

IMPENDING LEGISLATION ON METRICATION

(A Paper by Sally Oppenheim)

1. Brief Historical Background

1864: Weights and Measures Act (Metric System) -  
Legalised use of Metric Measures for Science and  
Export Trade.

1897: Weights and Measures Metric System Act -  
Stabilised dual system of Imperial or Metric.

1965: Douglas Jay, President of the Board of Trade - stated  
commitment to complete metrication within ten years.

1968: Benn (Hansard 769 col. 1167) announced establishment of  
Metrication Board and reaffirmed the Jay commitment.

October 1970: Short Debate on Metrication (3½ hours) - no vote.  
Most Conservative speakers against (ratio 10-1). Hardly any  
Labour speeches. The Government proposes to encourage voluntary  
developments.

1972: Command 4880 Metrication White Paper - main conclusion  
there should not be an M Day but rather a gradual process. No  
Debate on this.

July 1973: Short Debate on Metrication (on Adjournment Motion).  
No vote.

Majority of Conservative MP's against, same ratio. Hardly any  
Labour Members spoke.

Extent of Conservative Commitment

1972 White Paper accepted target for Metrication by 1975, in  
principle. However, we subsequently negotiated with the EEC to  
go completely metric by the end of 1979 (except for beer and milk)  
but undertook not to discriminate against use of Metric units by  
1976.

Sir Geoffrey Howe emphasised in the 1973 Debate that the  
commitment and intention was only to permit circulation of goods  
sold in metric units by 1976 (i.e. no commitment was given about  
date of final ban on Imperial Units). Assumed that as there would  
have to be a slow phasing-in period, this might begin about 1977  
or 1978.

3. Description of Proposed Government Legislation

See Appendix attached.

4. Implications and Consequences

50 items of food have to be sold in prescribed quantities  
(under the Weights and Measures Act 1963). This is an accepted  
and approved Consumer Protection measure. However, for a number  
of reasons orders made under the Act have not always been  
satisfactory.

Some orders have already been laid, in which a metric alternative is given. These orders are subject to the affirmative procedure and are always taken in Standing Committee or late at night for 14 hours. The proposed legislation would have the effect of removing the Imperial alternative in existing orders and, where no metric alternatives have yet been given, additional orders would be laid giving only a metric alternative. Terminal dates would in each case be given in the relevant order.

Terminal dates would also be given for metric changeover in the case of "weighed-out" goods (butchers, greengrocers, etc.). On the surface this appears to be a neat and simple legislative solution. However, there is a statutory consultation period in respect of each order, laid down by the Act (N.B. See Appendix, paragraph 5). Experience has shown that this is usually prolonged and tortuous, so when the orders are laid before the House, their presentation is rushed and we are usually told that it would be irresponsible to oppose them at such a late date, because the Trade or Industry concerned have purchased, or are just about to purchase, requisite equipment and that further delay would be damaging. Several very unsatisfactory orders have thus passed unopposed.

It is important to note that after the Government have made their proposed Amendments to the Weights and Measures Act, the crucial Metrication orders will come before Parliament late at night, or in Committee, for a very limited period and always under pressure.

#### 5. Objections and Alternatives

- a) No vote has ever been taken in the House on the principle of metrication (although we are committed to it by 1979 by an EEC Directive, the period could be extended by negotiation).
- b) No Metrication Bill has been introduced.
- c) The White Paper has not been debated.
- d) Metrication is inflationary; there will undoubtedly be rounding up. The Government have not said how this could be avoided. At a time like this it would be irresponsible to allow the Government to proceed with the metrication of consumer goods.
- e) If we allow the Government's legislation through unopposed, they can metricate by stealth and by night, without adequate Parliamentary Debate or approval of time table procedures. (See Appendix, Paragraph 5, which incorrectly claims the opposite).
- f) The costs of conversion are incalculable but in 1973 a rough estimate was £5,000 million. There is no doubt that the cost of the conversion of weighing machines throughout the retail trade will be very considerable.
- g) No proposals for the phasing in of metrication have been published. In recent Parliamentary answers, Alan Williams has attempted to play this down unconvincingly.

The CBI and consumer groups are in favour of metrication as soon as possible because of damaging uncertainty with regard to machinery and education etc.

Much of industry has already gone metric where there is no direct effect upon consumers, for export purposes.

Where prescribed quantities already allow a metric alternative for consumer goods, this has to be largely ignored because business and industry, for the purposes of their own image, and competition, want to be told that they have to go metric.

All uncertainty could be ended if the Government, in due course (as soon as possible) embarked on full consultation with trade, industry, consumer groups etc. (they do not need a Weights and Measures Act amendment to do this) and then came to Parliament for approval and full Debate, with a specific phased programme for each trade and industry and with detailed proposals for the protection of consumers, so that plans can be made within a known time scale. "Which" is publishing the framework for such proposals this month.

The Government could then proceed with a timetable and procedures approved and debated by Parliament. Statutory consultation on each individual order could then be curtailed. As metrication has to be phased in fairly gradually anyway, this could easily be accomplished by 1979.

We should claim that this should not be accomplished earlier in the case of consumer goods, for the reasons given.

Both on political grounds and because of their own commitments the Government would have to reject all of these proposals. They do not want to have to commit themselves to a published timetable or to debate costs and consumer safeguards.

It would suit them very well to get the proposed legislation through so that they can proceed quietly and at a speed that suits them politically. This, apart from any other justification, is why we should oppose this.

Our position vis-à-vis the CBI and consumer groups could be protected by our call for early publication of a timetable, and a debate on consumer safeguards. This would end all uncertainty, which is their chief complaint. As for the replacement of machinery, all but packaging machinery is at present for the most part already being replaced by metric machinery, while most new weighing scales are self converting.

#### 6. Political Considerations

We would gain a very substantial political advantage by voting against giving the Government a blank cheque for metrication as and when they please.

As we shall not defeat the Government, it is likely that they will have completed metrication by the end of 1977 or early 1978 (i.e. pre a 1978 or 1979 election).

Given a period of adverse public reaction at the end of 1977 and beginning of 1978, when this has taken place, if we are clearly on the record as voting against the Government's handling of metrication, there will be very considerable advantages for us in the ensuing election.

The Government clearly hope that we will not oppose them and put them in the position of having to marshall their troops into the Lobbies to vote for metrication at an early date.

They are particularly vulnerable if they oppose our arguments for the delay of the metrication of consumer products; they can hardly do so on the basis that they suspect inflation to be worse than.

In the 1973 Debate Alan Williams called for immediate legislation. He was pressed several times to say whether an incoming Labour Government would bring this in right away. Although he did not say so in so many words, this was clearly

implied. Therefore, if he claims that we are causing delays or running out of time - why did he not push forward with this (consultations, etc.) nearly two years ago, when they came to Government.\*

7. Worst Possible Outcome of our Voting Against Legislation

Resignation of the Whip by Ian Orr-Ewing.

S.O.

\* In that Debate, my position was consistent with this paper.

## APPENDIX

Issued by the Government in January, 1975

### METRICATION

1. The Weights and Measures Act 1963 needs amendment if the process of metrication is to be completed.
2. Amendment is particularly necessary to enable the Government to fix terminal dates for the use of imperial units. It is envisaged that this would be a matter for consultation and might be remitted to the Metrication Board in the first instance. It will be necessary to delete the proviso to Section 10(10) of the 1963 Act.
3. The sub-section empowers the Department of Prices and Consumer Protection by Order to amend Schedules I and III of the Act (which respectively define units of measurement and measures and weights lawful for use for trade) subject to the proviso:-
  4. "But ~~The Department~~ shall not so exercise their powers under this sub-section as to cause the exclusion from use for trade of imperial in favour of metric units of measurement, weights and measures".
5. An amending Bill which did not itself fix terminal dates would leave the amendment of Schedules I and III of the Act subject to an Order or Orders which would be tabled for Parliamentary approval. Thus there would be ample further opportunity for Parliament to consider the question.
6. Principal retail trades in weighed out goods - the butchers, fishmongers and greengrocers - are unwilling to come to any agreement to metricate until terminal dates are fixed after which imperial units and measurements will no longer be lawful for use for trade. In default of any other arrangement it is possible that EEC Directive 71/354/EEC will require the phasing out of imperial units on 31 December 1979. That date is too remote. Moreover if the weighing machine industry is to meet the demand on it for the adaptation, conversion or replacement of retailers' weighing machines in an orderly manner, it is essential that early plans should be drawn up in conjunction with the retailers.