

Neoliberalism has reduced politics to the level of farc...

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I watched Shona Robison, the Scottish minister of finance, deliver a statement in the Holyrood parliament yesterday. The statement was necessitated by budget changes that are being forced on the Scottish government this year as a result of significant changes to patterns of expenditure that have been forced upon it since the budget for the current year was set, and since Labour came into office.

I did not especially envy Shona Robison her task. What was apparent was that whatever she said, the combined unionist forces within the Scottish parliament and the Scottish media would criticise whatever she decided to do.

In practice, as she made clear, she had to cut the Scottish equivalent of the winter fuel payment paid by the Westminster government in England because Labour would no longer provide the money to pay for it.

She also had no choice but to find budget savings to pay for the necessary increases in public sector pay in Scotland to ensure that workers, from those in the NHS to teaching and elsewhere, have sufficient rewards to ensure that some people at least still want to undertake these enormously onerous tasks which impose burdens on those undertaking them that most people in the private sector would refuse to endure during the course of their working day.

And, what Shona Robison also had to anticipate was the fact that whatever she said now, things are likely to get very much worse. Rachel Reeves delivers her budget in October because she and Keir Starmer have, with a total absence of political flair, promised more pain thereafter.

I admit that Shona Robison's presentation showed little more flare. It is a sad fact that very few politicians are able to display much of that characteristic in Scotland or anywhere else. But that said, she was competent.

She made it clear that Labour is now her problem because that is now true as far as the people of Scotland are concerned.

She also made clear that despite fourteen years of Tory rule, growth and increases in productivity in Scotland have been bigger than they were in England.

And, as she also made very clear, everything that she had to do was the fault of Westminster because it has persistently refused, as a consequence of the tacit agreement between the unionist parties located there, to improve the devolution settlement for Scotland so that it has effective tax powers, or to agree to independence. The result was Robison was able to declare that Scotland is moving into austerity, and it was not her fault.

You would never have believed that this was a truthful statement given the reaction of the unionist politicians in the Holyrood chamber.

The Tories denied that they had any responsibility for the dire state of the economy.

Labour claimed that all the problems the Scottish government faced were entirely of its creation and nothing had anything to do with announcements that Labour had already made when that is very obviously completely untrue.

The Liberal Democrats floundered because that is all the Liberal Democrats ever do in Scotland.

There was, perhaps, a hint of conciliation from the Greens, which limited its criticism to cuts that are going to be imposed on capital expenditure, which is bound to impact necessary climate transition spending that must take place in Scotland, as elsewhere.

What, however, was most surprising was the total absence of any acceptance of responsibility for anything that might be happening in Scotland on the part of the unionist parties who have created the current almost unmanageable devolved financial settlement for that country.

If they are honest (and they are not), they would have to admit that the current devolution settlement is rotten to its core.

They would also have to accept that it is their neoliberal policies that make it almost impossible for the Scottish government to meet the needs of the people of that country.

And they, too, would have to admit that if they provide the Scottish government with no borrowing powers of any consequence, it is inevitable that it will not be able to fund the required levels of infrastructure investment that Scotland is desperately in need of.

They would also have to admit that it is their policies now putting pressure on public services in Scotland, not least by imposing recruitment freezes right across the public sector which are bound to prejudice the quality of services that can be supplied.

They will also have to admit, in the case of Labour, that the punishment being handed

out to pensioners is entirely their responsibility.

But that would be all too much for these neoliberal, anti-Scottish parties who want to play politics at Holyrood but who have between them not a single person actually capable of making the decisions that any Scottish government might need to take, most especially if the current settlement continues.

So, what we saw was a total denial of the reality of the British economic malaise by those parties that created it in 2009. In microcosm, we did, as a result, see the whole problem of British politics laid out. There was total denial of responsibility on the part of all those who have created the austerity that Scotland will face; however overwhelming is the evidence of their guilt.

No wonder we're in a mess. Neoliberalism has reduced politics to the level of farce. No wonder people have had enough of it.