

Reeves's shapeless wordfest is a true shocker

Shadow chancellor's inability to convey a set of inspiring policies illustrates a deeper problem with Starmer's project

Matthew Parris, Saturday March 23rd 2024, The Times

It is now fashionable to appreciate Labour's shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, for all the wondrous things she is not. She's not mad, not stupid, not lazy. She's not nasty, not on the loony left, nor – praise be – a Tory. Hallelujah! Heaven has sent us a marvel. Even her limpness is notable for the many foolish things she has, yet again, not committed herself to.

How else to account for the tolerant reception that greeted Reeves's underwhelming lecture in the City of London on Tuesday? The Mais lecture is an important moment for a shadow chancellor: by tradition a red-letter day. What would she say? The audience waits.

Soon we shall have a new government. New ideas are needed, a new soon-to-be chancellor is coming.

The lights dim, there's a roll of drums and a hush as the curtain rises, to reveal ... nothing. Her audience left none the wiser. This shapeless wordfest met little more than a shrug, accompanied by the knowing wink that says, yes, OK, she was dull; but she wants and needs to be dull and this only proves how shrewd she is.

To me, Reeves's Mais lecture was not dull, it was shocking. It shocked by its failure to rise to the occasion. The speech leaves its reader dazed by a superfluity of words and a deficit of meaning. I have read the whole thing, all 8,000-odd words of it. Twice. Yet, like that legendary ghost ship, the Flying Dutchman, the speech sails slap-bang through the reader's consciousness, leaving no trace of impact.

The shadow chancellor's speechwriters, presumably humans, are moving into a second phase in the evolution of chatbots where instead of algorithms assembling paragraphs mined from pre-existing human texts, humans are now giving speeches that sound like chatbots.

Indeed, the bots can do it better. I fed ChatGPT the lecture's extended opening section with a command to "please rewrite this with no clichés". The bot came back at once with an elegantly edited précis, cutting a third of the wordage, reading better and making more sense.

If it had been Reeves's intention to say very little, but at the considerable length the occasion demanded, one could understand her fans' appreciation of her political acumen. One would read the text with schoolmasterish disdain perhaps, but no political alarm.

"She's no Cicero," one might think, "but maybe saying almost nothing at this stage, with Labour massively in the lead, makes political sense." And a columnist like me could have fun on this page playing with the speech like a cat with a wounded mouse, but hardly adding to what we know of her likely talents as a chancellor, if not an orator.

But I don't believe she was trying to say nothing. There's an earnestness in her repetition that hints at a strong sense of what's wrong with Britain and the British economy, and an equally strong desire to do something about it. She keeps returning to her worry as though it were a sore tooth. The words "secure", "security", "insecure" and "insecurity", plus her new word "securonomics", appear 31 times; "stable", "unstable", "stability" and "instability" 29 times.

The lecture tries hard to say something about security and stability, to signal a set of policies that might meet the problem. It fails because of something deep in the nature of the whole Starmer project. The moment her thinking sets off in a discernible direction, a voice within her says "hold on", "up to a point" or "are you sure this is wise?".

Every “giddyup!” is checked by an immediate “whoah!”. Marginally to tweak the metaphor, it’s like driving with one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake pedal. By the end, the audience can smell the burning brake pads.

A dozen examples: “... to appreciate how the challenges confronting policymakers have changed over time” (whoah!) “... and how, in important respects, they have stayed the same”.

“Stability was a necessary” (steady on!) “but not a sufficient condition ...”

“An under-regulated financial sector could generate enormous wealth” (whoah!) “but posed profound structural risks too.”

“... the necessary balance between the imperatives of the energy transition” (whoah!) “and the real economic constraints we face”.

“Generative AI has the potential to bring about revolutionary improvements in the way we live” (steady on!) “but also the threat of profound disruption to labour markets ...”

“... globalisation, as we once knew it, is dead.” (Whoah!) “That is not to say we live in a less interconnected world.”

“... in recent years we have become at once too open – too exposed to global disruption” (whoah!) “but also too closed to global trade.”

“We want to make it easier to export and import.” (Steady on!) “But we must strike the appropriate balance between openness to global trade and resilience at home.”

“We cannot continue with the short-termist approach that disregards the importance of public investment.” (Whoah!) “But we also cannot ignore the pressing need to rebuild the UK’s public finances ...”

“... an economic agenda that is both pro-worker” (whoah!) “and pro-business ...”

“The UK economy is one of the most flexible among advanced economies, with hiring and firing relatively easy ...” (steady on!) “... but flexibility is too often manifested as insecurity ...”

“We will ban exploitative zero-hours contracts ...” (whoah!) “But these changes will not stop employers from offering overtime or meeting short-term demand ...”

The cumulative effect of relentlessly precautionary language imparts to the whole lecture a constipated feeling. “Well,” Reevesians will counter, “what’s wrong with precaution in a chancellor?” I reply that precaution is a virtue when accompanied by a driving sense of purpose and the ability to convey that energy to your troops.

Perhaps if Sir Keir Starmer were – like a Blair – gifted with both the impulse for policy and the flair for conveying it, the impression of foot-dragging in his chancellor might even be reassuring. But Starmer entirely fails to project the excitement about “the good that government can do” that characterised Blair. Steady on!

The next (presumably) Labour government will sail straight into the most testing of economic storms.

Without the unifying spirit that can hold together an essentially fissiparous party, Starmer’s administration will flounder. Contrary to the fashionable Starmerite view, Britain does not want to be bored. To get through this we will have to be inspired.

In Reeves’s Mais lecture there is no evidence of the evangelism that can carry governments to a place in history. Whatever else we might say to Rachel Reeves or her boss, “curb your enthusiasm” will not be required.