



## TICK-TOCK... TOCK

BY DAVID LOWE

Time and tide, and as I learnt to my dismay the other day on the 08.55 from Paris Montparnasse to Angers, wait for no man. I don't know whether you noticed, but during the early morning of 1st July, an additional second was added. In practice this meant that the clocks in France passed from 01hr 59min 59 sec, to 01hr 59 min 60 sec, then finally to 02hr 00min 00sec.

We actually all got younger, on paper at least, by a second. However, since the interest in public debt in France increases by x trillion billion euros every year, that is y million zillion euros every second, then I suppose, and I'm not an economist (but who is?), that France lost an extra z billion zillion trillion euros in that leap second. Could we reduce national debt by just removing seconds in a sort of temporal devaluation? I told you I wasn't an economist.

Where does this extra second come from? I'm sure you're in a heightened time awareness state on the train, watching the seconds tick away as you approach your destination – and you're most probably reading this article to pass time, waste time or even kill time. We are both in time and part of it, so killing time would mean terminus for us all.

Time is relative in the sense that an hour in a TGV isn't the same as an hour in a TER. My wife's "I'll be ready in two minutes" is nothing like NASA's "take-off in two minutes". So what is time, as opposed to what time is it?

*If nobody asks me what time is, I know what it is. But if I am asked what time is and I try to explain it, I no longer know what it is* – Saint Augustin.

*Time is what keeps everything from happening at once* – Einstein.

*Time is what clocks measure* – Poincaré.

*Time is money* – Donald Trump.

So why add a second? Because the rotation of the earth is not as regular as the the ticking of the official clock which uses as a reference the frequency corresponding to the transition between two electron spin energy levels of the ground state of the 133Cs atom. The earth is like a fat old watermelon, a bit rotten and punctured in places, turning around a wonky axis not quite centred

– I know it's not much but it's home. If we didn't add these leap seconds every now and again, in a couple of centuries midday would fall at two o'clock in the afternoon. And thus if we found *midi à quatorze heures*, then pigs would fly, chickens would have teeth and *ceux qui partiront à la chasse ne perdront pas leur place* [and those who leave their place won't lose it].

The matter is further complicated by the fact that we have to define whether the extra second added was a tick or a tock.

Tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tick or Tick-tock-tick-tock-tock? And, of course, if the English add a tick the French will insist on adding a toc.

*Toc toc.*

*Qui est là?*

*Buster.*

*Buster Qui?*

*Buster Keaton!*

And I wanted to finish not with a silly joke [the French equivalent of a knock-knock joke] but with a phrase so beautiful and profound that time would stand still and the petals of a freshly picked rose would detach themselves and fall gently to the ground... but I couldn't think of one. Bon voyage.

