

Comment



Russell Luckock

Raw deal for UK steel will hit our firms

MANUFACTURERS who use steel in their processes are becoming increasingly concerned about their sources of supply.

Indian owners Tata are shutting down their two blast furnaces in Port Talbot. Then, auditors for the Scunthorpe-based, Chinese-owned British Steel, have quit after just one year, as they believe the company might not be viable unless substantial funding is forthcoming from parent company Jingye.

Britain is a manufacturing nation and to become dependant on overseas supplies of raw material is not only risky in terms of continuous supply, but also means that we might find ourselves having to pay a premium to get steel delivered.

Additionally, Port Talbot produces very pure steel which can be depended on. I have spent a lifetime in manufacturing and am aware the difference between 'continental' steel and home produced can be very costly as extra production operations have to be introduced to get the component right.

Insofar as the Jingye plant in Scunthorpe is concerned, here again there are two blast furnaces that produce an excellent high-quality product, but the future of the plant is causing considerable concern in terms of future investment.

I think it is essential Government bestirs itself and gets involved, for it is essential as a nation we produce our own steel. For starters, I am not very happy about the quality and consistency of the product Tata says it will produce from a new electric-arc furnace which produces raw material from steel scrap, not pure ore. I fear the inconsistency could be very costly to component manufacturers.

In any case, supplies from such a furnace are some four years away. What happens in the meantime?

Yes, I know it is all part of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, but surely it just as important to protect jobs and supply streams. Surely brains need to be exercised to come up with compromises to cover all interests rather than savage shut-downs.

Government should be urgently getting to grips with the problems that are developing in both Port Talbot and Scunthorpe. There is little time to spare before irrevocable actions take place.

Debt justice is just as vital in current climate

Andrew Coulson

BETWEEN May 15 and 17, 1998, the leaders of the G8 group of major economies, with their wives, met in Birmingham's newly-built International Convention Centre.

Among them were Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Boris Yeltsin, Helmut Kohl and Jaques Santer, the president of the European Commission.

Their host was councillor Theresa Stewart, the leader of the city council, while preparations behind the scenes had been accomplished by Michael Lyons, the chief executive.

Keeping eight heads of state safe all at the same time was a major challenge for the security services and the police. But the most difficult day came on the 16th, when about 70,000 people descended on Birmingham.

No-one knows the exact number; it may well have been more. Many came in coachloads, from all parts of Britain, and from Germany and elsewhere on the continent.

Campaigning to persuade the G8 countries to cancel the unrepayable debts that poor countries had accumulated, they'd hit upon the concept - in the Hebrew bible - of a jubilee when, at regular intervals, debts are examined and those that cannot be repaid are cancelled.

We all linked hands and formed a "chain of debt" about ten miles long, which surrounded the Convention Centre and much of the centre of Birmingham, on a route agreed with the police that included much of the old inner ring road.

This demonstration caught the imagination of people all over the globe. It led to unprecedented pressure and a very rare success for this kind of diplomacy.

Eventually \$130 billion was written off. This made possible new starts in many of the world's poorest parts.

A few days ago, there was a gathering in Birmingham to celebrate this, 25 years later. (Okay, 25 and a bit.) It included the planting of a Ginkgo tree in City Centre Gardens, a few yards from the Convention Centre. This is one of the oldest trees known to archaeologists. It can grow to a great height and some have lived for more than 2,000 years. It is a symbol of continuity and hope.

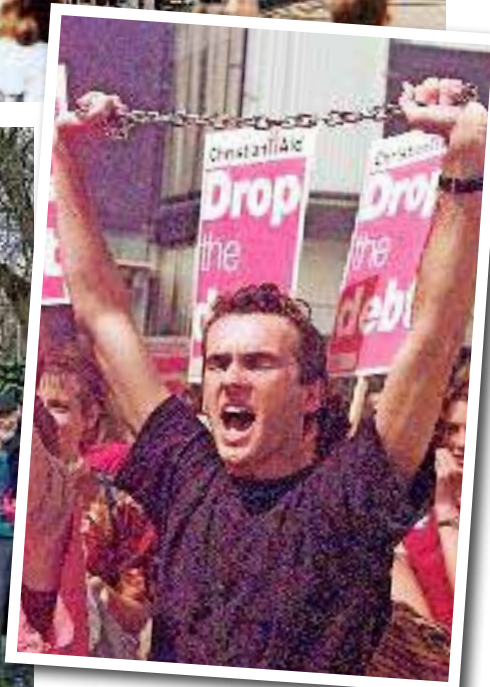
The original demonstration was organised by Jubilee 2000. This has now been succeeded by the Debt



Above and right: The original protest in 1998



The recent 25th anniversary event



fronted by Thomas Picketty and Yanis Varoufakis, was launched at the COP28 Climate Conference last year.

So the world still needs the Debt Justice campaign, more than ever. What effectively started in Birmingham in 1998 is now a campaign for change in this country as well as the poorest countries in Africa and elsewhere.

The Ginkgo tree pays tribute to a remarkable event, but also draws our attention to the unsustainable ways big governments and big banks treat poor countries and poor people.

Andrew Coulson is a retired lecturer and former city councillor.

“A campaign for debt cancellation, relating it to the climate crisis, was launched at the COP28 Climate Conference last year

Justice campaign, and works not only for the cancellation of unrepayable debts incurred by poor countries but for unrepayable debts accumulated by individuals or families on low incomes faced with bills for fuel, rent and food, which they cannot pay.

The position of many poor countries is again dire, not least

because of Covid and the climate crisis.

The International Monetary Fund has cancelled some debt, but only postponed the repayment of other debt, which is likely to make the overall position even worse.

Today, much of this debt is owed to private companies or banks, not to governments, which makes it harder to organise its cancellation, even when there is little or no chance of it being repaid.

A campaign for debt cancellation, relating it to the climate crisis,