

## Unleash freedoms, not fears

As local lockdowns become more common, Claire Fox warns against the use of draconian measures – keeping everyone working from home may not be the best option



Local lockdowns are the new normal it seems. The most recent placed restrictions on millions of people living in the North West. The media focused on the impact on Eid celebrations, but there were broader frustrations. People were geared up to get businesses working, return to jobs and socialise with family and friends, only for normality to be abruptly halted.

Even while aggrieved – and some worry this might be an over-reaction – most people accept that more targeted geographic lockdowns are preferable to closing the whole of society. If anything, such interventions should be more micro-local rather than locking down whole regions.

In this context, it makes sense that the Tory Government – not usually keen on dispersing power – has handed local authorities wide-reaching powers to deal with outbreaks of COVID in their localities. Councils can now shut down outdoor spaces, close premises, restrict transport, limit the number of people at gatherings, cancel events and impose ‘stay at home’ orders.

I’m sure this is music to the ears of councils who consistently crave more powers and who argue that they know what is best for their areas, unlike remote Westminster apparatchiks. But surely councils should have reservations here? Accruing these powers has a cost. At the very least, local government can now be blamed if things go wrong.

The powers themselves are unusually draconian, but let’s put aside my usual warnings about illiberalism. I’m worried that these controls may lead municipal decision-makers to risk-aversely adopt ‘better safe than sorry’ approaches, to avoid liability. This could have a devastating impact on the urgent need to kickstart economic activity. Looming mass unemployment and economic depression are easily as real a threat to people’s lives as the virus itself.

These particular powers prompt councils’ to focus on how to close down whole sectors of the economy, just at the time when they

should be using every ounce of imagination to open them up.

I would like to see more councils taking a lead in returning to normal themselves.

Where are the plans to resume face-to-face council meetings as soon as feasible? Too many authorities seem to want to make the new normal an ongoing virtue rather than a short-term necessity.

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I hear of councillors over-egging the wonders of video conferencing technology. They even suggest that allowing residents to watch online virtual meetings is more transparent and democratic than real-life chamber gatherings.

Shouldn’t local authorities be encouraging people to go back to work? Council leaders blithely discuss the gains of virtual working in terms of reducing overheads and rationalising office costs. At what price? This delaying in the public sector is unlikely to inspire confidence among furloughed private sector staff that returning to the workplace is safe, or even important.

Face-to-face work interactions are also important to inject dynamism into delivering council services, which have undoubtedly become sclerotic during the pandemic. The Local Government Association has admitted that lockdown has had negative consequences on delivering vital support: 150,000 babies born after March 23 and not registered due to bureaucratic backlogs, means their parents

can’t claim child benefits. Undoubtedly myriad other services are similarly affected.

The reluctance to kick back against lockdown norms such as home working are perhaps because most UK office workers seemingly don’t want to return to normal workplaces and hours.

According to a poll by Theta Financial Reporting, nearly two-thirds of employees agreed with the statement: ‘I do not feel comfortable commuting to work via public transport anymore, and think it will be one of the most stressful parts of my day.’

Worse, many policy wonks and politicians are attempting to turn this demobilisation of work to the dinner table into a positive vision of halcyon worker wellbeing.

One of the unintended consequences of the lockdown has been social atomisation. Please don’t let’s sell this as a positive. Isolation from one’s colleagues is not a boon. We lose something invaluablely productive without personal interaction, teamwork, engagement with varied people, talents and viewpoints and bouncing ideas off each other.

And remember: not all homes are spacious, equipped with problem-free wi-fi, or exempt from interruptions.

The erosion of the distinction between private life and public work might be a step backward. My older female relatives ‘taking in’ washing and ironing at home for convenience, were horror stories not fairy tales. My mother’s generation of independent-aspiring women fought to escape such privatised drudgery. They saw joining the workforce as a chance to broaden their horizons; they relished office life as freedom from the confines of the home.

Lockdowns may be a cruel necessity, but councils should use their new powers sparingly and learn from my Mum: going to work is liberating. Time to unleash freedom not fear. ■

Claire Fox is director of the Institute of Ideas

## soapbox



By Andrew Carter

As we grapple with the economic effects of the pandemic, policy-makers’ concerns have once again turned to the future of our high streets. Lockdown has dealt a heavy blow to many retail and hospitality businesses. At its lowest point during lockdown, our data showed that average city centre footfall was just 15% of normal levels. Even as the country returns to normal, social distancing rules and enduring virus-phobia mean that many people are remaining at home.

High street businesses fail for one simple reason – a lack of customers. Before the pandemic it tended to be high streets in smaller, less economically successful cities and towns that struggled because of a lack of weekday office workers spending money.

Now, the opposite is true: footfall in Britain’s largest city centres is taking longer to bounce back than in smaller places. Again, this is due to a lack of office workers. In London, large numbers of office workers are remaining at home and many companies are considering switching permanently to remote working.

These are not cost-free choices. While working from home may suit employees and reduces companies’ overheads, it starves the retail and hospitality sectors of customers. We are already seeing the effects of this: Pret a Manger is closing 30 branches and axing jobs, while Selfridges is also making redundancies.

The labour market will eventually adjust to these changes and in the longer-term we may see new service jobs created in suburbs and town centres on the periphery of big cities. But this hollowing out of our city centres could take away much of what made them the exciting places that they were pre-COVID.

If we care about saving thousands of retail and hospitality jobs and preserving the vibrancy of our city centres then we need to that ensure workers return for at least part of the working week. Transport authorities can do their part by allowing flexible part-time season tickets for commuters, but public and private sector employers should also recognise that the choices they will make in the coming months will have consequences for the health of their local economies. ■

Andrew Carter is chief executive of Centre for Cities