

Talking Point: Public holidays are too important for hush-hush reviews

We all have a stake in any decisions about public holidays, writes Jessica Munday ON Monday of last week, Tasmania had a statewide public holiday to mark the achievement of the Eight Hour Day. This holiday is particularly special to workers and their unions because it recognises the long struggle to achieve a shorter working day and provide balance between work, rest and recreation.

In an increasingly busy world, where technology is disrupting our working lives and many time-poor families have both parents in paid work or in multiple jobs, public holidays have never been more important. Just a day after marking this important holiday, the Mercury revealed that Premier Will Hodgman is reviewing Tasmania's public holidays. He said he had given this task to the Department of Justice. Details of the review have not been made public, but the Premier is quoted as saying the work is under way.

This was news to Unions Tasmania and it shouldn't have been. We're the peak body representing workers across our state. We're the first place you'd start to engage in a conversation about an issue so important to working people. But there has been zero consultation with unions, workers and the broader community. Nothing. A scan of the Department of Justice's web page reveals no details about a review. There are a number of other public reviews and consultations open but nothing about public holidays. Which of course begs the question — what is the Government really up to? Why conduct a secret review without consulting the very people whom the issue affects? What are the terms of reference? We have more questions than answers.

Workers are also asking this question — can we trust Will Hodgman with public holidays? In recent bargaining negotiations with Tasmanian public sector unions, the Premier has proposed cutting the Easter Tuesday public holiday as well as the half-day Cup Days in Launceston and Devonport for public sector workers. Given his most recent position on cutting public holidays for this group of workers, are we really expected to believe there are no plans to reduce current holidays for others?

If this review was a genuine one, there would be public consultation and we'd all have an opportunity to put suggestions forward. A review should canvas all options including examining the adequacy of our public holidays and, in fact, whether we should have more of them.

Media reports have the Premier suggesting this review is about bringing public holidays more closely in line with other states. But there isn't uniformity among the states and territories, with numerous local variations for things like sporting events and regional shows, as there is here in Tasmania.

In fact, when we look at what other states have and how they compare we don't stack up that well. Tasmania has nine statewide public holidays with some local regional holidays that may be full or part-days. NSW, Victoria and Queensland, in comparison, have 11 statewide public holidays.

In the ACT, NSW, Queensland and Victoria, Easter Saturday and Easter Sunday are public holidays. In South Australia and the Northern Territory, Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve are public holidays

from 7pm until midnight. Canberrans mark Reconciliation Day each May. Perhaps we should consider whether we should have these holidays here?

The creation of new public holidays can and does occur. The Victorian Government recognised the importance of football to their state and declared a public holiday on the Friday before the AFL Grand Final in 2015. I know some footy-mad Tasmanians who would think this was a fine idea.

I put forward these suggestions to illustrate a point — there are many options to be canvassed on public holidays. There will no doubt be lots of people who have ideas and want to contribute. The Liberals need to drop the secrecy around their plans for public holidays and allow all Tasmanians to be involved in the discussion.

When we talk about public holidays, we need to remember this — they have immeasurable social value. In addition to allowing us to celebrate important social, cultural or spiritual occasions, they allow workers to take a much-needed break.

People spend their public holidays with their families, attending community events or reconnecting with friends they don't see as much as they'd like. They spend money in local businesses that choose to open. Public holidays help build social cohesion and this is great for our emotional and mental wellbeing.

We must remember these benefits when we talk about public holidays. The conversation should not just be about what business wants but what is good for workers and for communities.

Because we work to live, not live to work — despite what some of the bosses would have us believe.

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