

**HD** Crucial penalty is the long-lost weekend

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Crucial penalty is the long-lost weekend

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Tearing around town on my errands this week I encountered two women of a certain age who were totally knackered. Sue at the fruit market checkout groaned: "It never bloody stops. Ever. I'm so exhausted. I wish we could go back to the days when the shops were closed on Sundays." Shops closed on Sundays? A very daring thought. It almost felt like treason. We sighed and exchanged a wan: "Well, that will never happen." I staggered out the door and fell into the traffic. The other exhausted woman staring back from the car's rear-vision mirror was me - the one running her own 24/7 small business. Like Sue, I had to think: When does it ever stop? Driving home I dredged up an almost-forgotten fact. In Australia in 1799, the hours of work for convict labour were officially set at 50 hours a week. They got Sundays off. Lucky bastards. I turned on the TV to see Liberal MP Dan Tehan advocating reducing penalty rates for weekend workers. He cited the plight of a baker in his electorate who could no longer afford to open on Sundays. Proof that I'm a woman of a certain age - a country kid in the '60s - I said loudly to the screen, "Well, if there's no fresh bread, why don't people just make some scones?" (Talking back to the TV? Scones? I'm turning into my mother's mother.) From my school days I recall that Monday was always special because we got to buy our lunch. We always ran out of bread at the weekend. We just could not imagine that folk would sacrifice their Sunday to be up at 4am working in a bakery so we could choose from a cornucopia of warm crusty rolls and loaves. When I was a child, commerce rested on Sundays. I can hear my kids say: "No way! Like, literally, in the Bible?" Well, yes. It was just expected that everyone in the district would be sitting on a pew in church before getting home to get the roast chook sorted for Sunday dinner. That arvo promised ... nothing of note. Maybe a nice, long drive to a plant nursery or, if it was Mum's birthday, an early tea at the only place open - the local Chinese. Yes, a (tedious) era long, long gone. Now we just could not cope without our weekend shopping. As Tehan went on to say, Sunday was now one of the busiest days of the week in his south-western Victorian seat of Wannon. He hails from a farming family who ran merinos and Herefords on prime grazing country that's now home to buzzing towns such as Warrnambool, Ararat and Hamilton. "The most profitable hours for retail, tourism and hospitality are on the weekend. It's when the rest

of us are looking to spend what we've earned during the week," Tehan said. That utterance brought me up sharpish. Who exactly is this "rest of us" Tehan speaks about? The ones privileged to be enjoying a Sunday outing at a cafe or visiting a winery. The ones who have full-time weekday jobs? And who then, by omission, are the others spending their weekends wrapping purchases, polishing cutlery, topping up glasses? Some of the 2.2million Australians who are casual employees? There are now two different Aussie Sundays. One's a sacred day to spend with family and friends and the other is like ... well ... any other Tuesday. Which Sunday will you have? Depends. The Fair Work Commission has begun its review of Australian workers' penalty rates. This debate will go beyond politics and right to the heart of our long-cherished "avagoodweekend" culture. Is it true, as Tehan says, that the notion of a sacrosanct weekend is a "last century rationale"? Or is Opposition Leader Bill Shorten right when he asserts: "Whatever this government says, we still do value our weekends in Australia." Should workers be recompensed for working "unsociable" hours? Perhaps that idea vanished with Australia's first 7-Eleven in 1977 offering "the first choice in convenience". Open from 7am until 11 at night, they killed ye olde corner shop stone dead. They now have 600 outlets open 24/7. Oh yes, the convenience! Trouble is, the work

timetable may have changed, but school week hasn't. On Sunday night there are school shirts and skirts to be washed and ironed, lunches to be made. Maybe it's a dash to the 7-Eleven to be served by people who don't look much like "the rest of us". Tehan says he fervently believes in a "fair go" for all Australians. His website proudly displays a picture of him, his wife and their five gorgeous young kids. I'm imagining that, in the future, when one of Dan's children bags a job at Baker's Delight, East Hamilton, and has to work Sundays, he'll still say: "Workplace flexibility is needed to achieve economic growth." But I also like to think that at the table is an Australian from my era who exclaims: "Imagine that? Working every Sunday? I hope she's earning a fortune!" And when MP Tehan replies: "No. Just lucky to have a job," that old lady exclaims: "Oh, for goodness sake, it's not worth it! We'll make do. Tell her to come home to her family. I'll pop out and make some scones." Wendy Harmer is the editor-in-chief of The Hoopla. [thehoopla.com.au](http://thehoopla.com.au)

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