“If Your Name’s Not Down—You’re Not Coming in” or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Critical Minerals

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It is almost impossible to open a serious newspaper without seeing an article referring to the use of and shortage of critical minerals, especially rare earth elements (REE). The impact of the Chinese “monopoly” of supply, the apparent critical or scarce nature (or otherwise) of the minerals, their significance in new materials, their necessity in new “green” energy, even the strange tongue-twisting names of some (particularly some of the REE), has made these minerals “sexy,” so that even politicians are taking note.

Committees of the great and the good are considering what this means and how we can resolve the apparent problem by statements of government policy backed up by government action. Questions are being asked, such as what critical minerals are, what is meant when we talk about critical minerals, how critical these minerals are (and of course what alternatives exist and how we can resolve the problem by recycling), and how government can, or should, act.

Unfortunately, this is not yet a coordinated approach in the UK, and the relationships between availability and use and the scale and extent of the issue are rather muddled. A partly misleading issue is the proclivity of committees or research bodies to draw up a list of what is or isn’t critical according to their assumptions or knowledge (or lack of knowledge) about the use and availability of a mineral. Currently in the UK we have (i) a list and a review compiled by Europe, (ii) two different studies and lists compiled by one government department, (iii) a policy document under production by another government department, (iv) a joint policy review by another two government departments, (v) a further approach on research proposed by the relevant academic research council, and (vi) a policy review by a committee of the House of Commons.

The unfortunate thing is that while matters as to the availability of REE etc. are being debated earnestly by committees and research groups, other economically critical minerals in the UK and Europe are suffering because of current disinterest. The UK is about to lose the fluorspar industry, and high-grade kaolin production is under threat. The question is whether we can translate the narrow concern about “critical minerals”, which is dominated by concerns about REE, into a more useful concern about the supply issues for many minerals important to our economy.