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Introduction

Following the indecision and intrigue that emerged after the closest-fought general election in at least two decades, the real business of government starts today. With almost three weeks of negotiation and varying levels of detail of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition agreement now published, we already have some idea of the new Government's legislative priorities – reinforced by an unprecedented leak of the contents of the Queen's Speech some days before the event itself.

Nevertheless, even though Parliament has been in operation for over a week, it has been exclusively engaged in what might be described as logistical matters – the election of the Speaker and the swearing in of Members. Today the Commons (and the Lords) will begin business proper, starting with five or six days of debate on the policy programme announced this morning. This is of particular interest this year; firstly it will provide a forum for myriad voices, across all parties, to make known their views on the coalition and its policy priorities, and secondly it will give an indication of how the Commons will adapt to the first genuine coalition government since the War; to only one opposition party of any notable size; and to a large number of backbenchers who may as yet be undecided how far their loyalty to their respective parties stretches.

The last Queen's Speech took place only 6 months ago, and the next – should the coalition remain sturdy – will probably take place in November 2011. We therefore have a typical post-election session: extended and allowing the Government to set out a fuller legislative agenda than normal. Today we saw 24 Bills (one in draft), and although the details of many remain sketchy, the sense is that the early goodwill towards the coalition has prompted an ambitious programme that might nevertheless signal the end of the Lib Dem/Conservative honeymoon.

Overview

The Queen's Speech this year was delivered against the backdrop of the Chancellor's announcement the previous day, setting out the details of over £6bn in savings and efficiencies aimed at reducing the deficit, and aimed at demonstrating the coalition's common intent to tackle the economic crisis as a matter of urgency. The coalition will have to get used to delivering this sort of bad news (and to dressing it up in as palatable a form as possible) – the savings announced represent a minute fraction of the nation's total national debt.

The Royal Address, then, recognised this reality. The Monarch's first words stressed the coalition's headline ideals of "Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility", and reminded all that the next Parliament's primary purpose will be to "reduce the deficit and restore economic growth."

Indeed, David Cameron, the 12th Prime Minister of the present Queen's reign, had prepared a speech containing numerous Bills that were aimed primarily at facilitating this "cuts" agenda: the creation of an Office for Budget Responsibility, reform of financial services regulation, and reducing the cost of bureaucracy and public bodies. However, these were balanced with an attempt to paint a sunnier future, and involving a number of measures aimed at bolstering the coalition's claims of representing the new politics: fixed-term parliaments, the right to recall corrupt MPs, reform of the House of Lords

and of party funding. Of course, many of these represent less the new politics and more the backroom dealings on which the governing coalition is founded.

The next set piece in Parliament will be George Osborne's emergency Budget on 22nd June – less than a month away. The first items of legislation will hardly have begun their passage when the country will again be presented with the harsh reality of the nation's finances.

Details on specific Bills

As far as farming is concerned, the monarch's address was notable for its lack of Bills relating directly to agriculture or food production and supply. Even more starkly, Defra has not been given any primary legislation to pilot for the next 18 months. Speaking shortly after the event, Green MP Caroline Lucas said that the government's agenda was "pretty half-hearted" on environmental issues.

There were, however, some items that will no doubt be of interest to NFU members. The **Public Bodies Bill** is the Conservative's main weapon in reducing the number of quangos, although interestingly it has been handed to Nick Clegg and his team at the Cabinet Office. We will examine the details with interest once published, to see which of Defra's delivery bodies might be caught by the legislation.

Considered a "win" for DECC Secretary Chris Huhne, the **Energy Security and Green Economy Bill** seeks to improve energy efficiency in homes and businesses and promote low carbon energy production. The **Decentralisation and Localism Bill** represents the centrepiece of the drive to devolve greater powers to councils and local communities, who will be given much more control over housing and planning decisions. It will see the replacement of Regional Development Agencies with Local Economic Partnerships, as well as the abolition of the Infrastructure Planning Commission.

The **National Insurance Contributions Bill** will stop Labour's planned rise in National Insurance Contributions (NICs) for employers, the so-called "jobs tax" which played such a prominent part in the early stages of the election campaign. However the rise in NICs for employees will still go ahead, a "win" for the Lib Dems in their coalition negotiations. The **European Communities (Amendment) Referendum Lock Bill** will enshrine the commitment to hold a referendum if there are any more measures to amend or introduce EU Treaty measures that directly affect UK sovereignty.

Turning to non-primary legislation, measures will be introduced to encourage investment in **new high-speed broadband internet connections**, which will include consideration of increasing the availability of broadband in rural areas. Legislation will also be required to enable the construction of the recently announced **high speed railway network**. A **public health service** will also be created, following consultation.

Absent from today's announcement were any provisions addressing flooding, for instance picking up some of the measures omitted from last session's Floods and Water Management Bill, and there was also no mention of **cost and responsibility sharing** in animal health, which was (to some degree) included in the recent coalition agreement.

Official list of Bills and measures announced in the Queen's Speech

Bills

1. Academies Bill
2. Airports Economic Regulation Bill
3. Armed Forces Bill
4. Decentralisation and Localism Bill
5. Education and Children's Bill
6. Energy Security and Green Economy Bill
7. Equitable Life Payments Scheme Bill
8. European Communities (Amendment) Referendum Lock Bill
9. Financial Services Regulation Bill
10. Freedom (Great Repeal) Bill
11. Health Bill
12. Identity Documents Bill
13. Local Government Bill
14. National Insurance Contributions Bill
15. Office for Budget Responsibility Bill
16. Parliamentary Reform Bill
17. Pensions and Savings Bill
18. Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill
19. Postal Services Bill
20. Public Bodies (Reform) Bill
21. Scotland Bill
22. Terrorist Asset Freezing Bill
23. Welfare Reform Bill
24. Parliamentary Privilege (Draft Bill)

Other items in the Queen's Speech

- High-speed broadband connections – secondary legislation will be used where possible, but consideration will be given to using primary legislation if needed.
- High-speed rail – Hybrid Bill to be introduced in due course
- **Limits on non-EU migration:** Government will consult on the implementation mechanisms for these limits and the level at which they should be set. The NFU will be fully engaged in this consultation.
- Public Health – the Government will create a new public health service led by the Department of Health, plans for which will be published in due course, and will be followed by consultation on the detail of the public health ring fence and the outcome measures to be adopted.

Full details of the Government's legislative programme for 2010/11 can be found here:

<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/topstorynews/2010/05/queens-speech-2010-3-50297>