



BOOM AND BUST: The Covid high street voucher scheme will cost at least £166 million, yet extending the universal credit uplift for another year would cost £108m

Voucher scheme an obscene waste of money

EXTENDING the \$20 weekly Universal Credit uplift for another year would cost \$108 million.

It is impossible not to contrast this with the \$166 million cost of the Covid shopping voucher, including the extra \$21 million announced last week for printing and excess applications.

The voucher uses one-off funding that would not be a sustainable way to budget for benefits.

However, the executive has no objection to that in principle. It is considering using one-off leftover funding to extend the uplift for another six months.

The purpose of the voucher is to stimulate retail spending. There is no more efficient way to do this than to raise benefits, which are generally spent at once, locally and on small items.

The voucher scheme had been carefully timed using economic modelling and experience elsewhere, yet it has arrived amid a spending boom as shops wrestle with supply and labour shortages. If this pushes up prices, those on benefits will be hit again. But it is too late to go back. We can only contemplate the folly of what may be the most obscene waste of money even Stormont has ever managed.

LORD Frost, the UK's Brexit negotiator, has complained cross-border trade "has gone up a lot", with "supply chains being re-ordered quickly". There has been much disquiet at remarks which appear to imply the government does not want the protocol to work and sees the all-island economy, an objective of the Good Friday Agreement, as a bad thing in itself.

Where this concern might be legitimate is if cross-border growth came at the expense of trade within the UK. The protocol is specifically not meant to do this, despite what its proponents often claim. However, the protocol is meant to keep options and opportunities open, so change is inevitable and likely to grow.

Perhaps one issue is that statistics exaggerate developments. Cross-border trade in goods is quite small in absolute terms, in comparison to trade with Britain and in comparison to the

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service economy, which the protocol does not cover. So its 65 per cent growth this year, while extraordinary, is still just 5 per cent of Northern Ireland's external trade overall.

ALLIANCE and the Greens avoided a trap at Belfast City Council, where they hold the balance of power, by voting down a Sinn Féin plan to regulate bonfires that the PSNI could not have enforced. This obliged unionists to back an Alliance vote asking Stormont to release the report from the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT), which examined contentious bonfire issues.

The report is being sat on by the Executive Office, officially without explanation, although Sinn Féin says it is not the obstacle, leaving only the DUP in the way.

The report must make recommendations the DUP does not like, yet the party at Belfast City Hall has just had to vote to release it. If it is not released and unionists do not cooperate in developing existing bonfire management schemes, which Alliance and the Greens want to be given more time to work, Sinn Féin's next vote for regulation will pass. "Sitting on the fence" is harder than it looks.

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LOYALISTS are complaining of two-tier policing after a centenary Orange Order parade in north Belfast had its route restricted while a Saoradh hunger strike parade in Bellaghy did not.

This seems a little harsh on the PSNI, as decisions on restrictions were made by the Parades Commission and there was still a heavy police presence at both events.

Anyone who thinks dissident republicans are not being dealt with by the PSNI and security services cannot be paying attention. Being dealt with by the Parades Commission is the better tier to be on.

A CONCERN sometimes raised about opinion polling in Northern Ireland is that it over-represents the "politically engaged", as they are more inclined to volunteer for online panels, producing effects too strange or subtle for professional pollsters to iron out.

A survey of 2,000 people published this week on behalf of the Commission for Victims and Survivors found 70 per cent opposition to the government's Troubles amnesty plan. It also asked about each of the interlocking mechanisms of the 2014 Stormont House legacy proposals: the Historical Investigations Unit; the Independent Commission for Information Retrieval; the Implementation and Reconciliation Group; the Oral History Archive; plus a possible body combining the first two.

Around two-thirds of respondents expressed support for each, with only between 4 to 16 per cent saying "I don't understand or don't know what this means". That looks like an impressive level of political engagement.

SINN Féin MP Chris Hazzard has written to DUP agriculture minister Edwin Poots calling for a fundamental review of the Forest Service.

Alas, the letter did not demand root and branch reform, or tell Poots to spruce up his act.

As Hazzard's main complaint was about "monoculture plantations", he may have felt puns were best avoided.

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 9 1921

Delegates in London

ONLY four of the Sinn Féin delegates who are to take part in the Peace Conference which opens at Downing Street on Tuesday were among the Irish party who reached Euston on Saturday night by the boat train from Dublin. Mr Arthur Griffith, Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Dail Cabinet, heads the delegation. Those accompanying him were Mr Robert Barton [Minister for Economic Affairs]; Mr E J Duggan [Chief Liaison Officer for the IRA] and Mr Gavan Duffy, [Irish Envoy at Rome]. The missing envoy was the famous Michael Collins who quite appropriately maintains his reputation for elusiveness.

The platform at Euston had been barricaded and a strong force of police kept the crowd at bay.

King Witnesses Sinn Féin Rally

A SPECIAL correspondent writes of the arrival of the Irish delegates: They were given a reception that a king might envy.

In fact, King George V came in for a slight share of it and was, doubtless, surprised at the blaze of Sinn Féin flags, banners and favours carried by the enormous gathering of London Irish societies mustered in the Euston Square neighbourhood and the stirring Irish airs played by a dozen bands as the King's motor drove out of the station.

Fearful Experience of Belfast Family

A CATHOLIC family residing off the Antrim Road in Belfast had a startling experience on Saturday morning.

It appears that about one o'clock the family were awakened by a loud knocking and when the lady of the house opened the front bedroom window, she observed a number of men standing on the footpath. She asked what they wanted and the leader, who was wearing a police constable's cap and civilian clothing, and apparently acting as a member of the A Class Special Constabulary, shouted that they were coming to search the house. Not satisfied with this answer, the lady asked the reason for the suggested raid and the leader said: "There is a door open in the shop." "What shop?" queried the lady. Realising that their game was a failure, the group hurriedly disappeared. The members of the household were greatly alarmed by the peculiar experience and they are still wondering what might have happened had the after-midnight party gained admission to the house at once.

(As tensions rose in the North on the eve of the Treaty negotiations, nocturnal raids by the Special Constabulary were commonplace, instilling fear in the nationalist community. Usually dressed in mufti with only police caps, armbands and revolvers to identify them, the Specials – an exclusively Protestant force – were compared by Lloyd George in 1922 to the Fascisti – Mussolini's armed thugs.)

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