

# Why Christmas can never be cancelled

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Boozing away the winter blues is a long-held right

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In the middle of a pandemic, it's hard to think of a worse idea than celebrating a traditional Christmas. It seems like madness for extended families to travel from far and wide to squash round a table in the fug of a well-heated home and cough over Granny. Yet across the world people seem determined to do exactly that. Against the advice of epidemiologists, politicians in Britain chickened out of banning people from meeting up, France lifted stringent travel restrictions to allow limited get-togethers, and gatherings of up to ten people will be permitted in Germany. As many governments have found throughout history, you mess with Christmas at your peril.

In an age of mass secularism, religion is only one reason why you can't cancel seasonal festivities. Even Christians came rather late to the mid-winter festival. What we think of today as "Jesus's birthday" wasn't set in stone until the fourth century. Many early Christians thought their Messiah was born on January 6th. Others were adamant that it was the spring. (Just think, the Holly and the Ivy could have been Daffodils and Tulips.) It was only some 350 years after Jesus was born that newly Christian Rome put an end to centuries of squabbling and settled on December 25th as the date of the virgin birth (a few holdouts in the Orthodox church still prefer the January celebration).

The end of December was already Roman party season. Rome was awash with drunken feasting during Saturnalia, the most debauched carnival in the calendar (and precursor to the modern Christmas party), which the Emperor Augustus limited to three days, and Caligula extended to five. During this period gambling was allowed in public and people swapped boring white togas for colourful robes. Roman life, normally so hierarchical, was turned on its head: slaves were served wine by their masters, cross-dressing was encouraged (the pantomime dame has ancient roots), and an ordinary man was elected King of the Saturnalia with the power to pass any "law" he fancied, so long as it was suitably hilarious. (Not everyone was out having fun. Seneca, a Roman philosopher and forerunner of Scrooge, complained one December that the "whole mob has let itself go in pleasures".)



**The end of December was already Roman party season: the five days of Saturnalia were the most debauched in the calendar**

Partying officially honoured the god Saturn. But then, as now, religion was largely an excuse to get drunk at the darkest time of the year. December 25th was a natural holiday long before it was a holy day. The harvest was in and animals that wouldn't survive the winter had been butchered and preserved. With almost nothing to be done in the fields, peasants could put their feet up. People needed to have fun, and Roman rulers understood that it was safer if they did so within officially sanctioned limits.

Christianity co-opted the mid-winter festival because it was easier to convert people to a strange new religion if the rhythms of daily life didn't really change. Clerics did want to alter the mood, though: they promoted the idea that Christ's birthday was a solemn time to be marked by reflection and fasting, not feasts and fornication. In 380 the archbishop of Constantinople preached against pagan traditions such as giving presents, putting wreaths on front doors, decorating the streets and feasting in ways that "prostitute the sense of taste".

He was fighting a losing battle. Across medieval Europe the escape valve opened every year, right on time. There were multiple excuses for merriment over Christmas and the new year. Two favourites were the Feast of Fools on New Year's Day, when boy choristers or local mad men were temporarily made into bishops, and the Feast of the Ass on January 14th, which celebrated the Holy family's flight into Egypt. Tradition called for a girl carrying a baby to ride a donkey into a church while the congregation chorused "hee-haw" instead of "Amen". As well as eating and drinking to excess, cross-dressing was widespread during festivities (it was especially popular with priests).

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Over the centuries the authorities tried their best to crack down on Christmas debauchery. In 1445 Charles VII of France issued a decree against priests' "derisive mockeries and spectacles". Nearly a century later, in England, Henry VIII outlawed carol singers and the tradition of having "children be strangelye decked and apparelid to couterfaite priestes, bysshops and women". The Reformation was boom time for grinchers. In Calvinist Scotland, people were fined for baking "Yule loaves" or indulging in "playing, dancing and singing [...] filthy carols".

Most infamously, in 1644 the English Parliament, presided over by Oliver Cromwell, abolished Christmas outright, along with Easter and Whitsun. Parliament reckoned that, since people

clearly weren't going to celebrate with a period of quiet contemplation, they shouldn't celebrate at all. Partying was banned and businesses forced to stay open. Not surprisingly, riots broke out across the country. Small wonder, then, that politicians have avoided banning family festivities this year.



As the Puritans discovered, Christmas is uncancellable. Despite their best efforts, “wilful and strict observation of the day commonly called Christmas” continued: shops closed and people put down their tools “to the great dishonour of Almighty God”. When the Lord Mayor of London and his men went around tearing wreaths and mistletoe from people’s doors, they were roundly mocked (“Their madnesse hath extended itself to the very vegetables,” wrote John Taylor, a Royalist poet). Still, the Puritans stuck to their principles. Christmas remained illegal until the monarchy was restored, under a party-loving king, in 1660.

Until 1789 the biggest Christmas killjoys were Christians themselves. That changed with the French revolution, which aimed to sweep away God, tradition and superstition and replace it with

a regime founded on rationalism, enquiry and progress. Christmas didn't stand a chance. It became just another day under the new revolutionary calendar, which was used in France between 1793 and 1805. It wasn't even on December 25th anymore: the new calendar named months based on the seasons; the ten days of the week were dedicated not to saints but agricultural tools, rocks, plants and animals. The day formerly known as Christmas became the 10th of Nivôse (month of snow), Day of the Dog.

Did the French revolutionaries succeed where other Christmas naysayers had failed? Not a chance. Mid-winter still needed brightening and Christmas traditions rolled on, especially in the countryside. By 1800 French Christmas was back in full swing. Undeterred by the failure of his revolutionary forebears, Joseph Stalin tried a similar trick when he became leader of the (avowedly atheist) Soviet Union in 1928. What better way to assert his might than banning Christmas? But even he succumbed to yuletide cheer and by 1935 Russians were allowed to put up trees and swap presents, so long as no one got too excited about religion. A similar attitude prevails in present-day China, where Father Christmas is better known to most than Jesus and the festival is tolerated as an excuse for shopping.

The lesson of history is that cancelling Christmas was never an option – even if letting it happen in a time of coronavirus confounds scientific reason. As the French revolutionaries learned to their cost, cold-blooded logic doesn't go down well with the masses, especially when you're

depriving them of a long-awaited chance to let their hair down. Despite the yearly exhortations to remember the “true meaning of Christmas” – religiosity, reflection and charity – the real point of it is much simpler. Fun.

And so we have been released from our chains for a precious few moments of festive feasting. Each country is following its own rules, for a short period of officially sanctioned madness. The British prime minister Boris Johnson, known for his obsession with the ancient world, has granted Britons five days of freedom – the same length as Caligula’s Saturnalia. January will be a cold, harsh month. But before it, as always, there will be a moment of light in the bleak mid-winter.