

In debt for the light

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

By the time you read this, it will likely be the second half of the week.

As I write this, however, we're at the start of a new one.

How did you spend it? At the start of the week, were you brimming over with the possibilities ahead or, were you like me, eyes trained to the finish line and ready to get this week over with, body clock thrown into disarray, much keener on the possibility of the next week coming up?

Don't misunderstand me, I'm not a naysayer. In fact, I might even be a little optimistic, but starting the week with one less hour of sleep under our respective belts, is very often a tone-setter.

Once again on Sunday we found ourselves springing forward, a marketing phrase if there ever was one. Springing forward into a new season invariably spreads the positive vibes. It's also a harbinger of the arrival of longer daylight hours, which is always a good thing. As we get wrapped up in all the positives, however, we lose sight of the fact that we're going to lose an hour right up until the moment when we have to set the clock. It leaves most of us wondering, 'Why are we doing this all over again?'

March isn't the only time when the hop-skip-and-jump march of time begs that exact same question. We do it again, albeit with considerably more consternation when we have to 'fall back' - a phrase which is much more accurate and to the point.

Yet, in the Fall, we relish that extra hour of sleep, at least until the darkness sets in.

But this time around we bemoan when that 60 minutes are taken away from us? until we're fully charged enough to appreciate a glorious window of time when the sun doesn't start setting at the ungodly hour of 4 p.m.

That brief moment in time where the actual act of springing forward is executed might seem like a slog, but it is a boon across the board in the long run, particularly for those of us who live with the aptly named Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.). We enjoy it while we can and by the time the days start getting shorter and shorter come the start of the summer, we cherish those hours knowing that the fall gives way to a slippery slope of darkness.

And completely unnecessarily.

Daylight Savings Time is a relatively recent addition to our cultural tapestry.

In Ontario, it was adopted in a piecemeal process with the communities of Port Arthur and Orillia being among the first, as decreed by their respective mayors within the first two decades of the twentieth century. The idea being to have more daylight hours in which to work.

Since its general adoption, several changes have been made to the overall principle, while moves to have it abolished have generally fizzled on the table.

But tweaking the system has proved possible in many instances, as long as it has been backed by political will. In 1986, for example, the United States government extended Daylight Savings Time to a start on the first Sunday in April, before an inevitable fallback on the last Sunday in November. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the second Bush administration made further changes

to the policy, mercifully moving up the start of Daylight Savings Time to the second Sunday in March before a conclusion on the first Sunday in November.

As is the case with so many pieces of legislation stemming from our neighbours to the south, we naturally followed suit to keep pace and have been reaping the benefits ever since.

But there comes a time when one can only improve the situation so much before its usefulness is questioned to the point of bulldozing any foundations it once had. We seem to come to this point every few years until momentum is redirected or otherwise lost in favour of some sexier endeavour.

This past fall, the Ontario Legislature passed a bill introduced by MPP Jeremy Roberts that would, in theory, make Daylight Savings Time a permanent state in the Province.

Recent studies have started to suggest that the time change may be causing much more harm than good, wrote the MPP in October. Firstly, there have been several studies that the time change is having no material effect on our energy consumption, as any savings at one time of the day are inevitably eaten up by the other end. In fact, the US National Bureau of Economic Research released a study that concluded daylight savings time might actually be wasting energy because heaters and air conditioners were being kept on later to account for extended afternoon daylight. Furthermore, we have seen adverse health outcomes from this practice.

The time change is a wartime practice that no longer serves its original purpose. It is causing more people to be depressed. It is likely leading to an increase in heart attacks, strokes and, potentially, suicides. It is likely causing more fatal car crashes and workplace injuries. Finally, it is decreasing our productivity. This begs the question why are we keeping it?

There are two factors, he concedes, that have to be considered before a further shift in time can be implemented in a practical way ? getting other jurisdictions in our time zone, such as Quebec, New York and Florida, to follow suit not the least among them. But the benefits, he says, will be multifold. Not only will it provide Ontarians ? and Quebecers, New Yorkers and Floridians ? more daylight hours in the evening and a reprieve from the negative physical and psychological impacts of shifting the clocks, but it could also aid, he argues, in our recovery from COVID-19.

Ontarians are facing challenging times during COVID-19, he says. Alongside the public health challenges, we are also seeing mental health issues spiking and ongoing economic issues. As we contemplate how to tackle these problems, I would posit that ending the biannual time change and shifting to permanent daylight savings time is a credible part of a stimulus plan. In fact [a] JPMorgan Chase study argued that making DST permanent may be an effective stimulus, and more effective than other policy measures.

I don't know if I'm completely sold on that last part, but taking a step down that road can't be anything but in the right direction. Now we just have to wait for Quebec and a handful of American states to row the same way.

It has been an exceptionally long winter and the extra hours of sunlight will only serve to brighten the light that continues to grow at the end of our collective tunnel. But we know the positives that arrived on Sunday are only temporary and we're in debt to the system by an hour. I don't know about you but, after the year we've been through, wouldn't it be nice if this debt was forgiven?