



PRIME MINISTER

SHOPS ACT: LATE NIGHT AND SUNDAY OPENING

You will by now have seen the Lord President's note recording the discussion at H Committee on 16 January on the proposal for complete deregulation of shop opening hours, on the line recommended by the Auld Committee. You will also have seen the letters from John Cope and Peter Rees.

2. If you agree, it might be helpful if I were to touch on this issue at Cabinet tomorrow under Parliamentary Affairs.

3. I in no way underestimate the extent of the opposition to change, and indeed I am anxious that we should go ahead only with a clear and full understanding of what is involved. But I think that public expectation of action by the Government to abolish restrictions on shop opening hours is such that we should attract, and rightly attract, even more criticism were we not to legislate.

4. Whilst recognising John Cope's reservations, I have doubts about the validity of comparing a vote on a Private Member's Bill, where the Government adopted an attitude of benevolent neutrality, with a Government Bill as such. Moreover, the Government will be acting in line with a recommendation from an independent Committee of Enquiry.

5. I would also stress the fact that the Auld Committee Report has generated widespread interest in the issue and the Government's reaction. The recent MORI poll indicated that 64% of the public were in favour of deregulation and that 68% of Conservative voters were in favour. Interestingly, 71% of trade union members were in favour. And the media

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have been virtually unanimous in supporting deregulation. In my view deregulation will be seen as a tangible and positive reform by shoppers for which credit can be claimed during the next election.

6. There are subsidiary matters also to our advantage compared with the situation last time round, such as the passage of time and the familiarity with a large amount of, admittedly illegal, Sunday trading here and the experience of legal Sunday trading in Scotland. It is true, on the other hand, that previously the debates have hinged around total abolition versus partial reform, but the Auld Committee has firmly rejected any halfway house.

7. Finally, on the question of whipping the Bill, I should point out that the Churches have not based their case on religious grounds, but have founded it more on the social advantages of the traditional Sunday. I would have thought there would be an expectation by the large majority of our supporters that the Government Bill will be whipped in the face of a united Opposition.

8. I do, therefore, favour proceeding with this reform. My preference is to make an early announcement to avoid any impression that we are divided or uncertain on the issue.

I am sending copies of this minute to members of the Cabinet, to the Deputy Chief Whip, to the Paymaster General and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

L. B.

30 January 1985

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