

## Opinion

# Don't let lazy ignorance keep us in the dark

An extra hour's daylight helps everyone. But backbench MPs lack the power to bring it in



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After writing for months about wars, budgets, currency crises and central banks, let me turn to something that genuinely matters to the vast majority of readers, who are not soldiers, accountants or financiers.

Last Sunday something near-miraculous happened to transform lives across Britain and indeed across the whole of Europe. The clocks changed, affording everyone an extra hour of afternoon sunlight — thereby significantly increasing our opportunities for walking in the countryside, playing sport, gardening or agreeable sunlit idleness after work or school.

This year the return of spring sunshine is different because it brings a genuine opportunity to make permanent the extra hour of afternoon sunlight and to extend this benefit to the whole year. Parliament voted last December by a nine-to-one majority for an ingeniously drafted Daylight Saving Bill, introduced by Rebecca Harris, a newly elected Conservative MP. This Bill would require the Government to undertake a thorough cost-benefit analysis of shifting Britain's clocks permanently forward by an hour, thereby adding an hour to afternoon sunlight in both summer and winter and also aligning Britain with the rest of Western Europe.

What makes this reform so interesting politically is that the analysis demanded by the Harris Bill would certainly recommend reform —

and for this very reason the Bill will be blocked in Parliament unless the Government or the Opposition gives its explicit support.

Dozens of these analyses have been carried out since the early years of the 20th century and the evidence presented on road safety, on social life and recreation, on energy saving, on crime and on cost has unequivocally favoured shifting forward by an hour. Yet the political obstructionism has continued. Why, then, this total disconnection between the good of the country and the actions of political leaders? There are four broad reasons.

The first, and in some ways least troubling, reason is sheer ignorance and stupidity. Perhaps some MPs genuinely believe that more children dawdle in the roads on their way to school than on their way home and therefore that dark mornings would result in more accidents than dark evenings. Some politicians may be

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unaware that more pensioners go out at five in the afternoon than eight in the morning and thus run the risk of getting mugged in the dark. But surely every politician realises that more people sleep at 7am than at 5pm and therefore that energy would be saved by transferring darkness from the evenings to the mornings — as indeed it was for exactly this reason during both world wars.

If there were any doubts about the safety, energy or cost implications of shifting British time, these would have been dispelled by the independent reports produced by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Age UK and the CBI, all of which have



Why deny ourselves some agreeable sunlit idleness after work or school?

supported reform. Some politicians may be too lazy to read such evidence, even though it is now conveniently collected on an environmental website called [www.lighterlater.org](http://www.lighterlater.org).

Unfortunately, most of the opposition to reform stems from even more worrying causes — including on this occasion, as on so many others, the disproportionate influence of small lobbies. In the case of time-change, the opposition does not come from Scots and farmers, but only from small subsets of these groups.

Polls support change in Scotland, as in the rest of Britain, and analysis of the economic effects by the Policy Studies Institute shows clear benefits for Scotland, partly because the tourist industry is much more important than farming. In any case, the National Farmers Union, even its Scottish branch, has declared itself “neutral” on the time issue.

The main opposition to change

comes not from the Scottish people but from politicians and commentators for whom it is a badge of honour to defy England. Equally vehement are the anti-European fanatics who denounce what they call Berlin Time.

A third, even more worrying, political dysfunction is an obsession with money — or, more precisely, the refusal of senior politicians to take anything seriously unless it involves huge sums of money. Whitehall tradition dictates that politicians and civil servants measure their prestige by how much money they extract from the Treasury. “Spending ministers” therefore take seriously only reforms that require public money to be spent. This is why even a government such as this one, supposedly dedicated to cutting costs, takes no interest in such reforms.

But what about backbench MPs? Since they have no access to the public-spending jam jar, they should be enthusiastic about a reform that costs nothing but could improve their constituents' lives.

Which raises the fourth political dysfunction illustrated by the campaign to reform British time. Our parliamentary democracy gives backbench MPs almost no power. Not only do government and opposition leaders refuse to take any interest in many issues that are outside their mainstream political agendas, but they rig parliamentary procedures to thwart such initiatives by individual MPs.

While constitutional scholars extol the “precious” link between British voters and their constituency representatives in Parliament, the reality is that neither MPs nor their voters enjoy any significant influence, let alone power. British parliamentary democracy, in short, is suffering a serious breakdown — and that, surely, is a sufficiently serious subject for politicians.