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More pubs are facing last orders

E IN ONE form or another, pubs have been a part of Britain's social fabric since the Roman times as places to gather, socialise, entertain and even to bolster each other in the toughest times. They're a precious part of everyday life and their appeal remains undiminished – but that could all change.

William Robinson, co-owner of sixth-generation family-run Robinson Brewery, and owners of 250 pubs across the north of England and Wales, told me their pubs stayed open during the Spanish flu, and through both world wars. Their pubs have only closed once in their 300-year history – to abide by the Covid lockdown rules.

Five per cent of pubs closed for good in 2020 and another five per cent are set to close in 2021 – that's 5,000 pubs gone and who knows what will happen in 2022, particularly given how last week's Plan B announcements hit the industry, with a tidal wave of cancellations – four million and counting – as people unbooked dinners and Christmas parties.

Pub Christmas bookings were already down by nine per cent, with many barely holding on to their business by their fingertips, but the latest announcements by government and scientists will close another slew of pubs, as industry surveys expect bookings to fall by about 40 per cent.

Emma McClarkin, below, Chief Executive of the British Beer & Pub Association, said: "We could be entering some of the bleakest months ahead as the bank has lent all it will give and the life savings of these companies are gone. Businesses are on the line."

If a government intervenes and destroys what is otherwise a viable business it has to compensate the owners. The industry has come up with suggestions of what could help it survive the next few months: keeping the reduced rate of VAT until the end of June 2022, suspend business rates for the first quarter of 2022 and introduce some form of grant for the lack of trade. The Government must help.

William Robinson adds: "The Chancellor recognised the social importance of pubs in the autumn budget – we implore him to step up as he has before and provide short and long-term support to ensure that pubs can survive."

Samuel Pepys aptly described the pub as the "heart of England" – a focal point of our communities. We mustn't let Covid rip the heart out of our local communities forever.



P COMING so soon after Arthur Labinjo-Hughes's murder, the country will have been disgusted to learn of the death of 16-month-old Star Hobson in my neighbouring constituency of Keighley. It is truly heartbreaking. The regular beatings she suffered, with her mother doing nothing to protect her, is awful beyond belief. But that sadness turned to anger for me when we learnt that Star's situation had been referred to Social Services at Bradford Council no less than five times in an eight-month period – and yet she was still abandoned.

This council has a woeful record in children's services and Keighley MP Robbie Moore is right to demand the resignations of council leader Susan Hinchcliffe and chief executive Kersten England. They should be taking ultimate responsibility for this appalling failure.

Murderer Savannah Brockhill was given a life sentence with a minimum term of 25 years, while the mother, Frankie Smith, guilty of causing or allowing the death of a child (which carries a maximum sentence of 14 years) was given just eight years in prison. She will be automatically released after two-thirds of her term – just over five years – aged 25.

How on earth can that be justice? The judge should also be hanging her head in shame and I hope the Attorney General will refer this unduly lenient sentence to the Court of Appeal.

Esther & Philip

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



Pictures: GETTY

E J-LO LOOKS absolutely fabulous in her 50s, and is hugely accomplished, so does she really need Ben Affleck? Sniping at a former wife and blaming her for your drink problem is never a nice look, and if he is prepared to lash out at an ex, then you can guess it's only a matter of time before you get a tongue-lashing. It also shows an immaturity and an inability to take responsibility for your own actions. So it's time for J-Lo to move on, as it seems like Ben is more affliction than Affleck these days.

Stop pressing the panic button

P IT WAS around this time last year we were told we were 15 million jabs from having our freedoms restored. All it would take was to ensure the most vulnerable were vaccinated and life could start to return to normal. "Cautious but irreversible" said Boris Johnson, describing how our freedoms would be restored.

Fast-forward a year and we have now administered more than 120 million Covid vaccinations. A huge proportion of the population has been double jabbed and almost half of all adults have had the booster, including virtually everyone who is at risk of serious illness from Covid.

And yet here we are again, in almost the same situation as last Christmas, with the Government imposing restrictions and the nanny state public health professionals telling us not to socialise with anyone or attend sporting events.

What is perhaps more surprising is the number of people who have been frightened all over again. What do people think the vaccinations are for? The whole purpose is so that we can go about our lives knowing that if we catch Covid we will more than likely avoid serious illness. If we're going to introduce restrictions on our lives every time there is a new variant – given that Covid will be with us forever – then we may as well have not bothered and just locked ourselves away forever.

Either vaccines work – in which case, given our booster jab rates,



CLAPPING TO SACKING: NHS heroes shouldn't be forced into getting jobs

there is no need to panic – or they don't and it is pointless urging more to get a booster. The Government needs to make up its mind.

This is a virus which – as Chris Whitty told MPs last year – had a survival rate of above 99 per cent even before we had vaccinations, so now clearly it is even higher than that, and we are also dealing with a variant – Omicron – which all the evidence suggests is milder.

One part of Plan B which hasn't had as much publicity as it should was the vote to sack people in the NHS who haven't been vaccinated. Given that Whitty this week told MPs the vaccines had "minimal" impact on transmission, there is clearly no justification for this – or for vaccine passports for that matter.

Last year we were out clapping our NHS heroes, next year we will be sacking some of them for no good reason – and putting further pressure on the NHS. Who would have thought Labour, with a few honourable exceptions, would vote overwhelmingly to sack NHS staff? But that is what it did this week.

We need some perspective and to stop being frightened into giving up our freedoms.

It is amazing how easily logic and common sense have been replaced by irrational fear and panic.

● Richard and Judy are away

Schhh.. you know WHO

P THE House of Commons Science and Technology Committee was told this week by Harvard scientist Dr Alina Chan that the most likely origin of Covid was a leak from a laboratory at Wuhan in China.

Esther and I attended a lecture earlier this year at the Royal Over-Seas League in London by former head of MI6 Sir Richard Dearlove who also advanced that theory. Dearlove pointed out that when this possibility was first raised, it was instantly dismissed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and 27 eminent scientists in the field of viruses who wrote a letter to The Lancet describing it as a conspiracy theory and therefore silencing any debate.

You might want to bear that in mind when you are hanging off every word these experts and the WHO is telling you about Covid and its causes.

THE VOTERS ARE FOR TURNING - AND BORIS NEEDS TO WAKE UP

E THERE can be no sugar coating the result. Seeing a 23,000 Conservative majority turn into a 6,000 Lib Dem majority on a 34 per cent swing in the North Shropshire by-election was a terrible result for the Conservatives.

The Government may wish to claim it was a typical mid-term protest in a by-election, but it is vital that it learns why so many Conservative voters wanted to protest to such an extent that two-thirds of people who voted Conservative at the General Election in that constituency in 2019 decided not to do so just two years later.

I hope this wake-up call will be heeded and we once again govern as proud Conservatives with a belief in and making the case for individual freedom, individual responsibility, low taxes, living within our means and tackling crime and illegal immigration.

Otherwise voters will keep protesting until their message is heard.