

Patel's arguments are crazy. Unless you v...

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I would like to think that most people realise that Priti Patel's comments, made yesterday, suggesting that British business replace those people from the EU who will no longer be allowed to work in the UK with either robots or people recruited from amongst the eight million 'economically inactive' resident population of the country were, to be polite, economically illiterate. Thankfully the media was anxious to point this out, from the BBC onwards.

To consider the economics for a moment, of those 8 million a significant number are students. Others are sick. Some are retired. There are non-working parents in that number. And yes, there are also some unemployed.

But the government has until very recently been only too keen to trumpet the fact that we now have supposedly record employment rates in the UK. But now, apparently, that hides the significant involuntary unemployment of 3 million or so people required to replace those from Europe. Either that's true, or the advance of robotics and AI in the next few months is going to be at a pace never before witnessed.

Now, it so happens that I do think that there is considerable underemployment in the UK economy. And I happen to think small numbers of the jobs that are currently taken by EU residents will be taken by UK residents if those from the EU, who are probably better qualified to do them, are not available. That is, of course, inevitable. But that will not make good the substantial shortfall that will occur. The employers saying so are not making this up.

So let's accept that Patel talked nonsense. And let's instead speculate what this, and so much else of the Brexit rhetoric, means.

This policy has a range of potential outcomes. Presuming the lost jobs are not filled as the policy begins to impact, as surely it will, then there will be significant short staffing in agriculture, food processing, catering, tourist industries, the NHS, care facilities, building and other sectors. These sectors will not be able to deliver their services. The knock on effect will not be significant increases in wages when there isn't capacity to

either reduce margins or increase prices significantly; the consequence will be corporate failures. Businesses facing inevitable losses will close before that point is reached. And the job losses will then reach the sectors of the economy traditionally staffed by UK domiciled staff.

Of course, this shrinking of the economy might create a downward overall pressure on wages and a pool of UK workers willing to take work at any rate. But this is hardly about levelling up the economy. Dumbing down is the reality. That is not going to go down well with those who were told to believe a new wave of well being as a result of this policy.

Alternatively, those businesses facing failure will make enough noise and the policy will be changed. That again is not going to go down well with those who believed that migration had to be controlled.

In this sense this policy is simply a microcosm for the whole of the Tory Brexit strategy. What is being said now appears to be economically and politically incoherent. It is economically incoherent because it will leave us significantly worse off. It is politically incoherent because in any normal situation the policy will fail precisely because it cannot deliver.

So the question is, are we in a normal situation where the usual rules apply? My fear is that we are not.

It's not normal for politicians to lie the extent that has become commonplace.

Or for Cabinet members to parrot responses to a Prime Minister.

It is not normal for the conventions that underpin our democracy to be subject to the attack that they now are.

It is not normal for there to be such attempts as are being made to control the media.

It is not normal for dissent to be so ruthlessly suppressed in the way the prime minister is doing.

It is not normal for a non-elected and unaccountable person to have the power Dominic Cummings now has.

Nothing is normal. And that extends to the willingness of the government to use shameless propaganda and lies to make its case. Those in power did that with £350 million on the side of a bus. They will do that again. And they may use such methods to persuade people that there is a new normal where they must suffer for the greater cause, and that it is right to do so. History has shown governments can create the mythology to do that.

Priti Patel's commentary makes no sense. At least not against the criteria we are used to. But in a world of controlled mythology it will be the fault of the EU, foreign workers themselves and foreign owned big businesses who refuse to employ domiciled people (even when they do not apply to work) for the failure of this policy. They will be the 'others' who will be denying the UK the chance to be the low-income migrant state it wants to be. The excuses are already, I suspect, lined up.

Patel's arguments are crazy. Unless you've got what Priti Patel has in mind, of course.