



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

'Lockdown' measures lacking clarity

AT the time of writing – never has that start to a sentence been more apposite for me as I really don't know how things will have changed by next week, tomorrow, or even by the end of the day – we are training the horses almost as normal. We are training them to be fit to race when racing resumes. We hope that will be on May 1, and I am very encouraged by the tone of the latest communication from the BHA on the subject, but I'm not sure how many of us really believe that is possible.

One of the hardest things for me has been to interpret, and to try to follow, government guidelines since 'lockdown'. Like many, in racing and beyond, I want to do, and be seen to be doing, the right thing. But, unlike some, I am determined to get the former, doing the right thing, ahead of the latter, the perception of being seen to be doing the right thing.

The government guidelines have said from the outset, and continue to say, that you can travel to and from work 'but only if that work cannot be done from home'. Many individuals and industry representative bodies have added the concept, perhaps correctly, that the work must be absolutely essential and that has almost become the accepted norm.

Responsibility

This, in my opinion, has created the greatest confusion. What is essential for one person or business can look quite unnecessary to someone else and John Scanlon (Off The Bridle, p. 25) is not the only one to be reminded of the late Phil Bull's description of horseracing as 'the great triviality'. If you take this argument to the nth degree we can get into the debate about whether it is 'essential' to keep horses at all, never mind race them but, thankfully, we are a long way from having to consider that. We all, personally, have to do 'our bit' but, beyond that, my first responsibility is to Johnston Racing, its customers, its staff, and, of course, the horses under our care.

The government, even before 'lockdown', ordered the closure of pubs, restaurants, cafes, and gyms – high-risk businesses where people meet and mingle in close proximity – and soon afterwards this was extended to 'non-essential' high-street shops (there's that word again – 'essential'). They stopped short of telling all other businesses to close and they have even clarified guidelines to condone tradespeople carrying out repairs and maintenance in people's homes, provided both the tradesperson and the occupants are well and

social distancing guidelines are followed.

As I have said, many individuals and representative bodies have their own interpretation of what the government have said, what they think the government should have said, and what we all should be doing to stop the spread of the virus. The BHA stopped racing a week before 'lockdown' and I said it was wrong to do so. It was, at that time, and arguably still is (although I agree that it has become increasingly difficult and impractical under 'lockdown' measures) possible to continue racing 'behind closed doors'. The Irish did it for several days after Britain stopped and that included one meeting, at Downpatrick, in the UK but under HRI, rather than BHA, rules. In my opinion, the BHA should have, at least, made more effort to stage meetings behind closed doors as this would have given us vital experience of the logistics of staging racing under these difficult circumstances, particularly as it seem highly likely that the resumption of racing will take place without spectators and with extraordinary disease control measures in place.

Anyway, it was done and, to a large extent, there is little point in us dwelling on that decision. It is far more important for us, and them, to concentrate efforts on getting racing restarted as soon as possible. It is vital for us to have plans in place for a restart under a multitude of different scenarios as things are changing so often and so quickly. None of us know what measures the government might introduce in the coming weeks, whether restrictions on movement might be strengthened or if they could be relaxed. Racing needs to be prepared to grasp whatever opportunities it is handed and I get the feeling that there might just be a will within the BHA to do so that wasn't there when the decision to stop was made. Maybe they have had something of a wake-up call from the reaction to their initial decision or maybe some different people within the BHA have stepped up to the breach as often happens in times of adversity.

It might be my imagination but has Nick Rust been less prominent in the last week and/or has his influence been less evident? Is he self-isolating? Or is he being isolated?

The governing body for my professional veterinary qualification, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, took very decisive action on the Coronavirus crisis and advised their members to cease non-essential work and cover

emergencies only, at least until the end of the of the government's lockdown period. Like the BHA's stance, it looked at first to be a demonstration of strong leadership but it had a similar lack of consideration of unintended consequences and it has caused consternation and confusion within the profession.

I have been following, and contributing to, a debate on the matter on the Equine Veterinary Group forum, an online veterinary discussion group that I subscribe to. It has, at times, become quite heated and it has given me a lot of food for thought on the matter.

Much of the debate revolved around the routine vaccination of horses against influenza, to comply with the rules of racing and reproductive work, particularly for the thoroughbred breeding industry. Most agreed that routine vaccination was contra to Royal College guidelines and refused to do these. The situation on reproductive work wasn't so clear and many felt that the work was essential, if only to ensure that their client remained in business if not simply for the welfare of the horses involved.

Infection

One contributor to the forum gave a heartfelt description of the pressures her doctor sister was under and explained that we, as vets, know how the virus spreads and the risks involved, whereas others take the government advice literally and believe that, if they can't work from home, they should go to work. She used an example of a tree surgeon who wanted to come to work at her house and she persuaded him not to.

It made me think a lot but, when I discussed it with Charlie and tried to apply some of the principles to our own situation, he pointed out that the tree would be unaltered after three or four weeks' delay, whereas our racehorses could require two months just to get them back to the same stage. 'We can't just press pause on this business', he said. Quite right.

It was followed soon afterwards by a posting which quite angrily questioned why we couldn't vaccinate horses to protect them against infection but it was all right to visit mares to help get them pregnant, 'on purely economic grounds'.

It set me thinking that there must be no end of things which are considered essential on purely economic grounds. I used the example of a blast furnace which, if it would be

irreparably damaged by shutting down, or even inordinately expensive to restart, must be kept going. It struck me that the government must recognise this. It cannot want or expect total shutdown of the economy, and the fact that the wording of the advice still focuses on being allowed to travel to work 'if your work absolutely cannot be done from home', rather than making reference to the nature of the work or its importance, must be deliberate.

THIS is why, when a BHA employee made the suggestion that we should only be exercising horses to uphold standards of welfare and not to keep them fit, it was quickly withdrawn by those who were aware that, if there is to be any hope of a return to racing, we must have a population of racehorses in training and that a shutdown would mean the laying off of more than two-thirds of the workforce, with many businesses never to return.

I have trailed through no end of government guidelines and, when I saw John Scanlon's piece (p.15) on the virus and his reference to 'non-essential work', I asked him to do the same in search of guidelines on whether people should or should not go to work. With the exception of the clear orders on pubs, restaurants, gyms and, later, non-essential shops, we could not find anything other than the repeated advice that you can travel to work if you cannot work from home. I did come across one reference to going to work if 'absolutely necessary' in the daily government bulletin but the emphasis remains on 'if you cannot work from home'.

By the way, I reserve the right to change my mind. I have always believed that the ability to change one's mind is a virtue rather than a weakness and, in these times, when we are all confused and uncertain, it is essential to keep an open mind.

We will make mistakes and get things wrong in our own personal decisions and so will the politicians and others who are dictating policy. It is far better to recognise that you are on the wrong path and correct yourself than to plough on for fear of criticism or ridicule.

We are reviewing the situation constantly with the underlying aim of getting back to the racecourse and doing the best by our customers, our staff and our horses.