

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

GA2

OPPOSITION MOUNTS TO WEEK-END VOTING

If the government switches voting from Thursdays to week-ends, it will be in the face of overwhelming opposition from the local authorities which are responsible for running elections.

For reasons which are currently unclear, the Ministry of Justice has not yet responded to a public consultation which ended more than a year ago, and to which the government initially promised to respond within three months.

So far the only reason given by the MoJ for the delay is that nearly 1,000 submissions were received by the closing date of the Consultation in September 2008, and that these have taken a long time to process and analyse. No indication has yet been given as to when the government intends to announce its response.

However, during the recent months of government silence, it has become increasingly clear where the weight of opinion lies. Anyone keying *Week-end voting in Britain* into a search engine will be led to several pages of local government web sites queuing up to express their scepticism and their opposition to week-end voting.

Authorities as diverse in location and social composition as Wigan, the New Forest, Purbeck, Chichester, South Ayrshire, Coventry, North Tyneside and Staffordshire are all giving the same message. Week-end voting will not only cost more, but would present greater problems with staffing, security, and finding sufficient available venues, given that church premises, commonly used as polling stations, would be unlikely to be available on Sundays.

There is also a clear awareness of a religious dimension to the issue. Most Councils mention that there will be those with religious objections to voting on Saturdays or Sundays. South Ayrshire Council, conscious of the Sabbatarian presuppositions still evident in the mindset of the population in some parts of Scotland, warns in its response to the consultation: 'There would be strong opposition to Sunday voting in parts of Scotland, as well as Saturday voting if this means that the count would take place on a Sunday.'

The consultation itself admitted that week-end voting would cost between £38 million and £58 million more than voting on Thursdays – a cost increase of between 42% and 64% over the outlay for Thursday elections.

Most of the local authorities are concerned that there is no evidence that moving voting to week-ends will increase voter turn-out.

The responses of some local authorities scarcely hide a scathing condemnation of the present state of political life in Britain. To them, the reason for the loss of voter turn-out is nothing to do with the day or circumstances of voting, but is much more the result of the fact that the voters have become disenchanted with politicians and the quality of the political system in Britain.

The submission from New Forest District Council, for instance, suggested its own reasons for the decline in voter turn-out in recent years:

- Voters feel that their vote will not make a difference
- There is a lack of trust in politicians
- Voters feel disengaged from politics – ‘they are all the same’

Against this background, it is difficult to imagine that the government will court the annoyance of local authorities by announcing a switch to week-end voting. Any change will involve legislation, and there was nothing in the Queen’s Speech on 18 November. This gives great scope for the subject to be kicked into the long grass.

If the government decides, in the light of the Consultation, that Thursday should still be voting day, evangelical Christians and churches will be pleased and grateful. As Affinity said in its own response to the Consultation: ‘Historically, the UK has been a country rooted in the Christian faith, which has always separated the secular from the sacred. Any introduction of Sunday voting will blur the distinction between these two spheres of social involvement and responsibility. It would represent a departure from established custom for no particular gain, and have a detrimental impact upon many individuals and upon the nation as a whole.’

Rod Badams

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Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.

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