

The INDEPENDENT

Universal Time: The radical plan to destroy time zones

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Last summer, North Korea did something a little odd. On the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation, the closed and authoritarian state announced it was permanently turning its clocks back half an hour. The country was creating its own time zone: Pyongyang time.

As a plan, it didn't make a lot of sense. Many, understandably, interpreted it as just another example of Pyongyang's characteristically illogical policy logic. Yet Pyongyang time also highlighted something else. All around the world, time zones make little sense. Russia currently has 11 time zones, while China just has one. Spanish people are said to be constantly tired because they are in the wrong time zone. Nepal is — inexplicably — the only country in the world to have a time zone that is set to 15 minutes past the hour.

Looking over this chaotic landscape, it's reasonable to ask: Are time zones inherently flawed? That's what Steve Hanke and Dick Henry think.

A few years back, Hanke, a prominent economist with Johns Hopkins University and a senior fellow with the CATO Institute think tank, and Henry, a professor of physics and astronomy at Johns Hopkins, teamed up to propose a new calendar designed to fix the inefficiencies of the current one. The plan was dubbed the "Hanke-Henry Permanent Calendar." Last month, after reading a WorldViews story about Pyongyang time, Hanke reached out to us to detail another idea he and Henry had devised to fix the chaos caused by time zones.

The plan was strikingly simple. Rather than try to regulate a variety of time zones all around the world, we should instead opt for something far easier: Let's destroy all these time zones and instead stick with one big "Universal Time."

Does that sound extreme? Perhaps, but perhaps not. The logic of Universal Time is strikingly simple: If it's 7 in the morning in Washington D.C., it's 7 everywhere else in the world, too. There are no time zones. Wherever you are, the time is the same.

WorldViews recently conducted an interview over email with Hanke and Henry in which they explained why time zones had to go, why Universal Time was a better system and why the time

has also come for their proposed calendar reform. The exchange, lightly edited for clarity, is below (Hanke and Henry gave joint responses to the questions).

Q: It was mentioned in a previous email that there were around five countries who changed their time zones last year. Is this a large number for one year?

A: It is about par for the course. It remains a political football, which would disappear if our ideas were adopted.

Q: So why do countries change their time zones?

A: Usually for political reasons, but sometimes for economic reasons. We are on the right side of history: Look at the U.S., where local time in each city was the norm until the railroads came, and time zones were created. Sanford Flemming, a Scottish-Canadian railway engineer, was the first to propose a system of worldwide time zones in 1889: “the twin agencies steam and electricity” annihilated distances and made reform necessary. Today the agency of the Internet has annihilated time and space completely and has set us up for adoption of worldwide time.

Q: What problems have time zones created around the world?

A: (Former President Dmitry) Medvedev consolidated Russian time to some extent in 2010, but these reforms have been undone by the Duma in July 2014. Bungled implementation of a good idea. Now North Korea has adopted a half-hour difference between Chinese time and Japanese time. Confusion abounds!

Q: Do any time zone policies strike you as particularly egregious?

A: You are asking if some strands of spaghetti are worse than others: they are all bad.

Q: So, the Universal Time Zone system — what lead you to argue so strongly for that option?

A: Because from a physics point of view, there IS only one time! And this principle of physics lines up perfectly with the principles of economics.

Q: But why would it work better than, say, regulating time zones so they tie in better with the local solar time?

A: Local solar time was fine, when almost all activity was local! Today, much activity is global, and ONE time is called for. You’d quickly get used to the new reading on your watch and your clock.