

Goodbye to rip-off Britain

With the crunch coming, the artificial inflation in the economy will soon be exposed

Martin Samuel

There is a guy, does business up town, doesn't use his car much, bit of a novice when it comes to scooting around London. Anyway, a few weeks back he has complications with late meetings so, for a couple of days, he drives in. First time, schoolboy error, he forgets to pay the congestion charge, incurs a £60 fine right there. His parking for the day comes to roughly £40 in an NCP. Next time, he remembers the congestion charge, but leaves his car on the street, doing the parking meter tango, feeding it, moving it, feeding it, moving it, £8 here, £6 there, until finally he gets really busy, overruns by five minutes and, bang, a £100 penalty. He reckons the whole experience, with petrol, of two days' motoring will have cost close to £300. He's a wealthy man, he can afford it; but suppose he was an ordinary working stiff from the sticks, bringing in the average wage? That could be his disposable income, after the mortgage, gone. For two innocent, pretty harmless, mistakes. This is why Gordon Brown is in trouble.

The economy is false. The economy is a lie. The economy is a fictional set of numbers cooked up during a boom period that is almost over, and six months from now nothing will add up. The cost of a parking ticket grew to be completely disproportionate in relation to the offence committed because everyone was sawing it off, so nobody cared. Some twerp slapped a sticker demanding one hundred notes for a minuscule oversight on your windscreen and you knew it was preposterous, but you could afford it. And now you can't. And now you are going to realise how overpriced and bogus the minutiae of British life are, and Gordon is panicking because there is no way he can make this sustainable; yet the artifice of commerce and government relies on your expanding wallet.

If, while waiting for the clampers to arrive, having paid your £100 release fee plus £60 fine plus VAT, you pop into Starbucks for a cup of coffee, you will be charged close on £2. For coffee. Think about it, because so few have. We read about sub-prime mortgage markets and global credit squeezes and receive the deep thoughts of financial experts that have caught a cold in every recession for the past 50 years, which is why the benefits from your endowment mortgage will just about cover a self-assembly greenhouse from Homebase, but nobody notices the details. Coffee, two quid. No rationalisation. No justification. In a recession, nobody can drop two quid for a hot drink three times a day, five days a week. Bottled water the same: £1.60 for 500ml to take away at Caffè Nero on Monday. And everyone has a sip. Our lives are full of inflated expenses that are propping up Brown's fairyland economy and, when the penny drops, this crash will be the mightiest ever. No wonder he looks scared.

For so long we have not given this stuff a thought. My favourite football club charges a £1.50 booking fee on each ticket, so if I take my three boys we pay an additional £6. These tickets will be placed in one envelope and sent to one address, so the charge cannot cover postage or packing. I am actually paying a ticket office extra to sell tickets. It would be like a greengrocer applying a levy for dispensing fruit and vegetables. Yet as this nonsense was introduced in high times, nobody quibbled.

Background

- [Rip-off Britain is back](#)

- [High living costs hit Labour in poll](#)
- [London bites with sky-high dinner prices](#)
- [Pack up your troubles and fly away? I'll take my chances on the train, thanks](#)

When a booking fee is demanded, we should ask the person on the end of the line to send round a cheese sandwich instead. You know, do something that is not part of the job, because that would be worth a tip. Clean the windows? Yeah, I'll pay extra. But applying a surcharge so a ticket office can provide tickets? I'm not seeing the value.

Brown got away with murder because he was Chancellor in the days when chimps could make money. In May 1999, he sold half the country's gold reserves during a 20-year low in the market at an average price of \$275 an ounce. Yesterday morning the price of gold was approximately \$946 an ounce. Brown bought euros instead, which have done well, but even so the cost to the nation of this mistake is measured in billions; and the only reason it has not been immortalised as a catastrophe in the same way as, say, Black Wednesday is because the population has been too busy hiring personal trainers and eating fancy crisps (chardonnay wine vinegar flavour, firecracker lobster flavour, patatas bravas, have you people gone nuts?) to care.

It costs more to download music from the same supplier in the United Kingdom than it does in the United States. Consider that. No shipping, no additional overheads, no reason the cost of the service shouldn't be identical. We are so used to meeting inflated prices, it barely registers anymore. The top-of-the-range Lexus hybrid costs £83,000 in the United Kingdom and £54,145 in the United States. The wealth that keeps Brown's economy ticking over is a mirage; it cannot survive the recession. And neither can he.

Not long ago I made a reservation at my favourite Chinese restaurant in town. Bit pricey. A special occasion place, not your average local. They wanted credit card details in advance with the right to charge £35 per head in the event of any alteration to the booking. I refused. They would not reserve otherwise. I very politely asked it to be explained to the manager that there was a recession around the corner and the number of people looking to drop six figures on noodles could be about to change quite dramatically. He might want to keep those that do outside. The reservation was accepted, no credit card. He knew, you see. So does Gordon. That is why he looks worried.