

Christmas bells ring hollow this Covid-blighted year



'M WRITING this on the day the hairdressers reopened. After drifting about for nearly three weeks in a cloud of dry shampoo, looking as if I'd stuck my head in the dustbag of a hoover, I'm my neatly coiffed self again.'

Don't tell me. I know. It was an insignificant inconvenience in the midst of a pandemic – but already I'm fretting about our health minister's thinly veiled threat to corral us all over again if we don't behave.

I'm fed up. All this in/out, in/out of special measures is like a macabre hokey-cokey. The first lockdown (I wouldn't be so rash as to call it a novelty) was hardly a pleasant experience but it galvanized us. What a virtue-signalling flurry it was of deep-cleaning, DIY, home-baking, redecorating and brisk walks. Lockdown was, we were told, an uncomfortable disruptive sacrifice but a necessary means to a safe end. And we believed it.

A repeat exercise found our store of inner resources somewhat depleted. Knock away the supporting structures of our days and we crumble, our iron resolve turning to putty and our tenuous goodwill exhausted. Now we're weary, dispirited and bored rigid, our sole entertainment a concerted whinge-fest. Who'd have thought our scientifically sophisticated society would be stricken by the modern equivalent of a medieval plague?

A sense of purposelessness permeates the public mood. There's little luxury in a long lie-in if you can do it any morning or you've nothing to get up for. Our days become shapeless, indistinguishable one from another. I have to look at the top of the newspaper to check the date. 'Going out' isn't the same as 'GOING OUT' out. Nobody dresses up for a hasty circuit of the supermarket. Throw a coat over the jogging bottoms, grab the list, the shopping bags and go. Halfway there, realise with many oaths and imprecations that it's necessary to return for the mask, left on the hall table.

Masks are very disconcerting. I keep greeting people I think I know and they turn out to be somebody else. Also, my glasses constantly steam up, I can't see where I'm going and when I remove the mask, there are two white stripes where my carefully applied blusher used to be. Worse, I've lost one each of three pairs of earrings.

Ever opportunistic, fashion wasn't long jumping on the Covid wagon. I spotted a designer



HUMANITY: The pandemic highlighted the selfless work of health service personnel; volunteers and charity workers, whose spontaneous response was a godsend to the needy – and anonymous, decent, ordinary citizens looked out for their neighbours without thought of recognition or reward

mask in padded silk for £114 in a magazine. The point is, unless fabric masks are washed daily, you might as well have a floocloth wrapped round your face. Despite its comical blowfish tendency to inflate and deflate with every breath, it's better surely to stick to the bog-standard disposable blue and bin it. And apropos of nothing, who invented our new sanitised form of greeting by touching elbows as if we're part of a ridiculous folk dance?

Home to television and news and heartsinking statistics. The longer this goes on, the greater the risk of an unravelling of our moral fibre and the danger of the reckless imperilling us all. I detect already in myself a dumb, glum acceptance of the status quo, a loss of energy and incentive. Days empty of purpose soon turn leisure into lassitude – the mental equivalent of slouching round the house all day in your pyjamas, transfixed by the hypnotic power of rubbish television.

Knock away the supporting structures of our days and we crumble, our iron resolve turning to putty and our tenuous goodwill exhausted. We're weary, dispirited

Covid has revealed the misery of many long hidden in plain sight – the plight of the new unemployed, the recently redundant, and a new poor whose enterprises have foundered in a suddenly altered and unforgiving economic climate.

Has any good come of Covid? Its few redeeming features are the tireless, selfless work of health service personnel; volunteers and charity workers, whose spontaneous response was a godsend to the needy – and the great anonymous army of decent ordinary citizens who looked out for their neighbours without thought of recognition or reward.

Meanwhile, commerce dictates that the frantic faux-jollity of Christmas must be sustained, relentless cheer casting a thin veneer over fear, loss, loneliness and increasing levels of hardship. Never have Christmas bells – nor Christmas tills rung more hollow.

ON THIS DAY

DECEMBER 15 1970

'Campaign Against Me' - Rights Activist

IN A statement yesterday Mr Paddy Doherty spoke of a campaign against his appointment to a housing post in Derry which, he said, had been mounted by 'certain individuals in public life along with some organisations'. Mr Doherty said he had learned with regret that the [Stormont] Ministry of Development had refused to approve the Derry Development Commission's appointment of himself to the post of maintenance manager. The Derry civil rights activist added: 'I can only hope that the Minister [Brian Faulkner] did not have this in mind when he refused to accept the recommendations of the panel of experts ...'

Mr Doherty said he had returned from the West Indies, where he held a supervisory post with a big British building concern, and had an opportunity of being interviewed for the post by a panel. 'This distinguished panel not only recommended me for the post but suggested that my starting salary should be fixed above the recommended scale.'

Falls MP's Old Bailey Clash

A STORMONT MP shouted at a prosecuting counsel at the Old Bailey in London yesterday. The Falls MP, Mr Patrick Devlin told Mr Brian Leary: 'Don't sneer at me. I am the MP for the area and I am not coming here to have anyone sneer at me.' The Judge told Mr Devlin, who was giving evidence for a Belfast man accused of plotting to supply firearms: 'Will you keep quiet?'

Mr Devlin was giving evidence for port superintendent, Joseph McBrinn (56), Belfast who had pleaded not guilty with three others to conspiring unlawfully to supply firearms to unauthorised people. The prosecution alleges that the arms were destined for Catholics in Northern Ireland. Mr Devlin said that he had known McBrinn for about 25 years. 'He is a highly respected member of our community,' he said. The Irish Transport General Workers' Union of which McBrinn was chairman, took an active part in helping families who had lost their homes.

A former IRA internee, Paddy Devlin (1925-99) was elected as Labour MP for Falls in 1969. A passionate socialist and founder member of the SDLP, which he later left, he was health minister in the 1974 power-sharing executive. **Common Market Hopes**

BRITAIN hopes that negotiations of her entry into the Common Market can be successfully concluded in a matter of months, Mr Anthony Royle, Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, said yesterday. (Exactly 50 years before the UK's disorderly exit from the EU, the Tory government of Ted Heath was impatient to join the European Common Market, an ambition they shared with the Irish government.)

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com