

It has been a sad period over the last few months to observe the continued decline in the UK steel sector, culminating in the announcement at the end of March that TATA steel is to sell of its UK operations. While much of the attention has been focused on Port Talbot in Wales, over 6,000 jobs are also at risk relatively nearby in Scunthorpe, Rotherham and Stocksbridge.

Much of the debate has centred on the damage that cheap steel imports from China have been doing to our domestic industry. It appears that a large proportion of these Chinese exports are being placed on the world market below market value; products cannot be sold internationally at prices cheaper than that which they are sold domestically, or for less than the production cost. This is referred to as dumping.

We rely on the EU to address cases of dumping - as is the case with Chinese steel - because the EU Treaties stipulate that in trade with third countries the European Commission takes the lead. Sadly however, the EU is not living up to its responsibilities and has been beyond slow to respond.

First and foremost, it has not been acting quickly enough. Of course dumping cases have to be properly investigated, however it is internal processes that have been taking too long for the European Commission to take decisive action and because of this delay the steel industry has in turn suffered. The European Commission has normally waited until the industry itself has complained of unfair practice before investigating, meaning that by the time investigations are concluded, within the nine-month timeframe that the Commission sets itself, it is simply too late.

I have asked on numerous occasions for the EU to speed up this process, including by monitoring closely problematic imports that are making their way to our shores, so that we can be ahead of the game and impose duties that stave off the threats to our industry before injury happens. We also need to be more vocal with those countries that don't play by the rules, reminding them of their international trade law obligations in international arenas such as the G20 and World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The Commission finally appears to be taking the hint, promising to reduce investigation procedures by nine to eight months, establishing a warning system that can highlight dumping and impose duties earlier and retrospectively, and talking to Chinese authorities to try to cooperate on the issue.

Sadly it is all too late for TATA, but I am confident that the UK Government is doing all it can to save the valued jobs at these plants. There is light at the end of the tunnel, and as I write this article, it appears that a buyer may have been found for Scunthorpe.

What this highlights however, is the slow, bureaucratic machine that is the EU, failing to prioritise the interests of the UK. And it is our government that has had to come in and clean up the mess. As always, I will continue to work hard to make sure that the EU works better for us, while we are a part of the club...