

Tullett Prebon Research, a blog by Dr Tim Morgan

About time – why the clocks should not go back

by Tim Morgan on October 26, 2012

This Sunday, we will all go through the ritual of putting our clocks back by one hour. I've always believed that this is a mistake, and that – at the very least – the UK should stay on GMT+1 through the winter. There seems to be an even stronger case for moving the clocks forward during both the summer and the winter.

When the clocks go back on the last weekend in October, Britain reverts from BST to GMT. Whilst BST, of course, stands for “British Summer Time”, GMT is supposed to mean “Greenwich Mean Time”. To me, though, it always seems more like “Generally Miserable Time”, since it ushers in an abrupt and depressing change to long, dark evenings.

Just to compound the complication, those with very long memories will recall that, during the Second World War, Britain adopted a system of DST (“Double Summer Time” or “Daylight Saving Time”), when the clocks were put forward to GMT+2 in the summer and GMT+1 in the winter, the aim being to improve productivity.

Beginning in 1968, Britain experimented with staying on BST throughout the year. As safety campaigners had promised, it did indeed save lives, and it seems that reverting to this system today would be likely to reduce the annual number of road traffic fatalities by about 300. Despite this, Britain returned to Generally Miserable Time in 1971, mainly, it seems, because neither farmers nor Scots liked the change. It has always seemed strange to me that, as a result of these objections, the majority were deprived of the benefits of GMT+1 during the winter months.

Though campaigners have raised the issue periodically over the intervening four decades, there seems to have been little appetite for a change in official circles. But there are three reasons, now, for reconsidering the situation.

First, and even if the nationalists are defeated in the independence referendum, Scotland now enjoys considerable autonomy, and there seems to be no obvious reason why MSPs should not adopt a time-zone different from the rest of the United Kingdom if that was the clear wish of the Scottish people.

Second, the majority of our trade is with Europe, and would remain so even if Britain were to leave the European Union. Any resolution of the Eurozone crisis is likely involve banking unification, posing a serious challenge to a City of London tarnished by various scandals. So having our own time-zone distinct from that of France and Germany could at some point cease to be competitive advantage. For businesses more generally, being on the same time-zone as our continental customers might be to our advantage.

Third, we are every bit as much in need of an economic fillip now as we were in 1940. I suspect that many businesses might benefit from a move away from the early closing which the reversion to GMT inflicts on them.

Should we re-adopt DST? It seems to me to be – so to speak – high time that we should.