP have asked for a billion pound investment in health care (and a similar figure for infrastructure) as part of any deal to support Theresa May's government.



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Missing Manifesto Pledges

The Conservative manifesto arguably contained several controversial policy areas; including the pensions “triple-lock”, “dementia tax”, grammar schools and fox hunting – all of which were noticeably absent from this year’s Queen’s speech. A clear reflection of the Prime Minister’s vanishing majority and the sheer complexity of negotiating an exit from the EU, the government would seem to be signalling an intent to avoid politically charged issues that might provoke political audiences over and above that of Brexit, which in itself will require extremely careful political handling.

“We've never seen a Queen's Speech in recent years so shorn of pretty much all significant domestic legislation. Brexit dominates so much” *

Governing by Consensus

Excluding the 8 bills relating to Brexit, the 6 bills carried over from the previous parliament and the 5 bills or draft bills that are in connection to consumer legislation (these are bills intended to help consumers and tend not to be party political, which ministers hope will be popular), this leaves only 7 bills or draft bills – which a number of political commentators have described as “vanilla legislation.”

These are all pieces of legislation that are relatively non-political and are the sort of measures that could easily be part of a Queen’s speech drafted by the Labour Party. Whether this is a necessary ploy to decrease the likelihood of the government’s legislative agenda being voted down or a more deliberate long-term strategy designed to create a political discourse that brings the two major parties together and poses much less political risk for Theresa May, only time will tell.

However, it is highly likely that the Brexit bills will dominate parliamentary business and political discussion throughout the upcoming parliamentary session, with very little appetite for compromise and considerable reputational risk for the government if they do not come away with a ‘win’ for the UK. The big question is whether defeat on any one of these bills would be tantamount to a vote of no confidence in Theresa May and her government.

Why is this Queen’s Speech Important?

Equivalent to the government’s “mission statement” for the year ahead, the Queen’s Speech is a high profile demonstration of a government’s political ambition and, depending on the content, their perceived control over the legislative agenda. Following the Queen’s address to Parliament, there is a debate in the House of Commons, normally lasting approximately 5 days, preceding what is normally thought to be a largely symbolic vote. However that characterisation has been built off the back of election results that have produced super-majorities, upwards of 100 seats in the House of Commons.

As it stands, Theresa May has yet to confirm that a deal has been struck with the DUP. As a minority government, if the Conservative Party fails to secure an agreement with the DUP or build wider cross-party support for their legislative agenda, Theresa May would be under enormous political pressure to resign or would face an immediate vote of no confidence tabled by the Labour Party.

However Labour is still far from wielding a workable majority in the House of Commons, even with the support of all other parties. Political reality would therefore dictate that if neither a Conservative nor a subsequent Labour government could manage to keep the confidence of the House of Commons, there would be no other alternative but to call a second election.

** Norman Smith, Assistant Political Editor, BBC*