



SURGE OF DEMAND: Shoppers queue outside Primark in Belfast as non-essential shops reopen in Northern Ireland following the easing of lockdown restrictions
PICTURE: Mark Marlow/PA

After so much sacrifice, let's not lose the run of ourselves

WELL, I suppose we got what we'd yearned for last Friday – a return to what passes for normality in these parts.

I had no intention of joining the Gadarene rush to the shops, but it was absolutely necessary for me to drive into town for a vital appointment, viz. eyebrow tint'n'tidy, since I bore a close resemblance to an anaemic version of the famously monobrowed Mexican artist Frida Kahlo.

What an ordeal it was, proceeding at a funeral pace, my foot aching on the clutch of my elderly asthmatic Fiesta, spirits dampened by the sight of every car park's serrated rows of vehicles and the fast-diminishing prospect of finding a space. You couldn't have slid a knife blade between cars outside TK Maxx. Outside our local Primark was a modern re-enactment of the Siege of Derry. Women, purses at the ready, thronged the surrounding streets, up to, and even on, the city walls – a tidal wave of determined femininity, like a biblical plague of locusts hellbent on stripping the shop rails bare. Which they did.

The theory posited by experts was that our experience of pandemic would radically alter the way we lived and thought. If Friday last and previous brief relief from lockdown is anything to go by, they're mistaken.

We mean well, but we're a nation of backsliders. Relief makes us reckless. Already, one person in three ignores the hand sanitiser at store doors, the two-metre rule has telescoped to a couple of feet and great lumps of teenagers march maskless into shops, giving dogs abuse to anyone brave enough to stop them.

Permission for outdoor drinking and dining has been hailed with enthusiasm by the hardy. In a climate as unpredictable as ours, alfresco eating has never really been part of our culture,

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though the memoirs of many recall the misery of grit-laden sandwiches consumed on windswept beaches. I'm not so desperate for company that I could be prevailed upon to sit outdoors on a pavement in defiance of the elements, inhaling exhaust fumes and getting a foundering along with my overpriced coffee.

Something terrible has happened to me during lockdown. I've turned into a curmudgeon – shouting at the television, despairing of the heedless young and consigning our politicians to perdition. Stormont – a hundred years in existence and still picking at the scabs of festering old sores.

What do most of us want? A decent house, secure employment, a good education for our children; efficient (and speedy) medical

care, safe streets, mutually respectful cultural diversity, freedom to worship as we choose and live at peace with our neighbours. It's called 'stability'. Other places manage it.

We, bedevilled by inherited suspicion of 'otherness', are a tiresomely insoluble embarrassment and a thorn in the side of two jurisdictions. For many generations now the most valuable of our exports are our young – an unshakable haemorrhaging of our brightest and best. A smattering of my contemporaries left in the sixties, never to return. Of my daughter's nineties form class, fewer than a handful remain.

Lockdown brought out the best and the worst in us – a tide of neighbourly kindness and concern; for some, gladness of respite from perpetual getting and striving. Others, without the anaesthetic of routine felt cut adrift. Undiluted leisure, unless it be a holiday, breeds boredom and soul-sapping aimlessness. Knock away the scaffolding of our days and some of us crumble. Prolonged togetherness either seals or fractures relationships. My heart went out to those 'working from home' besieged by familial interruptions and the 'furloughed', devoid of legitimate excuses, having to tackle

long-postponed renovations. As an ex-teacher, I confess to taking a certain vicarious pleasure in the discomfiture of parental 'home schoolers', discovering that it ain't as easy as it looks.

Re-reading this, I'm in severe danger of realising that I'm old – but glad of it. Who'd want to be young in this benighted place these days? We Baby Boomers had the best of it – and even that wasn't great. Let's not at this late stage and after so much sacrifice, lose the run of ourselves. Remember – two jabs don't bestow immortality. Mind how you go.

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ON THIS DAY

MAY 4 1921

Protest at 'Papist Viceroy'

THE appointment of a Catholic as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and the swearing-in of that gentleman at Dublin Castle on the Douai Bible were strongly condemned by Councillor W J Twaddell, one of the [Unionist] candidates for West Belfast at a meeting of women in Shankill Road Orange Hall. Mr S Cunningham, JP, who presided, said they were in very critical times and if they did not win now, they would be 'done for' and be under a Sinn Fein Parliament. Mr T H Burn, MP, said it might be held that the struggle was between Unionists, on the one hand, and Nationalists and Sinn Feiners on the other; but he could tell them that the real struggle lay between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism (applause).

Councillor W J Twaddell, another [Unionist] candidate, said: 'We are as heartily and strongly opposed to Home Rule as ever we were and our opposition is amply justified by the state of Ireland today. ... Nevertheless Home Rule has been forced upon the Six Counties. We did not want it; we don't want it; we prefer to remain an integral part of the UK. Be that as it may, it is our intention to make the best of what we consider a bad bargain.

This is a contest for the defence of Protestantism in opposition to an attempt at the conquest of the Six Counties by the Roman Catholics of Ireland'.

He added: 'One item, I think we will all agree, is contrary to the Constitution of this country and that is the appointment of a Roman Catholic Lord Lieutenant.'

Mr R J Lynn, MP, the third candidate, described the [Devlinite] Nationalists as 'Sinn Feiners' in disguise.

Craig and the Orange Sash

SIR James Craig, speaking at Bangor, said the people of Ulster must not expect miracles because a Parliament was brought to their doors. His party and his policy were going to be moderate. But...there must be no trifling with the Union Jack or Orange sash.

THE sectarian tone of much of the unionist rhetoric in the run-up to the partition election was hardly reassuring to the one-third Catholic minority, trapped in the new state. William Twaddell MP would be assassinated by the IRA in May 1922. The appointment of Lord Fitzalan as the first Catholic Viceroy angered loyalists such as TH Burn, a member of the right-wing Ulster Unionist Labour Association. The UULA was set up by Carson in 1918 to deflect Unionist workingmen from Socialism which was making inroads in 'Red Clydeside'. RJ Lynn chaired the 'Lynn Committee' into educational reform under the unionist government.

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