

What would a courageous government do?

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This is an apparently serious news report in [The Guardian](#) this morning (and no, my copy is not dated 1 April):

UK citizens will be told to stock up on tinned food and take steps to ensure they are prepared for national emergencies as part of a new government campaign to improve the nation's resilience.

The new campaign from the Cabinet Office will set out ways people can prepare for extreme weather events and potential attacks from hostile states, including stocking up on bottled water, sources told the Guardian.

For those old enough to remember, this reminds me very strongly of the instructions issued (I think) in the 1970s that said that if we wished to survive a nuclear attack, we should build a nuclear fallout shelter in the cupboard under the stairs, presuming we had one, and my family did.

I am well aware that August is the silly season for political news, but this really does scrape the barrel.

At the same time, we should perhaps take it extremely seriously. Maybe this is a real indication of the level of strategic thinking and planning that is to characterise the Burnham government.

Surviving climate change just requires storing a bit more water, in plastic bottles (irony alert). And a stock of tinned food will definitely get us through any national emergency.

The stupidity of this as a general announcement, rather than as a specific household choice, is quite extraordinary.

Twenty per cent of people in the UK live in poverty. They have no chance of buying these items. Many more households are stretched to their limits; they too will be unable to set aside money for these items during a cost-of-living crisis. They will be incredulous

at this suggestion,

And where, in any case, are many households meant to store these items? Those who are issuing these suggestions might have the space available to store stacks of bottled water, but the millions who are living in small, overcrowded accommodation, where any space at all is at an absolute premium, will rightly ask the question, 'What idiot thought this one up?'

In political terms, this suggestion is, to be very polite, crass.

However, there is a deeper point to be made. Instead of describing what these national emergencies are, and how the government will manage them, what is very clear is that this government is doing two things.

First, it is admitting it cannot, or rather will not, manage these crises. The message is sent, even if not very clearly, that we should not look to the government to solve these issues.

Secondly, it is therefore outsourcing supposed responsibility for any such eventuality to us. We are meant to take responsibility for the consequences of crises for which the government will not accept a duty of care.

This, of course, is neoliberal thinking gone mad. In 2011, in my book *The Courageous State*, I suggested that a sure sign of a neoliberal government was that whenever it identified a problem, it would deny that there was anything it could do about it, and then pass the burden of responsibility back to markets or individuals.

The whole point of the neoliberal politician, which Andy Burnham is proving himself to be, day in and day out, is to undermine the very organisation of which they have taken control purely for the sake of their own gratification and advancement, and not for the benefit of the people of the country they are meant to govern as a consequence.

So, what would a courageous government do in the face of national emergencies and the climate crisis?

First, it would define what those emergencies might be and ensure the government has the necessary reserves of food, fuel, and water available to supply on a rationed basis if required.

Second, having identified those potential national emergencies, it would take every possible step to prevent them from happening rather than swan around the country talking about the ability to cancel a Netflix subscription, which is all Burnham seems capable of doing.

Third, on the climate crisis, it would deliver a Green New Deal and make clear that this issue is so important that managing anything else would become secondary to

achieving this goal. That would mean fiscal rules, inflation targets, rules about Bank of England independence, and much more would be set aside to deliver the necessary programmes. These programmes would, at the same time, create a carbon army of people to deliver the necessary processes of change, so that the problems of unemployment amongst young people and others in the UK would become a distant memory as a consequence.

That is what a courageous government would do.

Our problem is that we are a very long way from having one.