

Seasonal Time Changes: Recent Developments

Summary

In September 2018, the European Commission published a draft directive which would oblige member states to end seasonal time changes in 2019 and decide whether to remain on winter time or summertime permanently. Both the House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee and the House of Lords European Union Committee expressed concerns about the proposal on the basis that it breached the principle of subsidiarity, and the UK Government committed to oppose the directive. In March 2019, the European Parliament Committee on Transport and Tourism approved the directive, subject to amendment, including delaying its effect until 2021. The directive must now be approved by the European Parliament as a whole, after which negotiations between MEPs and the Council of Ministers will begin. If the UK leaves the EU on the terms negotiated in the Government's withdrawal agreement, EU law will cease to apply by December 2020, and therefore the UK will not be bound by the directive, unless the transition period—during which EU law would continue to apply to the UK—is extended. As the Republic of Ireland will be obliged to end seasonal time changes, the Northern Ireland Executive—to whom power over time zones is devolved—may have to decide whether to align with the rest of the UK or Ireland.

The issues of time zones and time changes have been the subject of significant parliamentary debate since seasonal time changes were first introduced during World War One. Since the 1990s, several private member's bills have been introduced with the aim of advancing the clocks by an hour throughout the year. Proponents cite potential benefits such as a reduction in road collisions, reduced energy consumption and a boost to the tourism industry, although evidence on these issues is inconclusive. Changes to time zones or seasonal time changes also have specific implications for Scotland, the UK's most northerly territory. The matter is currently reserved for the UK Government for Scotland and Wales, but the Scottish Government has expressed opposition to any change.

EU Proposal to Discontinue Seasonal Time Changes

EU legislation to harmonise seasonal time changes was first introduced in the 1980s. Since 2001, clock changes have been coordinated by Directive 2000/84/EC which obliges all member states to conduct bi-annual clock changes on the last Sunday of March and the last Sunday of October.¹ In September 2018, the Commission proposed a new directive which would repeal Directive 2000/84/EC and end seasonal time changes altogether. It proposed that the last mandatory clock change would take place on 31 March 2019; each member state would then decide whether to remain on wintertime or change the clocks for a final time in October 2019 and stay on summertime permanently. After this point, member states would no longer conduct seasonal time changes.²

The EU's explanatory memorandum outlined the Commission's reasons for the proposals:

The system of bi-annual clock changes has been increasingly questioned, by citizens, by the European Parliament, and by a growing number of member states. The Commission has,

therefore, analysed available evidence, which points to the importance of having harmonised Union rules in this area to ensure a proper functioning of the internal market. This is also supported by the European Parliament as well as other actors (eg in the transport sector). The Commission has also carried out a public consultation, which generated around 4.6 million replies, of which 84% were in favour of discontinuing the bi-annual clock changes while 16% wanted to keep them. Moreover, the issue has been raised by transport ministers in recent meetings of the Council in June 2018 and December 2017, and a number of member states have indicated their preference for discontinuing current summer-time arrangements.³

The Commission stated that given these developments, the directive was “necessary to continue safeguarding the proper functioning of the internal market through a harmonised scheme applicable to all member states”, giving it a legal basis in the article 114 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union.⁴

UK Parliamentary Scrutiny of the Proposal

The proposed directive was considered by the House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee and the House of Lords European Union Committee. Both recommended that their respective Houses should object to the proposal through a ‘reasoned opinion’—a so-called ‘yellow card’—on the basis that it breached the principle of subsidiarity: “that action should only be taken at EU level when the desired objectives cannot be effectively achieved by means of action taken at national or regional level”.⁵

The House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee questioned whether the EU had the competence to act, arguing that this directive went much further than previous directives:

Whilst extensive precedent establishes that the EU has competence under Article 114 TFEU to coordinate the transition to and from summer time across the Union, we question whether it also has the competence to divest member states permanently of the power to determine at national level whether seasonal time changes are necessary and to prevent them from maintaining (or, in the future, re-introducing) seasonal time changes.⁶

This point was also raised by the House of Lords European Union Committee which argued that the Commission had not “adequately explored [...] the possibility of allowing member states to choose whether or not to observe seasonal clock changes but requiring coordinated arrangements for those that do”.⁷ The committee said that the Commission had not presented any evidence that this would “represent a greater threat to internal market harmonisation than its proposal, which allows member states to choose which standard time to apply”.⁸

The House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee also noted that although the directive would prevent seasonal time variations, member states would still operate on different time zones. It argued that the Commission had not explained “why there is a clear market rationale to intervene on one but not the other”.⁹ It questioned whether the proposals were “necessary or proportionate means to ensure the proper functioning of the EU’s internal market”.¹⁰

Government and EU Response

In a written statement on 6 November 2018, the Government stated that the committees’ concerns had been raised in a meeting of EU transport ministers by Parliamentary Under Secretary for the

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Lord Henley. Summarising opinion at the meeting it said:

There was broad consensus in Council that the timetable proposed by the Commission was too short and thus there was widespread support for the Presidency's intention to provide for an extension. A small minority of member states were notably critical of the proposal while the majority welcomed the initiative, albeit noting its deficiencies.¹¹

In a letter to the chair of the European Scrutiny Committee on 19 November, Lord Henley stated the Government's opposition to the directive. He said:

The UK Government has no plans to change daylight saving time, and Government ministers are actively working to convince other member states to block this proposal.¹²

In December 2018, the European Parliament Committee on Transport and Tourism produced a draft report which proposed amendments to the directive. Most notably, it proposed that the directive should apply from 1 January two years after it first entered into force.¹³ Assuming the directive is passed in 2019, the last mandatory time change would take place in October 2020; member states who have chosen to adopt permanent summer time will participate in one final coordinated clock change in March 2021 and other member states will remain on wintertime permanently. The report was endorsed by the committee on 4 March 2019 with 23 votes in favour and 11 against and must now be approved by the European Parliament as a whole, after which negotiations between MEPs and the Council of Ministers will begin.¹⁴

Implications for the UK after Brexit

The withdrawal agreement negotiated by the Government provides for a 'transition' period (or 'implementation' period, as the Government refers to it) during which time EU law will continue to apply. According to the withdrawal agreement, this period is due to end on 31 December 2020, before the date the proposed directive is due to come into force. Therefore, should the UK leave the EU in accordance with these arrangements, the UK will not be bound by the directive and can continue seasonal time changes. However, if the UK is still a member of the EU or is still in transition in 2021, it will be obliged to implement the directive for as long as it remains so. The withdrawal agreement provides for the possibility of a one-off extension to the transition period of one or two years. The UK and the EU could agree to extend the transition period as an alternative to the Northern Ireland backstop arrangements coming into effect if an agreement on the future relationship that would supersede the backstop was not finalised by December 2020.¹⁵

There would be implications for the UK even if the directive does not apply directly, as the Republic of Ireland would be required to end seasonal time changes. Clock changes and time zones are explicitly reserved matters for Westminster for Scotland and Wales, but not for Northern Ireland.¹⁶ Therefore, when the directive comes into force, Northern Ireland may be faced with a dilemma, as noted by the House of Lords European Union Committee:

If the UK then decided to maintain summertime arrangements, Northern Ireland (assuming the devolved institutions have been re-established) would have to choose between having a one-hour time difference for half the year either with the Republic of Ireland or with the rest of the UK.¹⁷

UK Debate on Clock Changes

Clock times and seasonal time changes have been the subject of significant parliamentary debate. Seasonal clock changes were first introduced by the Summer Time Act 1916 to save energy and help the war effort. During World War Two, the Government introduced ‘double summer time’ to enable factories to work later into the evening.¹⁸ In 1968, the Government embarked on an experiment, moving temporarily to permanent summertime, referred to as British Standard Time.¹⁹ However, on 2 December 1970 the House of Commons voted against making it a permanent arrangement by 366 votes to 81, and seasonal time changes were reintroduced.²⁰

Since 1970, there have been few proposals to end seasonal clock changes; however, several private member’s bills have been introduced with the aim of advancing the clocks by one-hour year-round. These are summarised in the table below.

Private Members’ Bills on Clock Times

Bill	Sponsor	Purpose	Territorial Extent	Progress
Commons				
Daylight Saving Bill 2010–12	Rebecca Harris (Conservative MP for Castle Point)	To require the Government to prepare a cost-benefit analysis of advancing the clocks by one hour throughout the year and depending on the outcome initiate a trial clock change.	All UK	Commons report stage (bill dropped)
Energy Saving (Daylight) Bill 2007–08	Tim Yeo (Conservative MP for South Suffolk)	As below.	England	Commons second reading (debate adjourned)
Energy Savings (Daylight) Bill 2006–07	Tim Yeo (Conservative MP for South Suffolk)	To advance the clocks by one hour throughout the year and establish a ‘review panel’ to assess its effects.	England	Commons second reading (debate adjourned)
Lighter Evenings Bill 2003–04	Nigel Beard (Labour MP for Bexleyheath and Crayford)	To advance the clocks by one hour throughout the year.	England and Wales	Commons first reading (bill dropped)
British Time (Extra Daylight) Bill 1995–6	John Butterfill (Conservative MP for Bournemouth West)	To advance the clocks by one hour throughout the year, moving the UK into line with Central European Time.	All UK	Commons second reading (debate adjourned)
Lords				
Lighter Evenings (Experiment) Bill [HL] 2005–06	Lord Tanlaw (Crossbench)	To advance the clocks by one hour throughout the year for a three-year experimental period.	All UK	Completed Lords stages; Commons second reading (bill dropped)

Western European Time Bill [HL] 1995–96	Viscount Montgomery of Alamein (Crossbench)	To advance the clocks by one hour throughout the year.	All UK	Completed Lords stages; Commons first reading (bill dropped)
Central European Time Bill [HL] 1994–95	Viscount Mountgarret (Crossbench)	To advance the clocks by one hour throughout the year, moving the UK into line with Central European Time.	England, Wales and Northern Ireland	Completed Lords stages; no progress in Commons

(House of Commons Library, [British Summer Time](#), 10 March 2016, pp 10–13, and House of Commons, [Sessional Information Digests](#), accessed 18 March 2019)

Issues and Arguments

There are a number of key issues that have been raised in debate on the UK's time zone and clock change arrangements.

Road Safety

Proponents of changing the clocks often claim that an extra hour of sunlight in the evenings could significantly reduce the number of road collisions; Lord Tanlaw (then Crossbench) cited this as his primary motivation to introduce the Lighter Evenings (Experiment) Bill in 2005.²¹ A counterpoint that is often raised is that an additional hour of morning darkness in the winter months would increase accidents in the morning.²²

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accident (RoSPA) states that during the working week, a greater number of accidents occur in the evening than the morning, due to several factors:

- Motorists are more tired after a day's work and concentration levels are lower.
- Children tend to go straight to school in the morning but often digress on their way home, increasing their exposure to road dangers.
- Adults tend to go shopping or visit friends after work, increasing their journey times and exposure to road dangers.
- Social and leisure trips are generally made in the late afternoons and evenings.²³

It argues that the number of accidents increases in the autumn when the clocks go back, due to darker evenings and worsening weather conditions. RoSPA suggests that changing the clock to allow an additional hour of evening sunlight would lead to a net reduction in accidents, even if morning accidents were to increase marginally as a result.²⁴

A 1993 study from the Policy Studies Institute estimated that if the UK were to move the clocks forward by one hour throughout the year:

The number of deaths and serious injuries and of damage-only accidents on the roads would now be reduced by over 600 each year, with an estimated saving of over £200 million.²⁵

In response to an oral question in 2013 on the impact of advancing the clocks by one hour on road casualties the Government estimated that “54 deaths and 185 serious casualties would be avoided annually across Great Britain”.²⁶

However, a 2017 review of the academic literature suggested the evidence on the implications of daylight savings time (DST) on road collision risk was not conclusive:

The DST literature, taken as a body of research, should not be used to support or refute the assertion that shifts in time-zones can have a road safety benefit. Inconsistent findings and conclusions across studies, combined with the heterogeneous nature of the studies, mean that DST could possibly have a positive or negative impact on collisions, but may also have no effect.²⁷

Energy Consumption

Another common argument put forward in favour of advancing the clock is that an extra hour of evening light would reduce energy consumption and reduce fuel bills.²⁸ In 2011, the House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee took evidence on the effect on energy usage of extending British Summer Time. The National Grid estimated a modest reduction in energy usage:

In summary, if BST were extended through the winter;

- Daily demand peaks during the shoulder months would decrease by up to 1300 MW.
- The December and January demand peaks would be largely unaffected with a high case view of a 500 MW (0.8%) reduction.
- Morning demand would increase throughout the winter.
- Daily energy volumes would decrease by up to 0.1 GWh.²⁹

A joint submission from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Department for Energy and Climate Change, and the Department for Transport cautioned against making predictions based on current energy usage patterns:

Although we might expect overall energy use to be reduced by extending British Summer Time (“BST”) the effects are likely to be small in magnitude, and may even be uncertain in direction. The most significant effects are likely to be associated with lighting demand as demand switches from the evening to the morning.

However, the evidence quantifying these effects is not strong enough to conclude either way what the impact on the overall demand would be. On the one hand the working day is more aligned with natural daylight leading to reduction in demand, however there are also complex behavioural factors to consider such as the fact that households may be more likely to turn lights on when it is dark than off when it is light.³⁰

Tourism

Announcing its support for the Daylight Saving Bill in the 2010–12 parliamentary session, the Tourism Alliance argued that moving to lighter evenings all year round would boost tourism by £3.5 billion per year and create 80,000 new jobs in the sector.³¹ The then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry, Lord Truscott, rebutted a similar point when it was raised in an

exchange on an oral question in 2007; he said, “my advice is that climate, as much as a lack of light, precludes outdoor tourism activities in winter”.³²

In a 2015 report on the tourism industry, the House of Commons Committee on Culture, Media and Sport noted the potential benefits of moving to daylight saving time and recommended the Government commission “a rigorous cost-benefit analysis, including the research needed to properly inform this”.³³

Scotland

A common objection to advancing the clocks by an hour is the implications it would have for Scotland and northern parts of the UK. During second reading of the Daylight Saving Bill, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Edward Davey said:

We must acknowledge that the change would have widely differing impacts on day-to-day life in different parts of the UK. They would be particularly acute in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where it would not get light in mid-winter until nearly 10 am in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Belfast; in Lerwick in the Shetland islands, it would not get light until 10.08 am on New Year’s Eve. Although hon. Members have spoken of changes in public opinion in Scotland, it is clear that much opinion understandably remains against the proposal.³⁴

A 2010 report by the Policy Studies Institute examined this issue and argued that overall, Scotland would also benefit from the change:

Examination of the times of sunrise and sunset in relation to the time when the majority of people in Scotland get up clearly indicates that moving to SDST [advancing the clocks for an hour year-round] would enable a better match of their waking hours with the available hours of daylight. It would result in an extra hour of evening daylight on every day of the year, while working people would only be affected by the later sunrise on about 60 weekdays in winter.

In Scotland, the change would mean that adults in 9-to-5 employment would enjoy a yearly total of almost 300 additional hours of daylight, with more than half of these falling on working days. For Scottish children, there would be a yearly increase of about 200 daylight hours, with roughly half of these falling on school days.³⁵

Nonetheless, the Scottish Government’s current position is that “there is no substantive economic or social case for any change to existing arrangements, or for different time-zones within the UK”.³⁶ In a letter to the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Scottish Government gave its opinion on the EU’s proposal to end seasonal time changes. It said:

The current system of daylight saving should be maintained to avoid putting practical difficulties in the way of those making a living in northern and rural areas. The impact would be particularly felt by the farming community and other outdoor workers and could have a negative effect on Scottish rural business in general.³⁷

In 2015, the Government stated that it had no intention of bringing forward legislative changes to UK clock arrangements, citing the lack of agreement between different parts of the UK.³⁸

Further Information

- European Commission, [Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council Discontinuing Seasonal Changes of Time and Repealing Directive 2000/84/EC](#), 12 September 2018, 2018/0032 (COD)
- House of Commons Library, [British Summer Time](#), 10 March 2016
- [Debate on 'Daylight Saving Bill'](#), HC Hansard, 3 December 2010, cols 1083–156

¹ European Commission, [Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council Discontinuing Seasonal Changes of Time and Repealing Directive 2000/84/EC](#), 12 September 2018, 2018/0032 (COD).

² Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [Explanatory Memorandum for Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council Discontinuing Seasonal Changes of Time and Repealing Directive 2000/84/EC](#), 11 October 2018.

³ European Commission, [Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council Discontinuing Seasonal Changes of Time and Repealing Directive 2000/84/EC](#), 12 September 2018, 2018/0032 (COD).

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Parliament Website, ['The Principle of Subsidiarity'](#), accessed 14 March 2019.

⁶ House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, [Ending Seasonal Changes of Time Directive](#), 2 November 2018, HC 301-xli of session 2017–19, p 6.

⁷ House of Lords European Union Committee, [Subsidiarity Assessment: Discontinuing Seasonal Changes of Time](#), 22 October 2018, HL Paper 200 of session 2017–19, p 5.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, [Ending Seasonal Changes of Time Directive](#), 2 November 2018, HC 301-xli of session 2017–19, pp 6–7.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ House of Commons, ['Written Statement: EU Transport Council'](#), 6 November 2018, HCWS1069.

¹² Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, ['Letter to Sir William Cash, Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee'](#), 19 November 2018.

¹³ European Parliament Committee on Transport and Tourism, [Draft Report on the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council Discontinuing Seasonal Changes of Time and Repealing Directive 2000/84/EC](#), 18 December 2018, 2018/0332(COD), pp 9–10.

¹⁴ European Parliament Committee on Transport and Tourism, ['Could Switching Between Summer and Winter Time End in 2021?'](#), 4 March 2019.

¹⁵ HM Government, [Explainer for the Agreement on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union](#), 14 November 2018, p 28.

¹⁶ Currently, the Northern Irish Executive can change arrangements as long as they are compliant with EU law, for which the UK Government is responsible, but after Brexit this requirement will fall away; Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, ['Letter to Sir William Cash, Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee'](#), 19 November 2018.

¹⁷ House of Lords European Union Committee, [Subsidiarity Assessment: Discontinuing Seasonal Changes of Time](#), 22 October 2018, HL Paper 200 of session 2017–19, p 2.

¹⁸ House of Commons Library, [British Summer Time](#), 10 March 2016, p 7.

¹⁹ Magnus Bennett, ['A Question of Time: Changing the Clocks'](#), BBC News, 29 October 2010.

²⁰ [HC Hansard, 2 December 1970, col 1422.](#)

²¹ [HL Hansard, 24 March 2006, col 459.](#)

²² [HL Hansard, 24 January 2007, col 1102.](#)

²³ Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, ['Lighter Evenings Campaign'](#), accessed 13 March 2019.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Mayer Hillman, [Time For Change: Setting Clocks Forward by One Hour Throughout the Year](#), 1993, Policy Studies Institute, p 5.

²⁶ [HL Hansard, 22 May 2013, col 835–7.](#)

²⁷ Rachel N Carey and Kiran M Sarma, ['Impact of Daylight Saving Time on Road Traffic Collision Risk: A Systematic Review'](#) *BMJ Open*, 2 July 2017, vol 7 no 6, p 13.

²⁸ [HC Hansard, 3 December 2010, col 1126.](#)

²⁹ House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee, [The Effect on Energy Usage of Extending British Summer Time: Oral and Written Evidence](#), 21 November 2011, HC 562-I of session 2010–12, Ev 11.

- ³⁰ House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee, [The Effect on Energy Usage Of Extending British Summer Time: Written Evidence](#), 21 November 2011, Ev w1.
- ³¹ Tourism Alliance, '[Daylight Saving Campaign](#)', 28 October 2010.
- ³² [HL Hansard, 24 January 2007, col 1099](#).
- ³³ House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Tourism](#), 26 March 2015, HC 614 of session 2014–15, p 37.
- ³⁴ [HC Hansard, 3 December 2010, col 1146](#).
- ³⁵ Mayer Hillman, [Making the Most of Daylight Hours: The Implications for Scotland](#), October 2010, Policy Studies Institute, p vii.
- ³⁶ Scottish Government, '[Letter to The Rt Hon David Mundell MP](#)', 23 October 2018.
- ³⁷ *ibid.*
- ³⁸ [HC Hansard, 27 October 2016, col 428](#).

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