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DESPITE the price of oil falling to a level not seen in decades, greedy energy providers refuse to pass on savings to their customers, once again proving the need for stronger government regulation.

The excuse proffered by the energy sector — that they need to retain savings to pay for much needed infrastructure improvements — rings hollow at a time when the government are still providing cold weather payments to save many elderly dying from hypothermia.

With so few energy providers in Northern Ireland, we don't have the option of switching in the same way that customers in the rest of the UK can. It's

therefore even more important that our politicians hold those providers to account and ask the obvious question: Just where are the millions saved in lowered oil prices going?

Prime Minister David Cameron recently announced a government scheme that will see £20million spent teaching female immigrants English.

The PM argued that, with 190,000 Muslim women speaking poor English and another 38,000 speaking no English at all, this leaves them isolated and prone to radicalisation. Here in Northern Ireland we are in no position to criticise such an initiative as last year around £600,000 was spent improving the communica-

tion skills of our local politicians. Sadly, this 'investment' hasn't had any discernible impact as most local politicians still manage to sound as if English is their second language.

AS a young man working in bars across Belfast on more than one occasion I've seen a distraught wife arrive with bags of her husband's clothes, which she dumped at his bar stool.

It seems the women of Dungiven don't even bother to bag the clothes as a tumble-drier was thrown through the window of a pub last Friday. Police say they are baffled by the crime but I suspect if they find the man with no change of clothes they'll find the culprit.



RUTH Patterson's decision to call on a group of Loyalist protestors to rethink their planned demonstration on Saint Patrick's Day outside the City Hall in Belfast looks like it had Jamie Bryson's fingerprints all over it.

Ruth and Jamie have joined forces in her election campaign to win a seat at in the upcoming Assembly election. Unfortunately for Jamie, during the same radio interview, Ruth informed us that St Patrick had been a Protestant.

This came as something of a shock to most historians as Patrick preceded the reformation by eleven hundred years. Yet to many in Ulster,

Patrick's Protestant credentials are accepted without question. For them it is obvious Patrick was a Protestant — his good teeth and snappy dress sense proves he couldn't have been a Catholic.

If proving Patrick was a Protestant is hard, an even bigger challenge for Ruth will come in her election fight against DUP nominee, Emma Pengelly.

If she is to have any chance of success, Jamie Bryson will have to keep Ruth away from all unsupervised media interviews or who knows who she'll be claiming as a Prod next — St Peter, perhaps?



MAKING THE CITY SLOWER

FROM January 31, central Belfast will have a new 20mph speed limit.

The decision was taken to ensure a safer city centre for both pedestrians and cyclists.

For many motorists it will be seen as yet another way to increase revenue through fines.

I welcome the move as any minor inconvenience to motorists is greatly outweighed by a safer city for all. In Holland cars in towns and cities give way to both cyclists and pedestrians.

Sadly Belfast is decades behind Holland when it comes to cycle lanes but we should be moving to shifting our reliance from cars to both public transport and cycling.

Time to lock up the death drivers

A SCENE of utter devastation, reminiscent of the worst days of the Troubles, occurred in West Belfast last week when death drivers ploughed into five cars, injuring four people.

It's a miracle the outcome was not worse, that innocent people once again did not lose their lives. All this because a minority of mindless scum feel they've the right to steal cars and drive at insane speeds through busy streets. Such incidents, once all too common, have become less frequent due to improvements in car security. This has led to a change in tactics by death drivers, who now opt for carjacking or creeper burglaries to get car keys.

Many of those involved are repeat offenders who know that, if caught, they'll likely face another suspended sentence. After decades of a 'softly softly' approach in dealing with this problem, the time has come for society to face down these thugs. If someone attacks with a knife they'd go to jail so why is it any different if your choice of weapon is a car?

Until we tackle this curse with punitive prison sentences, our police will continue to be nothing more than a taxi service, driving these imbeciles from police station to court, only to watch them walk free.



THERE's an old Chinese proverb that says — we never really know what's for the best or the worst.

A farmer's son breaks his leg and the family think it's bad fortune. The next day the army comes to conscript him, but don't, due to the leg — so it was good fortune after all.

I've found this truism becomes clearer the older one gets. I can say with hand on heart that it was a blessing when I broke my back weightlifting as a teenager. Even though my injury resulted in years of pain, two operations and months

in hospital, I got off lucky. On occasion, I've bumped into old training partners who weren't lucky enough to have an injury put a stop to their weightlifting early. Virtually all of them have ended up with terrible injuries.

The human frame simply isn't designed to deal with the insane weights used by power-lifters. Many destroyed their spines, others wore out joints and some are on their second joint replacement with all the debilitating effects of such surgeries. I was invalidated out just as steroid use in sport became commonplace.

Where once the human body's own limitations would limit any damage being done, the use of drugs changes things.

Suddenly, instead of only being able to train three days a week with a couple of days to recover, you could train flat out, every day. I see young men pile on bulk in a way that was impossible in the past.

Performance-enhancing drug-use has now escaped the world of sport and become a sick form of fashion accessory.

Young men and women, desperate to mimic the look of the latest catwalk model or movie hardman, have bought into steroid use with abandon.

The long list of crippling and sometimes fatal side effects of long-term steroid use has not proved a deterrent, and there is virtually no gym in the country where you won't find a way to get hooked up with a steroid supplier.

Society's mantra of coming down hard on drug use in sport rings somewhat hollow when we realise that nations such as Russia have been drugging their athletes on an industrial scale for decades.

How can we ask our young people to turn away from drug use when their heroes and role models are now exposed as habitual users?

Sebastian Coe, below, the new head of the International Association of Athletics Federations, could hardly have been surprised this week when major sponsor Adidas decided to pull the plug on its sponsorship deal with his organisation.

Before taking the top job, Lord Coe was a vice-president of IAAF for seven years, and this has led to questions about what and when he knew about

doping. Adidas' cancellation of sponsorship leaves a £2million hole in IAAF finances. Athletics could always bite the bullet and hook up with a company such as Zambon — one of the world's biggest producers of anabolic steroids. This, at least, would cut out the lying, hypocrisy and subterfuge.



SF PHIL'S NOT FOR BIN YET

I'M heartened to see that the gaffe-prone career of Sinn Fein's Phil Flanagan may not be over yet.

In his eventful term as Fermanagh and South Tyrone MLA, Phil managed to lose a libel case against the UUP's Tom Elliott.

He then took offence at Isis being called terrorists and more recently, faced a dressing down from Assembly speaker and fellow Sinn Fein member, Mitchell McLaughlin, for being improperly dressed in the Assembly. Not bad going, even for a Northern Irish politician.

Then his local party decided they could do without his services and he wasn't selected as a candidate for the upcoming elections.

It seems, however, that SF head office aren't willing to see young Phil go just yet, as they announced there would be another selection election for the constituency.

It seems that Sinn Fein operate a form of democracy where members are forced to vote until they arrive at the result the party bosses like. And talking of leader, Gerry Adams released an e-book of his Twitter meanderings, in which he tries to shift his image from paramilitary leader to bumbling old grandad.

My favourite recent tweet from Gerry was his confession he trampolines naked in his back garden with his dog Snowy. His 'must be the only dog in the world who doesn't like biting bouncing balls.