

**MAIL ON SUNDAY COMMENT: Powerful voices now argue for a more nuanced and less painful way of learning to live with the virus... We urge the PM to listen**

The measures now being imposed on large parts of the country would be severe and hard to bear if we had reason to believe that they would do any good. The trouble is that we have no shred of solid evidence that they will help at all.

The vast illogical web of new rules, increasingly impossible to understand or follow, looks worryingly like an exasperated attempt to punish us for wanting to live normal lives and enjoy ourselves. Go to a pub if you are prepared to eat a large unhealthy meal with your drink, but not otherwise. Go to the gym in Manchester but not in Liverpool. Wear a mask while you walk to your restaurant table, but not while you sit down. The measures now being imposed on large parts of the country would be severe and hard to bear if we had reason to believe that they would do any good.

The trouble is that we have no shred of solid evidence that they will help at all. It would take the late Professor Albert Einstein to work out the latest combination of regulations on who we can or cannot see, mix with or meet, in the open air or indoors. And by the time the great physicist had managed to discover what it all meant, the rules would have changed again. The alleged scientific basis for this is weak beyond belief, as Sir Keir Starmer pointed out before throwing all reason and logic aside and demanding still more stringent collective punishments, which would incidentally make even more Labour voters unemployed.

In 19 out of the 20 places already compelled to suffer under strict regimes, no benefit was observed. And why should it be? When we were first beguiled into this new way of life by an appeal to our benevolence and generosity, we were told that in a few weeks of self-restraint we would save the NHS from being overwhelmed. Who could resist such a plea? Millions cheerfully surrendered treasured freedoms for the common good, thinking they would soon get them back when the job was done. The NHS was not overwhelmed (and it is far from clear that it ever would have been). But the weeks passed, and what happened?

We had a serious case of mission creep. Somehow the task had now become one never previously attempted or achieved by any society, the virtual suppression of the virus itself. We were not free to return to our normal lives. On the contrary, every few days brought a new alleged alarm. A testy and increasingly petulant Matt Hancock, the Health Secretary, did not release us from our bonds. Restrictions applied on the pretext of safety or security are notoriously hard to get rid of, and these were no exception. Only after immense damage had been done to the economy were we allowed to resume something like normal life. Tens of thousands of holidays were wrecked by sudden quarantine clampdowns, though no significant evidence has been produced that travellers returning from these supposedly dangerous countries were in fact suffering from or carrying the disease. Hardly were the surviving pubs and restaurants and hairdressers open again, and high streets beginning to function, when the Government began to voice fears of a supposed 'second wave' of Covid, and moves to get us back to work were halted. Indeed, the Government tried very hard to find such a second wave, launching a highly successful nationwide hunt for healthy people who could be said to be infected by the virus.

The Prime Minister can be forgiven for taking what he, and we, believed to be effective and urgent action back in March. We knew so much less then than we do now. But the time has now come to reconsider the key fact about Covid-19, that it is rarely harmful to those much under 70 years of age, and then mainly when they have severe underlying conditions, seemed never to imprint itself on Mr Hancock's memory. He also seemed incapable of noticing that the great bulk of the positive test 'cases' of which he makes so much involved people who were and remained perfectly well. The reassuring facts, that doctors have quickly learned how to treat the disease effectively, that many hospitalisations tend to be brief, that many people are now recovering after successful treatments and the use of new and effective drugs, were likewise somehow underplayed.

Deaths, though each one is a tragedy, remain at levels far below the totals they reached at the peak of the first crisis in March and April. In the week ending October 2, Covid accounted for just 3.2 per cent of fatalities in British hospitals. Covid mortality levels are still drastically lower now than in the spring. In the week ending April 17, 8,758 recorded deaths mentioned Covid as a possible factor on the death certificate. For the first week in October, the comparable figure was just 321. As we also now know, many of the deaths in March and April followed a severe mishandling of the epidemic in care homes, and had little or nothing to do with the lack, or the existence, of lockdown measures. In fact

an examination of all the affected nations shows no obvious connection between the severity of the steps taken and the number of deaths suffered.

The key problem of the episode from the start – that the danger from the virus itself had been overstated – continues unabated. Yet we are once again being accused of misbehaving by the simple action of living our lives. A blizzard of decrees compelled millions to wear face coverings, despite what the Government itself had once admitted was sketchy evidence for their benefits. Now a rise in cases, which is largely attributable to the normal increase in respiratory disease at this time of year, is being used as the pretext for regional shutdowns or for a so-called ‘circuit-breaker’. In London, scanty evidence of a surge has been used by the utterly undistinguished Mayor, Sadiq Khan, to trigger misery and economic damage among the people whose interests he is supposed to protect. It is this damage, combined with the shrivelling of much of the NHS, that makes this continuing foolishness especially hard to bear. It may even be that more people die from postponed or missed treatments than from Covid. The strangling of travel and the hospitality industry has not just made life infinitely less enjoyable. It has permanently killed countless brave small businesses and deprived huge numbers of men and women of their livelihoods.

Fairy Gold, summoned up from nowhere by Chancellor Rishi Sunak, may ease the initial pain. But it must be paid for out of the nation’s life savings, and it will run out, leaving a bleak landscape of long-term unemployment and shrinking payments for those who suffer it. The Prime Minister can be forgiven for taking what he, and we, believed to be effective and urgent action back in March. We knew so much less then than we do now. But the time has now come to reconsider. The practical effects of these measures on Covid are sketchy at best. Their effects on human happiness, health, wellbeing and the economy are increasingly evident, deep, painful and lasting. Especially since the Great Barrington Declaration, supported by several distinguished scientific experts of all political hues, including Britain’s own Sunetra Gupta, it is no longer possible to say that science and medicine offer only one route out of this crisis. Powerful voices argue for a more nuanced and less painful way of learning to live with the virus, as we rebuild our prosperity and our freedom and look forward to a future free of lockdowns, circuit-breakers and family separation.

Boris Johnson has the capacity to see this and act on it. We urge him, with all our hearts, to do so now.