LETTERS ON LIBERTY

FREE HOUSE

PUBS: DEFENDING
THE FREE HOUSE

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Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

PUBS: DEFENDING THE FREE HOUSE

Since the late noughties, a regular pulse check on pub closures has made for grim reading. In total, there are less than 40,000 in England and Wales, and 7,000 have closed in the past decade. As predicted, overzealous Covid restrictions between 2020 and 2021 provoked the closure of thousands of pubs. If it wasn't for Wetherspoons, which has done a sterling job of converting old buildings into elegant drinking dens serving very affordable booze, the pub landscape would be almost barren. Spoons has become a haven for an older working-class clientele. For younger hipsters, microbreweries and pop-up pubs with live music venues show that enterprising folk still want to create lively spaces for the nation's young - and not quite so young. The problem is, these tend to have a very short shelf-life compared to established pubs and venues of old.

If the pub closure statistics have become routine, so have the rehearsed explanations for pub closures: the steady, above-inflation price rises of beer over a 30-year period; the hike in VAT on alcohol in 2006 and the smoking ban in 2007. Simultaneously, a much cheaper assortment of booze is now available from supermarkets, and the rise of home drinking has attempted to compensate for people's dwindling

disposable incomes. As economic explanations, these trends have undoubtedly played a role. However, what hasn't been explained is why enthusiasm for public drinking was beginning to decline before the regular price rises, the VAT hikes and the smoking ban. The peak period for pubs, as well as alcohol consumption, was in 1979, with a steady decline after that.[i]

Although pubs became a recognisable totem of British culture, reflected in their key role in dramas and soap operas, their decline was underway as early as the late 1950s. The sociologists Young and Willmott noted that working-class leisure time in east London was moving away from pubs to the home and hearth. The pub as a masculine domain was being replaced with privatised leisure time at home. Other 'affluent worker' studies at the time made similar connections.[ii] By the late 1980s and into the 1990s, a steady decline of public drinking mirrored a decline in other public associations. Trade union and political party membership, as well as membership of mainstream Christian churches, also fell during this period. There was a notable shift from being out with others to being reclusive at home. It is this reluctance to engage in public life, preferring to retreat into domestic isolation, that has been the key driver of pub closures.

These cultural shifts help explain why governments have been able to kick at open pub doors for years. A

creeping, privatised existence tends to encourage a fearful and suspicious mindset, to expect the worst of strangers 'out there'. It shaped a new type of politics, with an electorate more receptive to safetyism and risk aversion in public life. As we shall see, for some of the middle classes there is an activist mindset to demand even greater authoritarian control over public life. The absence of any revolt over the smoking ban in July 2007, for example, indicated how state encroachment on the pub lounge was pretty much accepted. This is not to berate ordinary people for lacking a radical edge. The privatisation of everyday life is the outcome of the exclusion of the masses from politics. It has had the effect of reducing the urgency of mass cultural life. Consequently, it is why pubs are culturally less significant places than before.

Of course, people have not entirely abandoned public drinking altogether. But the association of pubs with personal freedom and adult autonomy has diminished. And this is driven by how society now interprets autonomy and freedoms. Pubs are not seen as places to express the basic rights of free-willing citizens, but as dangerous spaces for health risks or personal safety. New Labour administrations were not dealing with epidemics of hard drinking and pub violence in the 2000s, but responding to a new climate seeking safety and security. The demise of pubs has gone hand-in-hand with a widening fear of freedom in Britain.

How pubs enabled freedom

The history of pubs can be traced to taverns in Roman Britain and through Anglo-Saxon alehouses. But it was not until the early-nineteenth century that pubs as we know them first appeared. When industrialisation, and with it the working classes, expanded in Britain's major cities, many leisure activities took place in public rather than in private. Their development in the subsequent centuries mirrored the rise of the masses into public life. Although they existed outside the direct discipline of the workplace, pubs still had to adhere to rules and 'permissions' (ie, a licence). And yet, from the outset, pubs still embodied the pursuit and celebration of freedom: the freedom of association for individuals to choose who to drink and converse with, and the freedom of political association - to meet other like-minded people to discuss politics and to form political organisations.

For centuries, pub rooms have been arenas where lively political debate can exist without fear of censure. It is doubtful whether working-class organisations and pressure groups would have developed without pubs as a meeting and debating place. Even today, politicians still admit that the pubs near the Palaces of Westminster are where the real business of discussing politics happens.[iii] They have always been spaces

steeped in the principles of free speech and free association for autonomous adults. They are havens of conversation, discussion and arguments fuelled by ale and lager.

Illicit underage drinking in pubs often did more good than harm - teenagers learnt how to behave like adults among adults, rather than drink themselves to oblivion.

From this sprang creative freedoms, too. From the nineteenth century to the present day, pubs have been havens of entertainment, live music, cabaret and comedy. The pub circuit helped furnish Britain with a raft of comedians and musicians - or, in the case of Billy Connolly, a combination of both. You weren't viewed as a proper, lived-in performer if you hadn't cut it in pubs up and down the breadth of the UK. Although the term 'pub rock' became pejorative after the scorched-earth approach of punk, neither punk nor what came after it would have thrived without a network of pub venues. The Hope and Anchor, The Nashville and Dingwalls in London provided a ready-made launch pad for some of the best acts over the past 50 years.[iv] The same is true of countless live pub venues right across the UK.

Contained within this creative freedom was the awareness that the rough and tumble of pubs could also make them daunting places. On a bar-stool level, your presence in a pub stands or falls on what you bring to the conversational table - it still does. Higher up in the stakes, whether a political speaker, musician or comedian, your capacity to enthral a pub crowd requires guts. Reputations were forged and adults would require a thick skin - sometimes quite literally. In less salubrious parts of a town or city, certain pubs carried threats of intimidation and violence, where hard-man reputations were also made.

All these different experiences of pubs demanded a degree of confidence, self-containment, maturity and wherewithal from punters. A corollary of the free space that pubs guaranteed was an informal expectation of responsibility, to abide by the unspoken codes established in any given space. This is why illicit underage drinking in pubs often did more good than harm - teenagers learnt how to behave like adults among adults, rather than drink themselves to oblivion.

The taming of the pub

Historically - in the early-nineteenth century - pubs were completely unregulated. The regulations that crept in were a compromise between an emphasis on the responsibility of the landlord and state-required permission. Nevertheless, this compromise did enable landlords a degree of autonomy over their premises. This is why pub landlords had their name above the door, to mark the space where they have jurisdiction. The landlord is responsible and makes the rules within the wider licensing laws, regarding opening and closing times, and the services they offer (for example, whether dogs are allowed in). Perhaps most importantly, the police can only enter a pub if asked to by the landlord or their representative. It marks a sort of privately regulated space (by the landlord) that is neither fully private nor fully public.

Thus, a pub landlord had a degree of autonomy and the authority to set his or her own rules - for example, to exclude customers. While pubs were a public space, they were also a semi-autonomous space for autonomous adults - a place of freedom. The significance of the 2007 smoking ban was that it stripped this important landlord autonomy. Rather than the state being left standing outside the pub doors, it could now barge its way in. The smoking ban

enabled the Labour Party to further demonise drinkers and embolden a narrative of pubs as dangerous places for young people - especially young women.

Even officialdom sometimes recognises how vital pubs are to our national way of life.

This climate of fear around pubs, most often pushed by politicians, was seized upon by the police as an excuse to introduce fingerprint scanning. Young drinkers entering a town's main late-night drinking and dancing joints are now routinely asked to register their personal details, have their photograph taken and submit to a biometric finger scan. Police forces from Somerset to Surrey have required pubs to implement such schemes in order to weed out drink-fuelled violence. The details of anyone getting into a fight or causing a nuisance will be entered on to a computer, so the next time the customer goes to a pub or club involved in the scheme, their details will be flagged up by the finger scanner at the entrance and the customer might be turned away.

Who knew that airport levels of security were required for a quiet pint? James Welch, legal director for Liberty, was right to challenge this: 'People in a free society should not be forced to hand over confidential personal information just to have a drink - yet this

sinister trend for compulsory ID scanning is on the increase.'[v] Unfortunately, such critical sentiments are few and far between. For some, the schemes are merely a minor inconvenience, and are instead viewed as an important measure to keep everyone 'safe'. In the not-so-distant past, no one wanted police officers sticking their nose in pubs. They were meant to be a free space for free adults. But this positive view of freedom has been turned upside down - freedom is now viewed as the freedom to prevent or escape harm. Consequently, visiting a supposedly 'free' space is no longer a joyful experience, but one containing myriad hazards that the police must prevent.

Nevertheless, this culture of unfreedom is not simply driven by top-down authoritarians. As mentioned previously, it has grown in tandem with a rising demand across society for safetyism. This trend was lamentably exposed during the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 to 2021, where freedom was thrown out of the window and even ostensibly radical left-wingers welcomed living in what they would usually call a 'Tory police state'. Furthermore, many of the middle classes also welcomed new social norms like working from home (WFH) and increasingly viewed expressions of public life with fear and loathing. It encouraged a craven form of NIMBYism, with demands for local pubs to be closed lest they ruin the peace and quiet during Zoom meetings.[vi] Such

demands, usually spearheaded by a few angry residents, have been gleefully taken up by council bureaucrats, leading to closures of historic pubs on the spurious grounds of noise and nuisance.[vii] The culture of unfreedom only begets a demand for further restrictions.

Covid lockdown seemed more geared around pubs and socialising than other domains of public life, reflecting how keen the authorities were to exert control over public freedoms. This expressed itself in an endless stream of daft regulations (like the 'rule of six').[viii] At one point, the government insisted that pub drinkers could only drink if their pints and bottles were served with a meal. This led to a Whitehall debate about whether a Scotch egg constituted a meal.

The fact that landlords devised ways around this was a positive push back against the ludicrous authoritarian lockdown measures - one establishment gave out cheese sandwiches on the door. Perhaps reflecting how important pubs remained as a place of social and public freedom, one of the first relaxation measures of the lockdown period was to enable people to go back and drink in pubs in May 2021 (unless you lived in Scotland), signalling that even officialdom sometimes recognises how vital pubs are to our national way of life.

The age of the teen puritan?

'Is this the age of the teen puritan?', asked the *Observer* a few years ago.[ix] The evidence suggests it is. Over the past decade, the percentage of teens who drink booze has declined from around 25 per cent to nine per cent. For health zealots, this is news to crack open the carrot juice to. But the discussion around young people and pubs reveals everything that is rotten about the way booze is discussed. Reducing alcohol consumption to a mere health issue ignores the role drink has played in human culture throughout the ages. It ignores alcohol's part in great conversations, nights out with friends, romance, marriage ceremonies and business deals. Booze lowers inhibitions - it helps us get closer.

Today, society tends to view people getting close to one another as a source of multiple risks. Hence, younger people's abstention from pubs and boozing goes hand-in-hand with a suspicion of getting up close and personal. (Sexual promiscuity among younger generations is allegedly much lower than their parents and grandparents.) This is an alarming trend and one that is detrimental to young people's development as socially confident and independent adults.

Many young people seem to have internalised this risk-averse, safety-first outlook. A survey from Portsmouth University showed how many young people feel scared and unsafe in pubs and clubs[x]. The researchers unwisely interpreted the survey results as a sign that pubs are populated with trouble-seeking thugs.

In fact, the youngsters seemed to be expressing concerns about holding their own in a conversation or being in a room populated with strangers. For the young people surveyed, it was preferable to be at a friend's house loading up on booze, away from the bustle, eye contact and awkward chats of the pub. But pubs are essential for socialisation - they act as a regulator of behaviour, informally instilling expectations of adult norms in the process. They are places of freedom, but with certain expectations of responsibility.

The normalisation of lockdown provided additional security from having to deal with others.

Away from such an adult space, teens loading up vodka in parks or at home end up drinking booze in an unmediated and destructive way. Aside from the physical risks of this, they also fail to pick up the cues and expectations of intergenerational social life. The

demise of the teen pub drinker is generally doing more harm than good - leading young people to passively watch footage of nightlife via TikTok, rather than actually venture out.[xi]

This was bought into sharp relief by recent surveys on the impact of lockdown on young people. Young people aged between 18 and 34 are in an 'epidemic of loneliness', according to the think tank Onward. In its report, *Age of Alienation*, Onward suggests that younger generations' interpersonal social networks have become far worse in recent years. According to Will Tanner, Onward's director, 'after decades of community decline and 15 months of rolling lockdowns, young people have fewer friends, trust people less and are more alienated from their communities than ever before'. But before lockdown, there had already been a sharp decline in young people socialising in pubs and clubs. Some youngsters admit that socialising in pubs is daunting and even 'scary'. The normalisation of lockdown provided additional security from having to deal with others.[xii]

Another round?

When the masses burst into public life following industrialisation, they created a robust and fearless public square in Britain. This dynamism was reflected in the development of trade unions and political parties, vehicles for advancing sectional interests and deciding who was in control of society. Pubs played an essential role in the life and leisure of the British masses. For most of recent history, this was also recognised culturally as a distinct totem of British society. No one does a boozer quite like the British. Their centrality as an informal space also meant that, while beholden to state regulation, pubs still enabled landlords to have autonomy over their rules and governance. It was a part-private, part-public space that was a unique free haven for ordinary people.

As Orwell acknowledged in his 10 rules for a pub (in his essay, *The Moon Under Water*[xiii]), a public drinking space should be a place for conversation among patrons. Despite the numerous threats to pub culture, pubs are still a go-to for celebrations for most of us, for watching football matches and to chat with friends and lovers. Indeed, although a chain, Wetherspoons mostly adheres to Orwell's rule that pubs should not have loud music to distract from the key focus of conversation. Combined with below-inflation prices,

these pubs have become the last bastion of working-class pub culture. Perhaps this is why they are so despised by middle-class snobs, who attack Spoons for being too 'Brexity' and populist. (Wetherspoons boss Tim Martin is a very vocal supporter of leaving the European Union.) But the new mood of populism against an out-of-touch political class could translate into a newfound revival of the pub as a haven for good time, for letting go and defying the pro-nanny-state set. All hope is not lost - a mini boom of new live venues in various cities across the UK indicates that Netflix can't entirely replace the thrill of live music and a few beers.[xiv]

Local councils could do their part by cutting red tape and rules to allow pubs to thrive and make local areas a more attractive place to live. But the future of rowdy locals relies on us, the punters, rediscovering and reshaping the public square as a place of freedom. We should not be ready to heed last orders so easily.

Right, whose round is it?

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