

PRIME MINISTER

5 November 1985

SUNDAY TRADING (SHOPS ACT)

*MW*

The Policy Unit is divided on this issue. One view is eloquently expressed by the note from Nick Owen (attached), the other by the one you have already received from Michael Alison.

My own personal view is that I am opposed to the proposed changes, largely on the grounds that I do not wish to see our traditional Sunday (possibly, and after a number of years probably) replaced by Continental practice, bringing with it yet another inducement to loosen family ties. Many of the social reforms under the Labour governments of the sixties were undertaken to provide greater freedom of choice. However, they have also demonstrated that over a period of time, a change in the law does result in a change in accepted moral standards throughout the population as a whole.

From a political point of view, there are many of your supporters who welcome your moral stance on economic and social matters. They also feel that our traditional Sunday is a part of our Christian heritage as a nation. They therefore find it puzzling, in view of your stand on other issues, that you are prepared to put the weight of Government behind these proposed changes.

As a churchwarden, I have been surprised at the momentum gained by the opposition to these changes within the last six weeks. It is an issue that unites both left and right within the church, and that unites churches of all denominations. As the Bill goes through Parliament I would expect the opposition to it to grow considerably.

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My personal recommendation, therefore, is first, to allow as much freedom of choice as possible to MPs in voting on this issue and to local authorities in the way they interpret the measure, and second, in mounting a defence of the Bill to give primary emphasis to the need for tidying up existing anomalies.

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Brian Griffiths

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Traditionalists have convinced themselves that Sunday trading would be unpopular in England and Wales, even though it seems perfectly acceptable to the God-fearing Scots, who have enjoyed this freedom for 40 years. Thoughts go back to the Resale Prices Act, 1964, which is unfairly blamed by some for losing the 1964 General Election. My personal view is that this view is mistaken. The generation of first-time voters which swept the Socialists into power 20 years ago applauded the 1964 Act for opening up competition in retailing, and indirectly in manufacturing - one of the few imaginative, popular measures of an otherwise unfortunate administration.

If we are serious about deregulation, about competition, and about allowing individuals to make choices in matters which concern them and harm no-one else, we should repeal the Shops Acts without further concessions. We have retained the Wages Councils. They will insist on double pay for Sunday, thereby making Sunday trading quite costly. We will also protect all existing shop workers, for life, against dismissal should they object to working on Sundays.

The character of Sunday may change, but not necessarily at the expense of family life. At present, couples with children or with full-time jobs are forced to shop for non-

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essentials on Saturday, when shops are highly congested. Sunday opening would allow families to shop together in a more leisurely way.

Deregulation will not impose uniform, 7 day trading across the country. In areas where the traditional Sunday is held dearly, Sunday retailing will not make much headway. Large parts of deregulated Scotland, both urban and rural, are totally unaffected by Sunday trading. The market system is a highly democratic arrangement.

*Nicholas Owen*

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