

Sunday shop closing was once regarded as socially progressive

Sunday trading laws will be relaxed,” said a line in *The Guardian*. It was referring not to plans by George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced in the Budget, but to one of the demands made on Greece by the pursuing Furies of the Troika.



This made me sit up, for opening hours are not simply a matter of economics but an embodiment of what seems normal in a culture. For example, in Spain, where I like to potter about, it seems perfectly normal for tobacconists (who, of course, sell stamps) to close at lunchtime, 2 p.m. on the dot.

Perfectly normal British Sunday trading laws (full of anomalies) have now been thrown into alarming uncertainty. “Two-faced David Cameron is facing a rebellion from Tory MPs and fury from Keep Sunday Special campaigners,” the *Daily Mirror* told readers, since, as recently as April, the Prime Minister had said he had “no current plans” to relax Sunday trading laws.

The story had suddenly changed, the *Mirror* reported. “Business Minister Anna Soubry said: ‘Critics hark back to a world that probably didn’t exist. Sunday was the most miserable day of the week’.”

The *Daily Mail* quoted her as saying: “The only thing to look forward to was Sing Something Simple on the radio.”

Dull it might well have been at Dunham-on-Trent (population 351), when Miss Soubry was brought up there. Even now, there isn’t all that much to do in Dunham on a Sunday. The White Swan has an “open log fire”, but so it did 50 years ago. True, the antiques shop is open too, but the keenest collector would probably not want to visit it every Sunday. That’s about it, unless you walk a mile to buy the papers, and buying papers is something that Sunday trading laws in England and Wales always allowed. (Scotland had its own laws, which did not prevent shops from opening on Sundays. They

were closed from individual or social conviction.)

As Rachel Cooke wrote in *The Observer*, the misery of the English Sunday was summed up by Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*: “Always the same ritual. Reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing.” Of course, “reading the papers” meant, for aspirant angry young men and women of the mid-1950s, reading *The Observer*, which people used to look forward to, in a spirit quite different from anger.

But, *The Times* explained, Mr Osborne (the Chancellor, not the creator of Jimmy Porter) would “free larger shops, including supermarkets and department stores, from rules that stipulate they can only open for six consecutive hours on a Sunday”. *Metro*, the free newspaper, reported that the Chancellor planned that, in order to give “more power to counties and to our new mayors, we are going to give them the power to set the Sunday trading hours in their areas”. It sounds a little like Sunday pub-opening in Wales, which from 1961 was the subject of a string of local referendums.

Sunday shop closing in England and Wales had been regarded as socially progressive in the late nineteenth century. Part of the battle to restrict long working hours for shop workers, it was allied to measures like the Seats for Shop Assistants Act 1899, which laid down that “every shop in the United Kingdom has seats ... for the use of the female assistants”.

Today, press opposition to longer Sunday trading also emphasises the effect on workers, though *The Daily Telegraph* added laconically: “Opponents have warned that a relaxation of the rules would hit already dwindling church attendances.” Carol Midgley, in *The Times*, added another perspective. “Retail creep”, she wrote, already “ensures that there’s little to do in some towns but shop”. She added that “Conservatives claim to be family-friendly, yet creating conditions in which more people, often low-paid, will be pressured into working on Sundays is not.”

In 1994, when shops were allowed to open for limited hours on Sundays, wrote Richard Godwin in the *London Evening Standard*, “aside from the religious objections (day of rest and all that), one of the main arguments of the Keep Sunday Special campaign was that shopping would lead to the ‘erosion of family life’. But what has happened since is more subtle. Throughout the Nineties shopping simply became central to family life. In the 2000s, we more or less accepted it as our religion and profession too.”

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