

Imagine a Country: Leila Abouela

Some countries have double the number of public holidays Scotland has. In Indonesia, where my family and I lived for a few years, there were seventeen holidays, some of which were more than one day. As expected of a country in which almost 90 per cent of the population are Muslims, there were the two Eid holidays – al-Fitr and al-Adha – Islamic New Year, the birthday (Mawlid) of the Prophet Muhammad, and celebration of his Night Journey (the Isra and Miraj). There was also Christmas, Easter and Good Friday; there was New Year's Day and Chinese New Year – that's now adding up to three new year's days per year! Hindu and Buddhist feast-days were also public holidays, as well as Labour Day. I loved all these holidays, especially when they came mid-week; my husband and children at home, the working week disrupted. There is no better way to celebrate diversity than by sharing each other's festivals. I would love Scotland to be the same. Fewer working days would enable us all to live better lives.

If religious holidays are not to everyone's taste, then how about secular ones? Let's make Valentine's Day a public holiday. Burns Night, Guy Fawkes, Midsummer's Day. If Scotland gains independence, will there be an Independence Day holiday? Imagine . . .

Holidays mean more rest and more togetherness; more precious time, more valuable hours. This great spinning world, let's slow it down, let's have a break. A break from the internet would be nice too. A relief from the news. A recess from advertising. We do not need to shop 24/7. We do not need to know the news every hour. We do not need to be able to do every little thing on every single day of the week. For the sake of the climate, we can take time off from electricity, from heating, from travelling. Short pauses here and there. To catch our breath, to hear the birds, to see the stars, to listen to each other. To feel idle. There is nothing wrong with occasional idleness. Staring into space, thinking thoughts or thinking nothing, swinging on a hammock, sitting gazing into the flames. Our fingers need a rest, as do our eyes, our minds. Shopping has become the new oppression, as has acquiring likes on social media, the endless expenses of self-improvement, and keeping up with the latest celebrities. All this comes at the price of more drudgery, more hours spent earning, more days at work.

The four-day work week is not a fantasy. It has already been adopted in Germany and Denmark to some extent. Fewer working hours are better for our physical and mental health. The four-day work week would reduce pressure on the environment. A 2013 paper published in *Global Environmental Change* shows that countries with longer working hours consume more resources and emit more carbon.* Reduced working hours, they suggest, could contribute to sustainability by decreasing the environmental intensity of consumption patterns.

Research by the Trades Union Congress has found that UK fulltime staff work almost two hours more than the EU weekly average. Yet staff in Denmark who worked fewer hours were more productive. Resting more and having adequate time for recreation improves the quality of the work we produce. By working fewer hours, we boost our output instead of reducing it.

Sadly, the reality in Britain is that many people are working longer hours or the same hours for less pay. Working harder to become poorer, working more to end up with less. Writing in *The Conversation*, economist David Spencer says: ‘The continued force of consumerism has acted as a prop to the work ethic. Advertising and product innovation have created a culture where longer hours have been accepted as normal, even while they have inhibited the freedom of workers to live well.’*

More public holidays – religious, secular or national – a reduction in the working week, time off from the internet, from the media, from travel and energy consumption, would reduce carbon footprint and give us more of what really matters.

Written by Leila Aboulela and extracted from "*Imagine A Country: Ideas for a Better Future*" edited by Val McDermid and Jo Sharp (Canongate Books £12, ebook £7.99)

* ‘Could working less reduce pressures on the environment? A cross-national panel analysis of OECD countries, 1970–2007’, K.W. Knight, E.A. Rosa, J.B. Schor, *Global Environmental Change*, 2013