

TUV Response to Sunday Trading Consultation

TUV welcomes this opportunity to comment on plans to review restrictions on Sunday trading in Northern Ireland.

At the outset we would like to make it clear that TUV resolutely opposes any relaxation of the current restrictions.

The Historic Position

It is worth remembering that Sunday trading on the mainland was not generally permitted until 1994 after some 26 previous attempts to relax Sunday trading laws.

An attempt by the Thatcher government to do away with all restrictions in 1986 failed after Conservatives MPs - concerned about the threat to family life and church attendance - and Labour MPs - concerned about workers' rights - united to oppose it.
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The fact that changes would provoke opposition among the elected representatives from the mainland, which is universally acknowledged to be much more secular than our Province, until relatively recently illustrates that the desire to "keep Sunday special" is not limited to a small number of religious extremists as is sometimes suggested.

Added to this, the law as currently constituted rightly recognises the religious and cultural differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

The Sunday Trading (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 means that Sunday trading in Northern Ireland is more limited than in the rest of the UK.

TUV believes that at the very least this should remain the position.

No Demand

TUV believes that - contrary to the claims of some - there is little demand for a greater relaxation of the Sunday trading laws. Particularly in the current economic climate people are more than aware that they only have so much money to spend.

Added to that, those who wish to shop on Sunday already have ample opportunity to do so in the hours permitted under the existing legislation.

It is interesting to note that Norway continues to outlaw Sunday trading for the entire day for almost all business.

The Importance of the Day

TUV is committed under its constitution to support and promote traditional family values.

We believe that it is fair to say that a great many of our members and supporters would agree with former British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill who once observed: “Sunday is a divine and priceless institution, the necessary pause in the national life. It is the birthright of every British subject, our responsibility, privilege and duty to hand on to posterity”.³

For many people across our Province Sunday is a day set aside to worship and spend time with the family, without being concerned about the matters which quite legitimately impact upon us on the other days of the week.

It is worth remembering that Northern Ireland is, in the words of 2007 survey and report by the charity Tearfund, very different from the rest of the UK in that 81% claim Christian allegiance and only 0.4% belong to other religions.

The same report stated that 45% of people in Northern Ireland could be described as “regular churchgoers” - substantially more than the UK average of 15%.⁴

Should the law be changed it could result in shops being open while church services are still in progress. This will doubtless cause difficulties for churches when it comes to traffic and parking - particularly in built up areas.

For many people in Northern Ireland Sunday is the Christian Sabbath which they are commanded by Almighty God to observe and keep special. This is much more the case in our Province than in other parts of the UK. There are many people who would find the removal of the last vestige of its special status from the statute book deeply offensive.

While we hear much about the importance of rights and parity of esteem in Northern Ireland it often seems that the rights of evangelical Christians are ignored.

Unfair to Workers

TUV believes that changing the law will result in workers who are already hard-pressed to find time for their family and personal life coming under pressure to give up what may be their one free day in the week.

Added to this, those with religious objections to working on a Sunday will undoubtedly find themselves coming under pressure to come in on that day as well.

There are already many stories of people who have found it almost impossible to obtain employment in certain fields because of their objections to working on a Sunday.

Equality Impact Assessment Required

It is our very strong belief that an Equality Impact Assessment needs to be carried out on this divisive proposal. We are surprised at the lack of any reference to such.

Notes

- ¹ On This Day – 1994 Sunday Trading Legalised, undated article
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/28/newsid_2536000/2536115.stm>
- ² Stores fight Sunday rules, thisismoney, 15th June 2005
<http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/news/article.html?in_article_id=401363&in_page_id=2>
- ³ Article on homepage of DayOne website, <<http://www.lordsday.co.uk/>>
- ⁴ Church going in the UK, A research report from Tearfund on church attendance in the UK, April 2007 available from
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/03_04_07_tearfundchurch.pdf>