

Slogans and Staying

The slogan Stay Alert has had a pretty bad press. Politicians and pundits have revelled in its vacuity. As a slogan, they say, it lacks the clarity of its forbear, Stay Home. At least in the days of Stay Home, the people of England knew where they stood. With that slogan now jettisoned, anything goes.

And yet Stay Home has never meant stay in your home, *come what may*. If it had meant that, hospitals and shops across the Union would have been empty and unstaffed since March. Pavements and parks would have been deserted. Roads would have played host neither to pedestrians nor vehicles.

That, though, is not the Stay Home world we recognise. The fact millions of people have, every day, been *leaving* home, some for many hours at a time, has not been an act of mass civil disobedience. It has been what the policy behind the slogan permitted – or, in the case of essential workers, *wanted* – them to do. The slogan would have captured the policy more faithfully if it had said Stay Home Except When You Are Expected Or Permitted Not To.

But let us be fair to Stay Home. It creates a presumption. It positions us in space and time. Other things being equal, there is somewhere you are meant to be at any given moment (home) and something you are meant to be doing (concentrating on not leaving home).

As a slogan, Stay Alert has no such clarity of purpose. It sounds like we can permissibly be anywhere at any time, doing anything we care to, provided we are in some sense alert to it. And the cause of Stay Alert is not helped by the policy it expresses having all sorts of weird anomalies about how you can do things in parks that you should not be doing in your own garden (or vice-versa). Perhaps, then, the slogan and the policy deserve one another: one is the flaky headline to the other's flaky copy.

Let us, though, grant Stay Alert the same fair hearing Stay Home received. Easing the lockdown means rendering permissible a multitude of things that were impermissible before. It means ending the presumption of where any given citizen should be at any given time. In navigating this new era, how much should we really be expecting *a slogan* to do our thinking for us? A better use of our energies might be to ask what we are entitled to expect of those newly freed agents as they roam far from the homestead. To which the answer comes: that they act responsibly and don't undo all the hard work that has gone into the lockdown already.

It may be that Act Responsibly is better than Stay Alert at capturing what the government is trying to convey to the people of England. Its flaw is that it begins with the word Act rather than Stay and thereby challenges the assumption that any successor slogan to Stay Home

must also begin with Stay in order to convey a sense of ordered continuity in government policy.

Along with their counterparts in Wales and Northern Ireland, the authorities in Scotland will shortly have to wheel out their own new slogan. This will no doubt open up the Government in Edinburgh to the kind of ridicule that has kept all of us, north and south of the border, so entertained in recent days. Dare Nicola Sturgeon depart from the Stay paradigm?