

Snow, Snowflakes and the UK: Britain's Response to the Cold Freeze: "Beast from the East"

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While the bibliophile and aphorist Samuel Johnson claimed that people of appropriate mental discipline could avoid talking about the weather, the British have found weather an irresistible topic of conversation. Storms are recalled with nostalgic exaggeration; accounts are rendered colourful after the fact.

The Beast from the East, as this latest cold freeze has been termed, stands as a form of climactic terror, storming its way through life without care or favour. Even the language is laden with suggestiveness, a Siberian nightmare forcing its way into the lives of Europeans with refrigerating potential. Ominously, it has been working in tandem with a storm innocuously named Emma.

Such is the mythological fear of unruly weather, intemperate and beyond placation. Omens are sought, fear noted. The Great Storm of 1703, as it was termed, led [Queen Anne](#) to call it

"a Calamity so Dreadful and Astonishing, that the like hath not been Seen or Felt, in the Memory of any Person Living in this Our Kingdom."

Some 6,000 sailors lost their lives, a costly toll given British participation in the Spanish War of Succession. It also inspired novelist Daniel Defoe to compile [The Storm](#) the following year, a work considered a work of masterful journalistic assemblage.

Meteorologists in the UK have released their predictions suggesting that the freeze of March 2018 is the worst since 1962. Schools across the country have been closed – 330 in Kent alone. Irritation at having idle children at home has been expressed, a point similarly made last December when closures affected 2,300 schools across the country. "We're breeding," exclaimed one Howard Webster in [The Daily Mail](#) with eugenic fury, "a generation of wimps governed by a generation scared shitless by health and safety regulation."

The snow fall has also had a freezing delay on transport services. Serious cases of gridlock on the M80, seeing the stranding of hundreds of drivers between the cities of Glasgow and Sterling, have been registered.

The army has been deployed to supply various services, including the transport of 200 NHS clinical and support staff. This, in a statement released on March 2, would "enable staff to change over their shifts while the amber weather warning remains for most of Scotland until 10am tomorrow."

Weather and environmental disruptions have an unmasking effect. They induce patriotic

insensibilities on climate and condition. With a [degree of derision](#), various public responses from countries more accustomed to dealing with heavy snow have done the rounds. Canada and the Scandinavian countries have been heavily represented in that regard.

“I knew it was snowing in the UK,” came a caustic Becca McDonald, “but didn’t know it was so full of Snowflakes.”

Such weather disturbances also expose the reprehensible limits of government policy, laying bare chronic inequalities and shoddy administrative decisions. For [Eve Livingstone](#), while a certain

“lack of readiness can probably best be explained by a combination of factors, the hard truth is that almost all of these are ultimately ideological.”

Austerity, budget depletions and slashings normalised by Tory governments, have all done their bit to cripple what might have been better managed efforts to combat extreme weather. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the body charged with the associated tasks of combating such phenomena, has been a sitting target for the razor gangs. In 2016, its staff received the ominous news that funding would be cut by [15 percent over four years](#). This gutting effort came on top of the previous year’s raiding, which saw a quarter of its budget cut.

As Parliament’s [Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee](#) stated,

“The challenges facing Defra are, first, whether the reduced budget available to it is sufficient for its task, and second how to make the correct policy choices so as to allocate smaller funds effectively.”

The National Grid also found itself in a pessimistic mood, warning that gas supply might be disrupted in responding to the cold. The deficit warning, the first in [eight years](#), was subsequently withdrawn, though it did encourage Ken Cronin, chief executive officer of UK Onshore Oil and Gas to claim that Britain was “worryingly dependent on gas imports”, one set to “increase to 80 percent by 2035.”

The social response to such weather patterns is also a mirror of ritual and practices. Heavy snow and freezing conditions did their bit to bring out the parlous state of employment in various parts of the country. Conditions where [zero-hour contracts](#) prevail necessitate a braving of conditions when, in other jobs, employees might be able to work from home.

This has prompted movements to take hold with a certain moral bite, such as the [Better than Zero](#) campaign in Scotland. That particular outfit has attempted to enlist employers to resist punitive action against employees who prefer safety over a dash to the workplace.

“No one,” goes one post to the organisation’s Facebook profile, “should be penalised or disciplined for following the advice not to travel to work for their own safety.”

Scotland's Transport Minister, [Humza Yousaf](#), has spent time discouraging and even scolding such actions.

“Frankly I'd be extremely disappointed if employers chose to dock wages for somebody because they couldn't travel during the red weather warning.”

As with any such collective response, variations abound. British media have been scouring for the tinsel moments, the necessary distractions that lessen the seriousness of the event. But the entertainment remains fluff to the gloom unleashed by the Beast from the East, working in league with Storm Emma. A depleted, and freezing Britannia, awaits the thaw.

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