You always hurt the one you love

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Opinion



The prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, told the Daily Mirror he supported their campaign to save the country’s pubs as he recognised they were at the heart of communities. He still finds time to go for a pint in his local, the Pineapple, in Kentish Town, North London. It’s worth a visit. As well as some impressive old Bass mirrors – but sadly no Draught Bass on the bar – the pub is a fine example of one that has been saved for the local community. When it was threatened with closure, locals, led by the former mayor of London Ken Livingstone and broadcaster Jon Snow, rescued it and saved it to serve the people in the surrounding streets. Sir Keir spoke to the Mirror in early February. Far from helping pubs, measures taken by his government has caused many to close or to curtail their opening hours and reduce staff levels. If the prime minister would like to see the crisis first-hand, he should take a short train ride north from Kentish Town to St Albans. It’s renowned for having more pubs – 50 – per square mile than any other town or city in the country. But last month one pub suddenly pulled down the shutters while other publicans are worried about their futures. The pub in question is the Alban’s Well, the first outlet run in St Albans by the pub company and former brewer, Young’s. It opened just four years ago on the busy main road, St Peter’s Street. Young’s hasn’t given a reason for wielding the axe but it’s not hard to see why. Increases in Business Rates, National Insurance and the Minimum Wage are taking their toll. Ye Olde Fighting Cocks is the most famous pub in St Albans, centuries old, visited by Oliver Cromwell during the Civil War and packed with impressive beams, standing timbers and inglenooks. It pays a heavy price for its fame. It will pay an extra £30,000 in Business Rates this year. It’s not the only sufferer: the average Business Rates increase for pubs in the city is £19,000. The Mermaid has been the local CAMRA pub of the year on several occasions and serves a fine range of cask beers and ciders. But it’s feeling the pinch, and the owners have taken the hard decision to reduce opening hours. The Mermaid will now stay shut until 3pm Monday to Friday. Mark Powell, speaking for the pub’s owners, told the St Albans Times: “We need to reduce wage costs to mitigate increases in National Insurance, Minimum Wage and Business Rates. And energy costs are still too high.” Mark spelt out the human cost that will be caused by the cut in opening hours. “It means some of our older regulars who used to come in for a few halves at lunchtime can no longer meet and socialise in the pub. Many of them live alone and going to the pub was their main social activity.” He added that the owners had made one manager redundant and had increased beer prices by 20p a pint – “that’s double what we would normally have put them up by. The Minimum Wage has gone up 49 per cent since 2019 and we need to abolish outdated Business Rates”. He said angrily: “At the moment we are just tax collectors for the government.” The local Farr Brew brewery runs two pubs, the Elephant & Castle and the Reading Rooms, in Wheathampstead, a few miles from St Albans. The brewery’s Matt Everidge said trading in January and February was “horrendous”. “Increases are causing great anxiety,” he added. “Suppliers are all putting their prices up, but we can’t serve above a certain price for the majority of the items on our menus or for a pint.” He said ominously: “The walls are closing in. We’re facing the death of the high street. The government should tax larger online companies which use tax loopholes to create the country’s deficit.” Fergus McMullen, a director of the family brewery based in Hertford since 1827, told me his company’s tax bill will rise by an extra £6m a year from this month. He predicts that many more pubs will close and there will be redundancies in the brewery sector. The next time the prime minister pops for a pint in the Pineapple, perhaps locals could form a glee club outside and greet him with a rendition of that old song “You Always Hurt the One You Love, the One You Shouldn’t Hurt At All.”