

Seven-day shopping won't cure what ails us

John Jacobs

The Sunday shopping debate in Nova Scotia is in full swing. The proponents of Sunday shopping have portrayed it as a simple matter of providing choice to businesses and shoppers. In fact 7- day-a-week shopping will have an impact on all of us whether we chose to shop on Sunday or not.

The proponents of Sunday shopping would have us believe that Nova Scotia is a region stuck in the past that needs to catch up to the rest of the world. In fact much of the industrial world does not allow wide open shopping on Sundays.

Countries such as Germany, Norway and Switzerland do not allow any Sunday Shopping. While other European countries such as Austria, Greece, Denmark, France and Spain restrict Sunday shopping to limited hours in smaller shops. The Netherlands has restrictions that allow open shopping 12 Sundays per year. The UK allows unrestricted shopping.

Some countries that currently have open shopping are being pressured by their citizens to restrict shopping. The Solidarity movement, that spearheaded some of the changes Eastern Europe, has embarked on a campaign in Poland to restrict Sunday shopping while a referendum in Slovenia recently chose to curtail Sunday shopping. Why must Canada take on the US model rather than the model of most of the industrialized world.

Currently in Nova Scotia convenience stores under 4,000 sq. ft, drug stores and shops that serve tourists are able to remain open 7 days a week. All necessities and most conveniences are currently available all week. Nova Scotians have developed a compromise over the years that works. What is being promoted is allowing malls and big box stores to remain open 7 days a week.

The proponents of Sunday shopping argue that they are motivated by the need to accommodate workers who are unable to shop during the current shopping hours. I have to question the notion that big retailers' are seeking to promote workers' interests. I think we need to be clear this is, for the most part, being driven by interest in increasing profits for bigger retailers. If the big box stores were truly interested in worker's interests they would support initiatives to provide shorter workweeks. A decent wage wouldn't hurt either.

The proponents also claim that Sunday shopping will stimulate the economy. But more shopping days doesn't mean there will be more money to shop. It is possible that 7-day shopping would allow those with deeper pockets to spend their extra cash in boutiques and the like. But average household debt loads in Canada are already too high and wages are stagnating, leaving little room for additional shopping dollars.

Allowing Sunday shopping will have a negative impact on small independent stores that now benefit from the Sunday restrictions on the big operators. Some of these smaller shops will be forced to

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close and some communities may actually be left without local convenience stores.

It is also argued that we need to accommodate tourists. Shops that serve tourists are already allowed to be open. I can't see how restricting shopping on one day of the week will have a dramatic effect on the tourism industry. In the case of cruise ships, some commentators have noted that very few actually visit on Sunday as it is the day that they usually leave their home ports. We also need to question the wisdom of shaping our communities' future to suit visitors who spend a few days, or hours in the case of cruise ship passengers, as our guests.

In reality Sunday shopping is part of a broader push to deregulate the economy. It relates to a view that rejects the role of democratically elected governments to promote the public interest. According to these folks, decisions about our communities' future should be left to consumers not voters, and communities' and workers interests are best served by accommodating profit maximizing corporations.

According to Nova Scotians for Shopping Choice, the coalition promoting Sunday shopping, "[t]he social and economic arguments supporting Sunday shopping choice are clear. Families are busy and many Moms and Dads need another day of the week to buy groceries, household items or things like school supplies." No question families are busy but providing another day to shop won't solve their problems.

To make ends meet households currently have to engage in more paid work than in the past 50 years or so. Most households need two people to work outside of the home to make ends meet. Our workweeks are becoming more fragmented with part-time work and variable hours. We are more stressed and have less time available for community volunteer work, our families and friends. These are the real problems that should be addressed.

Allowing 7-day-a-week shopping will make these social and economic problems worse.

Sunday has evolved, in the context of competing interests between workers and employers, from a religious "day of rest" into an anchor for the 2 day weekend, the standard 5 day, 40 hour workweek. Allowing wide open shopping on Sunday will contribute to the erosion of the standard workweek. The removal of Sunday as culturally accepted day off will increase pressures for broader array of services and businesses to operate 7 days a week and it will result in a longer and more fragmented workweeks.

Currently the pace of life in our communities slows down on Sundays. It reminds us that we are more than consumers and employees.

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