Time for a Change?

*It’s not just Daylight Savings Time that should be abolished!*

Sunday, March 11, 2007; B08

Suppose that in Alexandria the quart became, by law, bigger in the spring (so people would drink more fluids in hot weather) two weeks *earlier* than it did in the District? And that bottlers had to revert to the smaller quart each fall?

Can’t conceive of such an irksome government requirement? Well, *that one* is a fantasy, fortunately, but the government forcing us to change our *clocks* in spring and fall is all too real! We are just lucky that a time zone change line does not follow the Potomac River!

Sandford Fleming, a Canadian, invented Standard Time. I was still a Canadian myself when I arrived in the District in 1967, to live on Ontario Road (how Canadian!) not far from the old Prime Meridian: which in early days ran down 16th Street! (That’s why it is called Meridian Hill Malcolm X Park.) I had been offered a job by the Naval Observatory (in Observatory Circle) but I had accepted a job at the Naval Research Lab, in District 8. (I liked to joke that I preferred the smell of the Blue Plains Sewage Treatment plant, over saying “beep” “beep” “beep” into a microphone at the Naval Observatory, the keeper of the nation’s time.) The Prime Meridian today goes through Greenwich England, and the clock reading *there* is called, everywhere in the world, Universal Time.

Before Fleming, 12 noon was simply when the Sun was highest in the sky, and therefore clock readings *changed*, from town to town, if you traveled either eastward or westward. But now ask yourself this: what time is it, *now*, in Los Angeles? Is it *three hours ago*, or is it … right now? Well of course it is right now! According to Albert Einstein, it is only when you get close to the speed of light, or you change your gravitational potential, that *actual changes* in time occur—otherwise, it is exactly the same time in Silver Spring, as it is in Australia. It is just that the *clocks are set differently!* By government edict! I advocate not just abolishing Daylight Savings Time, but abolishing all of the Standard Time zones as well, and everyone switching to use of *Universal Time*, everywhere in the world.

Our lives would be improved, if my wise suggestion were to be implemented by *our* government (Chris van Hollen, are you listening?) and by other governments around the world.

How so? Well, never again would you arrive an hour early (or
late) for a dinner (or, worse, for an airplane flight!) because you just forgot to switch your watch. And, never again would you participate in a national conference call, and find a third of the participants calling in at the wrong time, because of time zone and/or daylight savings time confusion. Every clock and wristwatch in the world would show exactly the same time, always, and forever more. Universal time, indeed! Atomic universal time, as specified by the Naval Observatory in DC.

Would there be a down side? Not really! But, at least at first, it sure would shake up your innards! For example, today, March 11, you would have watched the Sun rise, *not at 6:30 am*, but at 11:30 by your watch. And, tonight, you’d watch the Sun set, *not at 6:07 pm*, but at 11:07 pm (or, rather, at 23:07). And, 53 minutes later … it would be March 12! *Everywhere in the world!* No more International Date Line.

Yes, we’d all be a bit confused, but only for a while. And I can prove that! For I remember how startled I was, years ago, when on the phone, my mother in Toronto casually said “it was very hot today, 30 degrees.” This elderly lady had smoothly adjusted to Celsius, after living *most of her life with Fahrenheit!* Such adjustments are *not* a big deal!

And, yes, we’d have to use “military style” time (14 o’clock rather than 2 pm). That does grate on me, even though I *loved* the summer I spent in the Canadian army.

So, I think I’ll just stroll down the old prime meridian, cross Lafayette Park, and, as a proud American, lobby the White House, to *stop this nonsense* of making us adjust our wristwatches, every time we fly to Los Angeles!

-- Richard Conn Henry
Silver Spring, Md.

The writer is a professor of physics and astronomy at the Johns Hopkins University, and is also Director of NASA’s Maryland Space Grant Consortium. He got the local (not Universal) sunrise and sunset times wrong in his piece above, because he forgot that we change to Daylight Savings Time today. His e-mail address is henry@jhu.edu

(896 words, including figure captions etc.)
Time generated by an Atomic Clock (background) at the US Naval Observatory (at an undisclosed location) is transferred to an old fashioned clock for people to consult.
Meridian Hill Malcolm X Park is adjacent to the onetime Prime Meridian from which US Time was measured. The Prime Meridian ran down 16th Street and through the White House.

Dick Henry stands on the old Prime Meridian, which is memorialized by a District Government poster of the Adams Morgan Heritage Trail.