



# **Not all Natural Opposition to the Policy of Extended Licensing Hours**

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## **About the Authors**

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## **About Consult**

Consult encourages young people to think for and beyond the cause of the Conservative Party, and represents the growing niche of people who want to talk about policy away from the emphasis of politics.

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## **Not all Natural Opposition to the Policy of Extended Licensing Hours**

### **Despite the Obvious Concerns, there are many arguments which need to be seriously considered when examining this new policy**

The Conservative Party has always been seen as the Party hard on Crime. Opinion Polls over the last few years have showed that this issue has always had the majority of the British Public believing that law and order is safest in the hands of the Conservative Party.

Therefore, when the Conservative Party decides to oppose and attempts to postpone the introduction of extended licensing hours, particularly with the foreseen cited problems surrounding the policing of this proposal and the likely rise in violent crime and arrests when this policy first comes into practice, isn't there an obvious case to support the opposition to this proposal and its forthcoming implementation?

And isn't this case made even more compelling when not only are the police opposed to the licensing act, but the current Home Office Minister Paul Goggins admits that the act may well mean more arrests for drink related offences i.e. more crime and anti-social behaviour.

Well, yes and no. Despite the natural wish of the Conservative party to be the party of fighting crime and maintaining law and order, there are many arguments which need to be seriously considered when examining this issue.

### **Greater Autonomy and Individual Choice**

The first is that the Conservative Party is the party of the individual and the best values of compassion, autonomy and drive coming from within the individual. For this reason, the Conservatives champion greater choice, autonomy and the power of individual decision making,

Therefore, isn't greater access and availability to extended licensing laws in line with traditional Conservative philosophy? Even taking into account some of the key arguments surrounding reducing antisocial and rowdy behaviour, is it not the role of the Conservative Party to champion the rights of the individual in giving them the chance to exercise their own free will responsibly rather than take the side of the State?

### **Flexibility Makes Sense**

Having more flexibility in opening hours makes sense in a number of different ways, and not just to people who wish greater access to their drinking establishments. Allowing establishments to structure their closing hours would reduce the number of people, en masse, leaving pubs and bars at the same time, making it easier for the police to monitor serious incidents and deal with potential problems.

Extending licensing hours would definitely cause problems in terms of asking for greater policing resources, and initially may well fuel the already great problem of binge drinking. But a sensible stagnation of opening hours would reduce the number

of people leaving establishments at 23.00pm, this helping the police to deal with drink-related incidents over a longer period of time.

One of the greatest problems currently is that everyone used to leave establishments at the same time, making it difficult for the police to deal with numerous incidents at the same time. What seems to be happening currently is that many pubs are putting in applications for an extra hour or two of opening, so that a large number of establishments will still close at the same time.

So flexibility could actually enhance and strengthen the ability of the police to deal with drink related incidents, rather than reduce it. But it needs to be well thought out and planned for, otherwise the current problems will only be made worse.

### **Changing the Drinking Culture**

Although extended licensing hours could cause the police many problems initially in terms of dealing with violent crime and disturbances, increased flexibility as stated above could make the task of actually tackling incidents over a greater span of time easier. But drinking hours are arguably only a way of structuring drinking habits and dealing with the consequences of it, they are not tackling the root or the cause of the problem.

Probably the most ambitious aspect of licensing reform is to attempt to change Britain's drinking culture through changes in the law. Alcohol consumption has over the last 20 years increased at the same time as it has been falling in other European countries; it may well be that reform will mean that the drink as much as you can before closing time culture will be replaced with more moderate or sensible drinking, however longer opening hours might simply mean people just stay in the pub a lot longer and alcohol consumption continues to increase!!

Heavy binge drinking is often caused by people drinking a large amount of alcohol in a very short amount of time. People who drink all day/over a long period of time will obviously suffer effects, but much of binge/excessive drinking is caused by people, trying to get as much alcohol into their systems by the cut off of 23.00 hours.

Therefore, people (especially younger people) need to be challenged and have their awareness increased about the dangers of binge/excessive drinking, and the potential consequences of this. It should be campaigned for both in terms of the causes of violent crime and the impact upon individual health, similar to the very successful campaign launched in the last decade against drink driving (which massively cut drink driving).

This would help make binge/excessive drinking something that is not well thought of and indeed frowned about. When coupled to the advantages of being able to enjoy having a drink without the pressure of having to maximise in-take before 23.00pm, then the advantages of a well structured campaign around the sensible intake of alcohol become numerous.

## **An Integrated Approach**

Finally, the choice that is faced is not simply a one between reform and status quo. Most critically, licensing reform in isolation will prove utterly useless in terms of creating a genuine night-time economy. Sir Ian Blair has expressed the concern that police resources may well be overstretched by this act, and so the country will need a police service that has both the extra resources and the flexibility in applying these resources to communities that no longer close down by midnight.

Secondly, there is no point in having longer opening hours if people can't get home afterwards. Currently, the tube shuts down at midnight, although there are plans to extend opening beyond these hours on Friday and Saturday nights. The night bus service is spasmodic; good in parts but poor in others. There is little point to the licensing reforms if people are unable to access these opportunities through poor transport.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, and in conclusion, although there seem to be many natural reasons to oppose extended licensing hours, especially when considering the problems of increased potential violent crime and the strain being put on policing hours, the very real challenge of changing the awareness of youngsters together with their culture and attitudes towards drinking, as well as the advantages offered by sensible flexibility, make all out opposition to the policy of extended licensing hours unnatural. Especially when considering the values and attitudes that such a policy is reflecting when compared to the aspirations and values of the Conservative Party.

However, whilst with the integration of better policing and improved public transport licensing reform could lead to developing a genuine night time economy which not only makes the lifestyle of 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain better, more accessible and safer, licensing reform by itself without proper planning over the stagnation of closing hours between different establishments, without a proper and well directed campaign over the ill effects of binge drinking and without both more police and a better integrated night time transport policy, will run the risk of creating more problems than it solves.

That is the current challenge facing 21<sup>st</sup> century Great Britain in facing up to dealing with this legislation.

**Matthew Page and Graham Damiral,  
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