

Queens Speech: Scottish impact



POLICY BRIEFING

Introduction

The Queens Speech headlines the UK Government's legislative programme. There is a little more detail in background briefings, but still only an outline. This briefing outlines the Bills that have a significant impact on UNISON members in Scotland.

Workplace dispute resolution

Providing options outside the employment tribunal process by encouraging 'early conciliation' where all claimants would lodge details of their claim with Acas giving parties the opportunity to engage in conciliation. Renaming compromise agreements as 'Settlement' Agreements to more accurately reflect their function and encourage greater use. Changing the tribunal system by increasing flexibility and encouraging employer compliance.

This is the latest attack on workers rights by weakening access to tribunals. It comes on top of the two year qualifying period.

De-regulation

Reducing inspection 'burdens' on business and strengthen the legal framework for sunset clauses on regulation. Repeal unnecessary legislation, cutting the burden on business and citizens.

This will probably be used to reduce health and safety protection for workers. The 20,000 workers who die every year from work are apparently a business burden.

Energy Bill

Introducing a system of low-carbon generation revenue support, an Emissions Performance Standard to prevent construction of high emission new coal plants and a capacity mechanism to ensure security of supply. Introducing a Strategy and Policy Statement which would set out the Government's strategic priorities for the energy sector in Great Britain. This is likely to conflict with the Scottish Government's energy policy.

Pensions Bill

Replacing the current state pension system with a new single tier pension, set above the level of the basic pension credit means test (currently estimated to be set at around £140 per week). Bringing forward the increase in the state pension age to 67 between 2026 and 2028. Committing to ensuring that the state pension age is increased in future to take into account increases in longevity.

Speech says nothing about the contracted out rebate for occupational pensions like NHS & LGPS. National insurance contributions for employees and employers are likely to rise.

KEY POINTS:

- The Queens Speech headlines the UK Government's legislation.
- These mostly apply only to England, but there are a number of Bills that will cover Scotland.
- Workers rights and safety are to be undermined further under the guise of removing business burdens.
- The state and public service pension schemes will be changed. Further clarity is needed on devolution aspects of this.
- Overall, the speech fails to address the need for growth and jobs.

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Public Service Pensions Bill

Implementation of the Final Proposed Agreements in the NHS, Teachers & Civil Service schemes. Calculating public service pensions, based on the average earnings of a member over their career. Asking people to retire later - with pension benefits normally paid at State Pension Age (earlier for members of the police, armed forces and firefighters' schemes). Introducing cost controls so that future unforeseen changes in the cost of pensions are shared by members and employers. Introducing more commonality to the powers and processes across public service pension schemes.

The Bill will leave the Devolved Administrations' competence for pensions and delegations of powers to make regulations unchanged. A phrase that does not make it clear how much, if any, of the above will apply to Scotland. The Scottish Government are awaiting clarification from the Treasury on this point.

Children and Families Bill

Mostly English family law but also give parents access to flexible parental leave; so that where they want to, mothers and fathers can share caring responsibilities in a way which best fits their needs.

Electoral Registration and Administration Bill

Individual Electoral Registration (IER) - requiring electors to register individually rather than by household. Aspects of this Bill will require Scottish legislation.

House of Lords Reform Bill

A smaller, mainly elected chamber in multi-regional constituencies using STV at same time as General Election. Non-renewable 15 year term with one-third retiring at a time. No change in powers. No cross party or even intra party consensus on this proposal.

Communications Data Bill

To ensure communications data (e-mails, texts etc) remains available to law enforcement and other authorised public authorities. There will be a new regulatory framework but this degree of intrusion into private communications has already attracted cross party opposition.

Response

The Queens Speech has been widely criticised as failing to address the key issues facing the UK economy. UNISON General Secretary Dave Prentis asked: "Where is the help for the lost generation of young people who cannot find work? Where are the Bills that would stimulate growth in the economy?"

Further info:

The full speech and background briefings

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/queens-speech-2012>

Scottish Government response

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2012/05/Queens-speech09052012>

UNISON UK response

http://www.unison.org.uk/asp/presspack/pressrelease_view.asp?id=2693



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