

PRIME MINISTER

THE SHOPS BILL

Following the quite lively discussion with Parliamentary colleagues last night about Sunday trading, may I trouble you with the sensitive issue of how, as your PPS, I should vote when we get the Bill in the House of Commons?

I shall cheerfully vote for the Bill on Second Reading, as I supported the Government last year on Auld, on grounds not only of personal loyalty to yourself, but because I support the principle of reform. A vote at Second Reading is not, after all, a vote to approve the final shape of that reform.

But votes at Report and Third Reading, when we do determine the final shape of reform, face me with more difficulty. I shall not conscientiously be able to vote in favour of the full de-regulation of Sunday trading, nor correspondingly against all the amendments designed to limit such de-regulation. I must therefore regretfully ask you to extend to me the informal license to abstain on a few votes in this critical area, which the Chief Whip seems likely to extend to other colleagues who, like me, are conscientious objectors. I am sorry that you should have the embarrassment of a dissenter in your own immediate entourage, although at least this reflects, in a representative way, the divisions in our Parliamentary Party at large.

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In the light of our discussion with colleagues last night, may I briefly summarise the rationale of the dissenting position, and how it might be reconciled with the Government's aims? Many dissenters (myself included) want the Government to legislate to make Sunday a "different" day, with a connotation of rest and natural break, principally as an act of affirmation. As George Tonypandy put it:

"Sunday has been and still is an overriding reminder that we are a people with a Christian heritage. It has a symbolism which cannot easily be defined."

The issue is certainly not a workaday one about "rest": you rightly point out that millions work regularly or occasionally on Sundays nowadays; but even more millions work neither on Saturdays nor Sundays! So the Biblical concern for adequate physical relief has long since been satisfied. But what I think the dissenters are concerned about is that the Government should adopt a posture of "affirmative resolution" rather than "negative resolution" in determining the future character of Sundays. So many traditional landmarks are slipping away, with ethnic and religious pluralism seeping in, that a Government decision to legislate to make Sunday different would - as George Tonypandy put it - be a symbolic affirmation of the Christian values of our past, related at the same time to some residual practical benefits (tranquility, etc.). This

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approach is analogous to keeping the Monarchy afloat, long after its real power has been ceded; indeed the weaker the Monarchy in real terms, the greater the zeal and affection for it popularly! This accounts, I believe, for the paradoxical upsurge in zeal for Sunday by millions of good, church-going Conservatives who cheerfully shop on Sundays in a limited way.

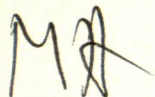
A further point in favour of trying to accommodate the dissenters: the one conclusion in last night's discussion which everyone seemed to share was that, whether we de-regulate fully, or only partially, nothing very much will change on the ground. The Scottish experience suggests that there is no great pent-up demand for Sunday opening, simply awaiting full de-regulation in order to burst forth. Indeed it is part of the Government's justification for the Shops Bill in its present form that no draconian changes are in prospect. This consideration seems to me to reinforce the case for the Government offering Parliament the option of retaining some limited Sunday trading regulations, to buttress, as it were, an existing natural public disposition. This route will win you more friends than it will make you enemies.

The French, the West Germans, the Dutch, the Italians, the Danes, the Swiss and the Luxemburgers have all opted for positive, though mostly flexible and limited, regulations to restrict Sunday trading; and Roger Gale cited the Massachusetts experiment.

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I believe that it would be no bad thing for the Home Office to put in hand some active work on acceptable alternatives to full de-regulation, perhaps drawing on European or US experience. With such an added string to your bow, you could face the Shops Bill difficulties with some equanimity.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be the initials 'MA' with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

MICHAEL ALISON

4.3.86

Prime Minister

From Michael Alison

Accession Book no

Box



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

mt

3rd March 1986.

Dear Prime Minister,

May I thank you very much for spending so much time with us this evening. I thoroughly enjoyed the evening - which certainly gave the lie to those who would like to think you do not listen to another point of view. Sunday Trading has clearly made us all think, and I found the time we spent on that most illuminating - and you have obviously given it a great deal of personal reflection.

We may not always agree with each other, though I know you would always expect me

to defend my corner, but I do so now very
secure in the knowledge of how you discuss and
respond to debate.

You gave me a very fascinating hour
and a half which I shall long remember. Thank you.

Yours ever

Albion