

'I love you.' 'I love you too, Harvey.' 'Forever?' 'Forever.'

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Esther & Philip

WESTMINSTER'S POLITICAL HUSBAND-AND-WIFE TEAM REFLECT ON THE WEEK'S EVENTS IN YOUR DAILY EXPRESS

Cashing in on rip-off room rate

THE pleasure of going abroad has gone. Hopefully not for good, but certainly for now. Tests, form-filling and the fear of the dreaded quarantine holiday – in fact everything Richard E Grant has been tweeting about.

There he was, visiting his family in South Africa, when a new variant came along, so when he landed back in Gatwick he was carted off to a quarantine hotel at a staggering £228 per night for 10 nights.

He rightly asks: "How is this price justified? A non-quarantine Holiday Inn nearby costs £89 including breakfast. Understand that there are security costs and 2 Covid tests."

I agree. It's a staggering amount for a bed, a packet of crisps and sandwiches. So, I went digging to see what the charge was for.

The figures I found were from an answer to a Parliamentary Question on September 6, and the story gets worse. Back then the total cost per guest was £1,750. The notional cost was £2,597, implying a shortfall and a government subsidy of £847 per guest. And here's the breakdown – get a cold compress – the hotel bill for 10 nights is £1,190; transport, £78; security, £876; welfare, £74; testing, £102; liaison, £52; "other", £135; and administration costs, £90.

First of all, what are "other" and "liaison" and, more to the point, how much for security? It's like a licence to print money. What with hotels being on the state payroll, accommodating asylum seekers and now quarantined people returning from holiday – and getting paid guaranteed inflated prices. Will they ever want to get back to being a private enterprise again? Somehow I think not.

These hotels are more like "notels". Richard, left, certainly seems to have had a particularly tough time of things. Earlier this week, while in quarantine, the police contacted him to say his car had been used in a Tesco ramraid.

Or was that Richard breaking out and stocking up with food? The amount has now increased to £2,285 per guest – as Richard knows only too well – and £1,430 for a second adult. And the Government is still subsidising each guest to the tune of £312. Nice work if you can get it.



ANYONE who thinks that Covid lockdowns were a price worth paying really ought to read this week's annual report from Ofsted which laid bare just how devastating those lockdowns have been for the children. The report highlighted how the loss of education, disrupted routine and lack of activities led some children to develop physical and mental health problems; vulnerable children, at risk of harm or neglect, disappeared from the teachers' line of sight, resulting in significantly lower levels to social care; some children in care felt less safe due to lockdown restrictions and broken relationships; and probably worst of all, it found the development and progress of many of the youngest children was hampered, with some even regressing in basic language and social skills. It is becoming increasingly clear that the full consequences of lockdowns will prove to be far worse than the virus itself, and we must never allow our children to be locked down in this way ever again.

Pictures: GETTY



IT'S been 17 years since the last episode, but Thursday night saw a new series of Sex And The City return to our screens. But without Samantha and with social distancing, maybe a better name for it is simply The City. I loved this show and it got better with each series – a decadent romp through the Noughties in Manhattan with fashion, flirting, friendships and... but will this series be as good? And as Carrie, the lead character, would have written in her New York column, "Will remaking this show be like dating an old boyfriend... destined not to work?"

Licence fee Bill is one to watch

MY GOOD friend and fellow Conservative MP Peter Bone is bringing forward a Private Member's Bill which I wholeheartedly support: The BBC Licence Fee (Abolition) Bill.

The BBC always seems very confident (some might say smug) about the quality of its programmes. So why not, in the 21st century with hundreds of channels to choose from, allow people to choose which programmes, channels or radio stations they want to pay for?

When I was growing up, if you wanted to watch the best sport, comedy and drama you watched the BBC. Now if you want the best sport you watch Sky; the best drama is on the likes of Netflix and if you want the best comedy you try to find a channel showing programmes from 30 years ago.

It is clear that the BBC and the licence fee have lost the confidence of a lot of the British people, not least with regards to how the over-75s have been treated, and yet individuals still risk ultimately being sent to prison after ending up in court for not paying the fee.

If people did have a choice over paying the licence fee, then if they got fed up with the BBC's obsession with political correctness – not to mention the very real concerns of bias – they could take direct



TAKE CONTROL: There can be no justification for the BBC's licence fee

action and decide not to pay for it. In this supposedly free country people should not be forced by law to pay for a TV station they do not want or agree with.

It should be a choice, and if the BBC is so convinced that the fee is excellent value for money, as it keeps telling us, why does it need the law to force people to pay? Surely if it is such good value, people would buy it anyway.

It is wrong that however badly the BBC performs, and however out of touch it becomes, it is still guaranteed more income the next year (due to more houses being built). And if scrapping the fee meant Gary Lineker had to take a pay cut then so much the better!

The sooner we scrap the mandatory licence fee the better. ● Richard and Judy are away

FULL marks to Miriam Cates, the excellent Conservative MP for Penistone and Stocksbridge, who highlighted to the House of Commons the devastating impact this week's new restrictions would have on victims of domestic abuse.

In response to the new guidance for people to work from home again, Miriam highlighted research from the think tank Bright Blue which revealed that 11 per cent of those women working from home in the pandemic experienced domestic abuse, compared to one per cent of those not working from home and that a staggering 27 per cent of disabled people working from home reported domestic violence.

These are the real (and often hidden) victims of needless restrictions.

All revved up for the F1 finale

WHETHER or not you are a petrolhead, this year's Formula One championship tomorrow heralds the final race of the season with rivals Red Bull's Max Verstappen and Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton tied on points.

Whoever finishes ahead in Abu Dhabi will be the world champion – for Lewis Hamilton it would be for a record eighth time.

Whereas most people, including Esther, will be cheering on home-grown Hamilton, I will be going against the tide, hoping for a Verstappen victory. I put a bet on him to win the championship before the very first race of the season and so I will win some money if he is triumphant – something that's obviously very important to a Yorkshireman.

Whoever wins, though, we can count it as a British victory. Obviously Lewis is English, and is one of our greatest sportsmen, and his Mercedes Formula One team is based in Brackley, Northamptonshire.

Red Bull may have a Belgian driver at the wheel, but they are a fantastic British-based Formula One team based in Milton Keynes.



FURTHER LOCKDOWNS ARE LITERALLY A DEPRESSING PROSPECT FOR THE NATION

IS THERE such a thing as the "covid condition", a post-virus lethargy that we've all managed to catch? I'm not talking long covid, I'm talking about a post-lockdown condition, whether you had covid or not. This lethargy takes many forms, from a general disinterest in work – there



are more than one million job vacancies at present – to a reluctance to wear formal attire – cosy jogging bottoms still seem to be the nation's choice ahead of business dress – and an indifference to sticking to plans – one in seven customers who have made a restaurant reservation fail to turn up. Has lockdown made us

lazy, as some have suggested to me? A psychiatrist told me not – she said it has actually pushed the nation into a depression. Uncertainty, disruption and a day-to-day existence doesn't sit well with humans who like to be able to plan and have certainty and stability in their life. Removing this makes us unbalanced. And while most

of us have fallen into a depression, others have tipped into anger. We are now either fighting our way out of the situation or sleeping our way past it. Lockdown has to end for all our sanity, especially if the Government is serious about promoting physical and mental health equally, as it always claims.