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Timing Is Everything

How crazy would it be if Canada opted out of the daylight-saving synch?

SINCE CANADA SUPPLIES 10% OF THE OIL AMERICANS consume each year, you'd think Washington would avoid doing anything to hurt the productivity of its northern neighbor. You'd be wrong. When a proposal to extend daylight saving time (DST) by two months surfaced in the U.S. Congress last month as part of an energy bill, some Canadians went into paroxysms of anxiety. Airlines and shippers warned that changing clocks south of the border would throw the integrated North American economy out of synch; nationalists grumbled about being forced to move in lockstep with the U.S.; provinces scrambled to figure out whether, and how fast, they might have to adapt. "What are the environmental up and downs of this?" asked a worried Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty. "What are the business pros and cons? What about life for families?"

We can all relax, at least for the moment. The bill Congress finally passed last week extends DST, but only about a month. It will run from the second Sunday in March to the first Sunday in November. And it won't go into effect until 2007. One reason for the postponement: to "allow our neighbors in the north and south some time to take a look at this," says Sean Bonyun, a spokesman for Michigan Congressman Fred Upton, a co-sponsor of the measure. In fact, summer daylight hours in North America may not change at all. Another provision of the bill gives Congress the right to ignore what it just decided, if a planned study by the U.S. Department of Energy shows no significant energy savings.

Credit good Canadian lobby work, in part, for those second thoughts. Embassy officials in Washington have been quietly buttonholing legislators, and Canadian Ambassador Frank McKenna spoke with Upton just before the vote. A Canadian embassy source tells TIME, "We pointed out that industries like aviation and automobile manufacturing are a lot more integrated on both sides of the border" than they were in 1973-74 when the Nixon Administration extended DST for 10 months during the Arab oil embargo, or in 1986, when it was extended a month. Most Canadian provinces, grudgingly went along in 1986 after their decisions not to follow the U.S. lead in the 1970s played havoc with airline schedules, TV programming and much else. With border commerce now pegged to just-in-time deliveries, having U.S. and Canadian times out of synch would derail North American trade, said the embassy official.

Which raises the question, How did the bill make it to the floor of the U.S. Congress in the first place? True, legislators in North America have been tinkering with time since at least 1917, when daylight saving was introduced as a wartime energy-conservation measure in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. (The U.S. followed suit in 1918.) But the new proposal's 11th-hour inclusion into the 1,725-page U.S. energy bill has got even Capitol Hill insiders flummoxed. "To tell you the truth, you didn't see any Senator standing up to poach this idea" by introducing a similar bill in the Senate, observed a staff member on the Senate Energy Committee. "What does that tell you?"

There's a good reason the clock-changing lobby is small in both Canada and the U.S.: people don't want to think about time unless they have to. "Time only does its job if it's invisible," says Rob Douglas of Ottawa's National Research Council. In Canada's northern latitudes, where there's less daylight to "save" adjusting Canadian clocks to match even a short-term time change in the U.S. would disrupt northern habits—and complicate northern politics. Since the administration of time is a provincial, not federal, responsibility, some provinces might follow the U.S., while others keep their hands off the clocks—thereby throwing Canada for a loop. "you'd have a problem if the provinces couldn't work out a way to collaborate," says David Zimmer, who chairs an Ontario government committee hastily set up last month to explore the province's options.

Should U.S. legislators care about Canadians' response? Absolutely, says Dan Stewart, mayor of Plattsburgh, New York. If Quebec decides not to follow the U.S. in changing the clocks in 2007, for example, it would throw his city into turmoil. Plattsburgh is now a virtual suburb of Montreal, which is just 29 km north, and "all our business is oriented to the border," says Stewart. "If we were in different time zones, even for a short while, it would cost millions in delivery-scheduling problems on the border." The go-it-alone DST bill, the mayor complains, proves that Congress still doesn't understand the developing border economy of North America. Not that Stewart is against more daylight, but, he says, "if you're going to do something like this, you need to do it in collaboration with your major trade partner." The good news, at least, is that we all have some extra time to think about it.