

# Hi ho silver lining: every crisis has its heroes . . . and its villains

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Nothing reveals a man's character quite like a crisis. And there has not been a crisis as catastrophic to the economy since at least the South Sea Bubble. Even then everyone who had been ruined could still visit the London coffee houses and laugh their stockings off at Drury Lane. The early Georgians were not stuck in their parlours shouting into Zoom.

Well, Covid-19 has revealed character. It has shone a spotlight into the furthest corners of corporate Britain, exposing some companies — and the men who run them — to be the chisellers that they are.

There's good old Mike Ashley, who, hearing the prime minister tell Britons that they could exercise once a day, thought he'd manage to flog a few more tracksuits. Sports Direct told its employees that it was “uniquely well placed to help keep the UK as fit and healthy as possible during this crisis”. Yeah, right. And maybe Harold Shipman is uniquely well placed to help the NHS during this pandemic. Ashley's chief financial officer, Chris Wootton, did not do his cause any good by then hiking the price of home gym equipment by as much as 50 per cent, blaming the fact that they “were not operating at full staffing” at the warehouse.

The prize for the greatest corona-plonker, however, has to go to Tim Martin, the turnip-headed Worzel Gummidge of capitalism. He is the founder of the JD Wetherspoon chain of pubs, which in good times serves cheap beer and free wifi to students and pensioners. It serves a genuine public purpose.

He does not. First off: in a foolhardy attempt to keep his business open last week, long after it became obvious that the coronavirus was being spread through social gatherings, he claimed that a shutdown of pubs was “over the top”. His reason? There was “hardly any transmission of the virus within pubs”. He should know. Before he became a publican he was an eminent virologist. Oh, hang on a sec, scratch that, he was a lawyer.

It gets worse. He then laid off all his workers and told them they should hang on until the government implemented its furlough scheme, under which laid-off workers should receive 80 per cent of their wages from the taxpayer. In a jaunty online video Martin suggested that his 40,000 workers should get a job at Tesco, and signed off: “Best of luck!”

Many people have suggested that when this crisis is over, if we have any cash left in our wallets, we will ensure that none of it gets spent at the likes of Wetherspoons or Sports Direct or Virgin Atlantic, where staff were forced to take eight weeks' unpaid leave.

Will consumers really remember? I have witnessed plenty of corporate boycotts, or at least a few outraged gatherings outside a Vodafone shop (for not paying enough tax) or Primark (for

selling garments made in the lethal Rana Plaza factory complex in Bangladesh) and indeed Sports Direct (for endless misdemeanours) and they tend to have little significant effect.

But I wonder if this crisis is so life-changing that people will have far longer and sharper memories than usual. I hope so. Not because I wish to corona-shame the charlatans, but mostly because the crisis has also shone a spotlight on a handful of companies that have proved that capitalism can be a force for good. While Tim Martin was telling his workers to get stuffed, his rival pub chain Fuller's wrote to its tenants saying that it would cancel all commercial rents. Not pause the rent or reduce it, but completely forgo it. "It is imperative, as a business, we ensure your survival," it wrote.

Then there is Tesco, Britain's biggest private sector employer, which is giving its workers a 10 per cent bonus to recognise the extra work they are putting in. Of course it has loads of extra cash in the tills, thanks to shifting that lavatory paper, so it can afford to do this. But, still, if you are in the aisles dealing with abusive shoppers fighting over the last bag of penne, I am sure it is appreciated that you are getting a slice of the profits, rather than it all going to the shareholders.

Leon, which in good times sells slightly overpriced, slightly under-salted meatballs to commuters, is staying open in locations where it can sell food at a 50 per cent discount to NHS workers, who understandably do not have the inclination or the time to start whipping up a meal after a long shift.

"The decision isn't financial. In fact, it's costing more for our business to stay open," the company has said.

Following the financial crisis of 2008 some of the banks that had been bailed out by the taxpayer failed to grasp that they needed to return the favour by changing their behaviour. Small businesses continued to be offered unreasonable terms; consumers were still mis-sold payment protection insurance.

In this case it is not a sector that has been bailed out; it is the entire economy and it would be heartening to think that some companies will see the example of Fuller's, Tesco or Leon — and the many others that ensured that their workers only had to worry about their health, not their livelihoods — and rethink their purpose.

After the Industrial Revolution the Quaker movement created a large number of businessmen, because they were barred from university and the professions, who discovered that it was possible to make vast sums of money at the same time as treating their workers very decently. Will this epoch-changing pandemic see an emergence of a new generation of Cadburys, Rowntrees or Lever brothers? That would be a much-needed silver lining.

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