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UK coalition to shelve bold ideas as focus moves to swing vote

By Jim Pickard, Helen Warrell and Kiran Stacey

The coalition government is shelving plans for a “lobbyists charter”, plain cigarette packaging and minimum alcohol pricing as it seeks to focus next week’s Queen’s Speech on core policies aimed at swing voters.

Plans to legislate to fix foreign aid at 0.7 per cent of GDP will also be left out of the package in a legislative programme heavily influenced by Lynton Crosby, the Tories’ new elections supremo.

Instead the electorate will be given a package of new laws which will focus largely on the Conservatives’ priorities: immigration, aspiration and the economy.

The Liberal Democrats will claim credit for other bills bringing in a single tier pension and reforming social care in Wednesday’s Queen’s Speech.

Both parties are expected to lose large numbers of seats in Thursday’s local elections although the full results are unlikely to be clear until later on Friday.

Against this backdrop George Osborne, the chancellor, is drawing up plans to introduce a transferable tax allowance for married couples in an attempt to placate the Tory grass roots.

The new immigration bill will introduce powers strengthening Britain’s ability to deport foreign nationals – a move that is currently hindered by the right to family life in European human rights law.

The bill will also set out reforms limiting migrants’ access to welfare, social housing and healthcare in response to concerns about a feared influx from new EU member states Romania and Bulgaria.

Meanwhile, a paving bill for the High Speed 2 rail line will be presented as a major boost to the economy. The bill allows preparatory work to be undertaken on the HS2 route from London to the north of England.

At the same time, coalition strategists are determined to strip out what they see as

extraneous policies such as forcing tobacco companies to use plain packaging.

The policy had been challenged by the tobacco industry, which has claimed that banning branding on packets will not necessarily put young people off smoking.

Brands on packets are one of the last remaining ways to advertise cigarettes in the UK due to a ban on tobacco displays in large shops introduced last year.

David Cameron, prime minister, has already seen his cherished plan for a minimum unit price for alcohol shelved after opposition from senior cabinet ministers including Theresa May, home secretary, and Michael Gove, education secretary. Plans for a new “lobbyists charter” are also being abandoned.

Mr Crosby likes to use the phrases “knocking barnacles off the ship” and staying on a straight “train track” as he seeks to focus colleagues’ minds on core issues.

The Lib Dems are also seeking to lay claim to the Queen’s Speech, insisting that they have delivered several key policies. One Lib Dem aide dismissed the idea that the legislative package was heavily influenced by Mr Crosby, saying “the idea that one person says what is in or out is delusional”.

Nick Clegg’s party has forced the Tories to drop plans for a communications data bill that would have given the state sweeping powers to monitor internet use. The party had said that the so-called “snooper’s charter” was unworkable, unnecessary and disproportionate.

Mr Clegg said this week that the major theme of the Queen’s Speech would be “radical social reform”.

The coalition will legislate to enact the single-tier pension, which will abolish the state second pension and a mass of pension credits that currently exist.

This will save the government billions of pounds in national insurance payments, much of which will go towards enacting the reforms proposed on adult social care by the economist Andrew Dilnot, which will set a cap of £75,000 on how much people have to pay for residential care in their old age. The cap will come into force in 2016.

The social care bill will also bring in new safeguards to protect people from abuse, a move triggered by several scandals relating to the quality of care in homes and hospitals.

Crosby makes influence felt

Lynton Crosby is a name increasingly heard across Westminster as the elections expert makes his influence felt.

Hired by prime minister David Cameron in November, Mr Crosby now spends six days a month at Downing St and Conservative head office.

He has also retained his private consultancy, Crosby Textor, which has offices in Sydney, Milan and London's Mayfair.

As a son of a farmer from southern Australia, Mr Crosby's background is rather different to the gilded Notting Hill set that usually surrounds Mr Cameron: the election strategist has been memorably described as "a cross between Alastair Campbell and Crocodile Dundee".

Renowned for his "dog whistle" targeting of blue collar voters through policies such as restricting immigration, one favourite phrase is "show don't tell", meaning it is better to get on with policies than simply talk about them.

Mr Crosby has been successful as an adviser four times for John Howard, the former Liberal Australian prime minister, and twice for London mayor Boris Johnson.

The only dent in his impressive track record was in 2005, when he was unable to get former Tory leader Michael Howard into Downing Street.

His calm, jocular persona belies a tough, take-no-prisoners approach. Already he has reportedly clashed with George Osborne, the chancellor, and Grant Shapps, party chairman, as he seeks to reshape Tory policy.

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