

Today's session of parliament is all about Labour being...

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There are emergency sessions of both houses of Parliament today, the first since the Falklands War in 1982.

The purpose of these sittings is to pass emergency legislation that will permit the government to take control of the UK steel industry. This, for all practical purposes, now amounts to the British Steel plant in Scunthorpe. This is under threat of closure because of the mounting losses being suffered by its owner, who perpetuates the once great name, British Steel. The company is now Chinese-owned.

I am aware of the technical reasons why the government does not want the steel furnaces to close down because negotiations with the plant's owners are in disarray. These things are, I understand, hard to start again, but it is staggering that matters have reached this stage.

I have not seen the proposed legislation. As far as I know, no one has as yet. But discussion of what is proposed last night suggests that this legislation is not about nationalising British Steel at this moment, but is instead about taking control of the company and gaining access to information about it, whilst, I very strongly suspect, guaranteeing payments on its behalf. In particular, I presume that the legislation is required to guarantee payment for a cargo of coke that will be used to keep the furnaces running, which cargo is not being landed at present because those who have shipped it are not sure that British Steel can make payment. I presume, therefore, that the government will be acting as guarantor, at least.

A whole array of thoughts arise as a result of this.

Firstly, and most obviously, the fact that this emergency situation has arisen is the clearest indication of a breakdown in thinking within the Labour government. It is an obvious sign of Labour being unable to formulate a strategy with regard to this issue and pursue it. It has, instead, had to undertake emergency measures that makes no sense at all when, if steel is of strategic significance, as both Labour and the Tories say,

a plan for the perpetuation of steel production in the UK should have been in place a long time ago, not least when the Port Talbot plant was also under threat. This emergency sitting of Parliament is, in that case, a very clear sign of Labour's inability to plan.

Secondly, it is also a sign of Labour's ridiculously inappropriate focus. It is, apparently, vital that we have a plant that can manufacture steel because this, supposedly, is critical to our defence industry, although as I understand it, to pretend that a steel plant can make any variety of steel, at will, is quite absurd. Having one steel plant in this country will not ensure that our defence industry can secure all the steel it needs from British plants. Even if Scunthorpe remains open, the steel that it makes will not necessarily be of the type or types required for defence manufacturing purposes. Worse still, because successive UK governments have, anyway, as a consequence of requirements of competition law, been placing contracts for the manufacture of UK armament requirements with other countries for decades, this argument has no substance to it in any event.

Third, in that case, it has to be presumed that this policy is all about jingoistic nationalism, and to be candid, that is unappealing.

Fourth, there is the fact that this plant is in an isolated part of the East Coast, and that is perfect Reform territory. I very much doubt that there would be so much anxiety if this closure did not create a perfect opportunity for Reform to win another seat. I cannot disassociate what is happening today from that idea, and that deeply troubles me. Are Labour really that desperate?

Fifth, let no one pretend that this is about a concern over job losses. Wes Streeting is very casually, and utterly inappropriately, cutting vastly greater numbers of jobs in the NHS than will be saved by this emergency legislation today, so no one should pretend that that is the issue of Labour's concern.

Sixth, let me make the obvious point that if this is not nationalisation, it just shows Labour's utter inability to believe in itself, and the power of the state. Instead, if it is a package of support for the private sector, it will continue to reveal its fawning admiration for neoliberal capitalism.

Seventh, it would appear that this plant is financially non-viable, as is all steel manufacture in the UK in existing plants. If the government had an industrial policy, why isn't it establishing steel manufacturing in this country using electric furnaces? Wouldn't that make sense, or is that too much to ask of these small-brained people?

Eighth, if this is a priority, why aren't children in poverty also in that category? If Steel is a matter of concern requiring that £500 million be conjured out of thin air to save British steel, why can't money likewise be created for real need?

The more I look at this, the more it is evident that today is all about Labour's failings, and it should be ashamed that it has reached the point where it needs to recall Parliament for such a peripheral issue, and the fact that this so clearly indicates its inability to both govern and manage.