



Yet another Canadian takes aim at changing time

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Ray Demarchi got his time-zone idea while driving from Alabama to Texas -- 21/2 days, 2,000 kilometres, didn't have to change his watch once.

It made the Cowichan Bay man think about our own divisions, all that pain-in-the-butt, three-hour-difference, better-phone-Ottawa-before-noon stuff that we in B.C. take for granted.

Our time zones don't work, Demarchi argues. They might have made sense back before electric light was commonplace, but they just get in the way now that electronic communications tie us together from coast to coast. How is the country supposed to function when there are just three hours a day during which we're all at our desks at the same time? Factor in lunch breaks in Ontario, coffee breaks in Quebec, bud breaks in B.C. and Screech breaks in Newfoundland, and the window is down to about 45 minutes.

So Demarchi wants to shrink the number of North American time zones and adjust the clocks to narrow the time difference between the West Coast and the rest of the continent.

"It is important to bolster North America's trade and commerce by co-ordinating time changes among the NAFTA nations in order to harmonize and optimize our financial, industrial, transportation and communication links," Demarchi wrote on his website, newtimezones.com.

Under his plan, we in B.C. (at least, in those bits of the province that are in the Pacific time zone) would move our clocks ahead half an hour. The rest of the country, save for Newfoundland, would shift back by 30 minutes. That would leave B.C. and Alberta in synch (if only on our watches), meaning the Pacific and Redneck (I'm pretty sure that's what it's called) time zones could be merged. The gap between Victoria and Toronto would be cut to two hours. Similar changes would be mirrored in the U.S.

The advantages? West Coast stockbrokers could enjoy a proper breakfast/coffee/Maalox before the New York markets open. People in Ontario could watch the Canucks game without nodding off in the third period. Your mother in Montreal could phone you at 5 a.m. instead of 4 when she forgets which way the time change goes.

Of course, all this would require the agreement of not only B.C. but the rest of the provinces, not to mention the U.S. Department of Transportation and the U.S. Congress, none of which have a long record of taking marching orders from retired civil servants on Vancouver Island. (Demarchi was the provincial government's chief of wildlife.) As David Bowie sang, "Time may change me, but I can't change time."

Still, it wouldn't be the first time the government had moved the hands on the clock, as we will be reminded when the alarm goes off an hour early tomorrow morning and we accidentally fire it into the wall. We'll all go back to eating our Corn Flakes in the dark this week because of the Americans' decision to advance the arrival of daylight savings from April to the second Sunday in March. Canada had no choice but to follow suit when the change was made last year. It was done in the name of saving energy (though, frankly, I felt a little sluggish myself).

If Demarchi's idea ever does get traction, he will be the second Canadian to affect the way the world winds its watch.

The international time zones we see today resulted from lobbying by Sir Sandford Fleming, who came up with the idea of Universal Standard Time in the late 19th century, when the spread of railroads led to the need for a common clock. Prior to that, every city or region determined its own time and went off on its own schedule. Why, that would be as crazy as dividing the capital region into 13 municipalities.

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