
QUEEN ELIZABETH OUTLINES U.K. GOVERNMENT AGENDA IN SCALED-DOWN SPEECH TO PARLIAMENT

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By Danica Kirka

Queen Elizabeth II outlined the British government's legislative program in a speech to Parliament on Wednesday after the prime minister promised "humility" in negotiating Britain's exit from the European Union following a disastrous election that cost the ruling Conservative Party its majority.

The 91-year-old monarch carried on with her royal duties at the ceremonial opening of the new Parliament despite the announcement that her husband, Prince Philip, had been hospitalized. Buckingham Palace said Philip, 96, was hospitalized as a precaution for treatment of an infection.

His rare absence from the State Opening of Parliament added to the solemnity of an occasion cherished by the British people and replete with tradition. While Elizabeth reads what is known as the Queen's Speech to lawmakers whenever a new parliament convenes, it is written by the prime minister and her staff and offers a broad brush of goals for Britain's future.

The nine-minute speech the queen delivered Wednesday reflected Prime Minister Theresa May's weakened position □ a loss of stature that has emboldened those within her own party who want a "softer" Brexit that makes a less-sharp break with the EU. Eight of 27 bills outlined in the speech deal with the complex Brexit process.

May slimmed down her plans and omitted several policies touted in the Conservative election campaign, including plans to change funding for the care of older people, which opponents dubbed the "dementia tax." Also missing was ending free school lunches and limiting winter fuel payments to low-income elderly.

Nor was there a mention of President Donald Trump's previously announced, but as yet unscheduled state visit. May's invitation, extended with days of Trump taking office, has been sharply criticized by all parties.

The prime minister's Downing Street office said nothing had changed: an invitation had been extended and accepted. It was not mentioned in the speech because no date had been set, May's office said.

Tempted by a big lead over the opposition Labour party in opinion polls, May called the June 8 snap election expecting an overwhelming victory that would silence dissenters and give her a mandate to push ahead with plans to leave the European Customs Union and drastically limit

immigration as Britain leaves the EU. Instead, the Conservatives lost seats and May still hasn't secured a deal with another party to insure Parliament will back the government's agenda.

"The election result was not the one I hoped for, but this government will respond with humility and resolve to the message the electorate sent," May said. "We will work hard every day to gain the trust and confidence of the British people, making their priorities our priorities."

Signaling the importance of Brexit negotiations with the EU, set to continue until the spring of 2019, the speech set out the government's program for two years, rather than one.

The prime minister, who had campaigned with the slogan "Brexit means Brexit," softened her tone in comments released ahead of the speech.

She also tried to be softer period. In remarks in the debate that followed the speech, she acknowledged government failings in helping victims of the London high-rise fire on June 14 that killed at least 79 people. She described the support on the ground after the Grenfell Tower blaze as "not good enough," and said that it failed to help people when they need it the most.

"As prime minister, I apologize for that failure," she said.

Opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn denounced the speech, arguing that May had delivered a "threadbare" program devoid of new ideas.

Even before news of Prince Philip's illness, the government had announced that the speech would be delivered with less pageantry than usual as a result of the timing of the snap election.

For instance, Elizabeth arrived at Parliament in a car, rather than a horse-drawn carriage, and delivered the speech in everyday dress, instead of the customary royal robes.

The primary issue was scheduling. The state opening took place only days after another huge annual event, Trooping the Color, a celebration of the queen's birthday. Both ceremonies take weeks of preparation and planning, and it was deemed too difficult to prepare for two such events so close together.

The monarch was determined, though, to make certain she attended the Royal Ascot procession, and her resolve offered a brief moment of levity in the House of Commons.

Veteran lawmaker Dennis Skinner offered the traditional heckle before the speech, joking that those involved in the ceremony had better hurry so the queen could make the first race.

"Get your skates on, the first race is half past two," he quipped.

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