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Down with toilet paper walls

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If the sign in the Superstore parking lot had said *Bush Impeached*, I couldn't have been more thrilled. Or *0% Mortgages*—I'd be excited about that too. But the sign I saw promised something far better: *Selected Businesses Open Sunday, 10 am to 5 pm*.

Sunday shopping was banned in Nova Scotia in 1989 by the arch-conservative government of "Honest John" Buchanan. John Puke-on'-em, my circle used to call him. We were still young enough to find government bullying funny. Since then, Nova Scotians have had just one day a week to get their errands done. It's been 17 long years of queues, traffic, and parking congestion, of Saturdays stuffed tighter than a Tokyo subway, and it's no longer funny in the least.

I'm not the only one to chafe in my restraints. But the province's religious right will tell you the issue was settled once and for all a couple years ago when a plebiscite won the day, 52% against Sunday shopping to 48% in favour. What these folks don't mention was that the ballot wording was stacked and the vote scheduled strategically, tacked onto a municipal election of the kind where urban turnout is typically low and rural turnout is not.

In Nova Scotia, the religious right lives in the country and rules from there. They let all-terrain vehicles ruin the peace and the wetlands, they declare open territory on any wilderness that's good for hunting, and for 17 years they've told us how to spend our Sundays. But now our grocery chains are challenging the law, and the type of Sunday that Canadians elsewhere take for granted, full of convenience, full of grace, blissfully free of browbeating by evangelical Christians—that kind of Sunday might just be coming back, even to our archaic little theocracy down east.

And so this past Saturday, for the first time in 17 years, I rested. When Sunday arrived, I was off to the Superstore. But things were only half as good as I'd hoped. Half, exactly. Aisle 5, Cleaning Supplies and Pet Supplies, all the way to the long bank of ice cream freezers lining the west wall: these were the bounds of No Man's Land in the new Sunday Superstore, where half the floor space was barricaded by temporary walls built out of cartons of toilet paper, Coke, and potato chips.

Why? Because under 1989's Retail Business Uniform Closing Day Act, only stores smaller than 370 metres square can open on Sunday. Nova Scotia's grocery chains now hope to get around that by partitioning themselves as smaller, discrete food shops or "separate businesses."

On Sunday, there were five such separate business open at my Superstore: Restaurant & Deli; Fish Market; Fruit Stand (produce, along with the bakery and some meat); Retail Market (everything in the drugstore minus the dispensary, which was closed); and "Marketplace" (a mishmash of staples staff had worked through the night to move in from the store's forbidden half). Five "markets," and then the toilet paper wall.

We don't need no education. We don't need no thought control. All in all you're just another brick in the wall. So went Pink Floyd in my head. A private guard patrolled the barricade, and I advanced on him. But I was friendly. How's it going? I asked him. (It's what we always say in Nova Scotia, even to the religious right. We should stop that.) Slow, he said. But for excitement there was the woman who'd tried to bypass the wall by walking the stainless steel beam of the meat fridge that runs down the back of the store.

Wow. Did he pull her off it, have her arrested?

He was smiling now. "I told her I could help her off," he said. "And I did."

People helping people—that was how Superstore fashioned its Sunday effort. Staff had toiled to move those staples and had another long night ahead of them, moving it all back for Monday morning. I was grateful. Because they'd worked so hard, I was able to get almost everything on my list.

There was yogurt, though only one brand in one size. There were large eggs only, but white and brown. There was one size and strength of milk, but at least there was milk. I couldn't pick up prescriptions, but I could buy shampoo. I came home without cat food, and nothing much for the coming week's lunches. All the packaged juices, the puddings and individual yogurts, the granola bars, most of the pop and the candy; it all languished behind the potato chip walls, and not even the walls themselves could be bought.

Elsewhere in the store, Coke was and wasn't for sale. Heaps of merchandise that couldn't be barricaded, but still wasn't included—who knows why—in the five "separate businesses," was draped in plastic and pasted with signs: *Attention Customer: This product is for sale from Monday to Saturday.* Next to one such shrouded Coke display was another, unshrouded and cleared for sale. It was baffling.

"What would Martians think if they landed and saw this?" said one shopper to her husband.

"Nova Scotia, Mars," he snorted. "What's the difference?"

Four of ten checkouts were open, including an express lane—a good thing, because business was brisk. At my checkout, Brad had volunteered to work, as had everyone working that day. Time and a half "would've been awesome," he said, but it hadn't been offered. Neither had anyone expected it would be—this is Nova Scotia, after all.

Saying they were responding to a complaint, Halifax police inspected five Superstore locations on the Sunday before last, even checking one with a measuring tape to verify that the stores were jumping properly through the various new Sunday shopping hoops government erected just last week. The new restrictions are baffling too. One limits the size of entire buildings, not just the size of the "separate businesses," and another sets a \$15,000 fine.

Never mind that there's always been lots allowed open in Nova Scotia on Sunday, including "any public game or contest for gain or for any prize or reward"—casinos, bingo halls, bars. The cold beer store is open Sundays, and never mind that either. The government knows its priorities. You only find yourself wishing they'd work that hard on something that mattered.

How I wanted to run into police with tape measures at my Superstore on Sunday. I'd've told them I thought the store was pretty big—big enough to take on the zealots, as well as a government from Mars.