The shops are opening again

It is welcome news that most shops closed to help arrest the pandemic are to open again today if they wish and if they can do safely.

Many retailers have been inventive in working out how to allow people into shops to see the stock, to choose and to buy whilst observing the rules of social distancing. The food stores pioneered techniques including asking people to wait outside, limiting the numbers in the shop at any time, going round the store in a prescribed way, keeping your distance when waiting to pay and protecting staff with screens and protective clothing. It helps if customers wear some facial covering. These and other ideas will now be adapted by the non food retailers who start trading again today.

I trust people will welcome this relaxation and will want to go and buy things from the shops. Many people say they value their local High Street and want the shops there to be available for them. To help secure their future it is important to back them in the only way that counts in the next few weeks, by visiting them and buying things from them. Of course if you are vulnerable or have to self isolate different considerations come into play, but for most people the risks of shopping for non food should be no bigger than the risks we have been taking to shop for food in recent weeks.

I have argued throughout this crisis so far that government needs to give the highest priority to saving lives, but also has to follow policies that can save livelihoods. I was pleased the government took up the idea of government cash to support staff who could not go to work, but this cannot go indefinitely. The only way to pay the wages in the months ahead is for people to be back at work serving and supplying customers who will pay the bills.

High Streets were struggling a bit against the formidable competitive challenge of on line shopping before the pandemic hit. It has now got a lot tougher, with almost three months of no trading from shops whilst people switch to the internet offer. That is why if we want to help restore our High Streets we need to support our favourite retailers as they go to the cost and trouble of adapting to the new conditions and opening their stores today.

Hold firm in trade talks

The PM should give no ground in talks next week. We need to take full control of our fish, our laws and our borders on January 1 2021.

Nor do we need to delay bringing in checks at our borders on EU food and goods. They should be the same as the checks we currently apply to non EU food and goods. If it needs more people and more checking lanes at ports then there is six months to increase capacity to do it properly with no added delays. We can also use trusted trader arrangements so most of it is pre checked, not needing a border post check. If we know what is on the truck and can spot check or follow up leads if wrongful declarations are ever suspected we can allow easy transit for most goods.

How many more times do we have to explain this to a reluctant Establishment? Ministers must instruct them to do it. It's what we already do for other countries so why the fuss? People importing food are anyway responsible in law for checking a consignment when they receive it, as it is their reputation on the line. They want compliant and wholesome food, so they do most of the checking and enforcing well away from the ports.

Latest survey shows further decline in CV 19 cases

I am glad the government started to test a sample of the population and to re test regularly to construct a time series of the incidence of the disease.

The latest figures for the period 25 May to 7 June show the figure down to just 11 people having a positive test out of the 19,933 people in the sample or 0.06%. These tests exclude hospitals and care homes to capture the position in households.

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Big fall in the economy

As feared and predicted, UK GDP fell a massive 20.4% in April on top of the fall in March already reported. There were few surprises. Cars were down 41.6%, and food and beverage 38.8% as you would expect given the lock downs. Retail managed to keep the fall to a very creditable 8.9%, demonstrating the way on line took up some of the slack with an explosion in the digital alternative to a visit to the shops and with heavy demand for food from supermarkets.

What is perhaps more surprising is the large fall in Health, down 11.4%. It underlines the impact of Covid 19 even here on activity. Whilst we are all grateful to the many nurses, doctors and support staff who were working very hard and taking risks to care for very sick patients with the virus, other large sections of the NHS closed down or just dealt with emergencies. Much of the private hospital sector was also taken over for use as part of the NHS plans for Covid 19 and related healthcare.

Education also fell a hefty 18.8% as schools pared back to look after a limited number of children attending in person, and putting on variable amounts of distance learning.

It shows us that the public sector as well as the commercial sector has a job to do to get back to anything like normal. The NHS now has a massive backlog of elective surgery and non urgent treatments to provide, and has to reconnect with seriously ill patients who have kept away from hospitals not wishing to get in the way of pandemic emergencies, or worrying about picking up the infection.

Meanwhile the debate continues about one metre or two for social distancing, which makes a lot of difference to businesses that need to meet their customers in person. Government needs to communicate some optimism and confidence that we can create safe models of doing business so livelihoods can be restored and the economy can pick up some momentum.

Central banks head off a liquidity crisis

We live in amazing times. The graph of US money growth is pointing upwards at an unprecedented rate. The graph of the US budget deficit is almost vertical. The last three months has seen the issue of over $ 2 trillion of additional Treasury bills, short term loans for the US government. No wonder the financial markets are in melt up.

The Fed’s latest figures show annualised M2 money growth at 40% for the last three months, a record level. State debt has surged by $2.06 trillion between March and May.

Remembering last time when Central banks starved markets of cash and left the banking system and corporates to plunge into financial reconstruction or bankruptcy for want of liquidity, the Central Banks led by the Fed have this time done the opposite. So far so good – companies have borrowed money instead of going bust,and banks have plenty of cash to lend.

The problems this poses come later. There is first that it must be a bridge to recovery, not to insolvency. Delaying bankruptcies would not be much of a success if we end up entering a credit meltdown when too many companies fail to repay their money on time.

There is also the issue of inflation. So far we just have asset price inflation. If more of this money gets into the bank accounts of companies and people who want to spend it rather than invest it in financial assets, that could prove more generally inflationary. Then Central Banks have difficult choices to make. Putting up rates to throttle back credit is the usual response to cut demand and stop overheating. That in turn means triggering the delayed bankruptcies of the over borrowed companies.

The happy answer is for the Fed and Central Banks to gently throttle back now they have stopped a liquidity crunch. The commercial banks have a lot of work to do deciding realistic and sensible schedules for repayment of loans, and working with business on who has a sustainable business model worthy of support and who does not in these new and difficult times.