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CONFIDENTIAL

METRICATION

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It is hoped that Members will find this brief
useful for the second reading of the debate
on the Weights and Measures &c Bill.

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24 Old Queen Street,
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GSC/ACS
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METRICATION

The Weights and Measures &c Bill

Section I - Summary of the Bill

1. Metrication

The Bill gives the Secretary of State for Prices and Consumer Protection the power to specify by order which weights and measures may lawfully be used. This effectively gives the Government power to bring in complete metrication at any time.

The Secretary of State will be given the power to amend by order the Schedules to the Weights and Measures Act 1963, which list the weights and measures which should be used. Under the new orders it will become an offence to use the imperial alternative weights and measures, and it will also be an offence for a trader to possess for use for trade any of the weights and measures whose use is to become unlawful.

The Secretary of State will have an obligation to consult affected interests before making an order.

Contracts already entered into will be safeguarded.

2. Other measures of consumer protection

The Bill will also give effect to other minor miscellaneous measures of consumer protection, such as giving the Secretary of State the power to require goods to be sold in containers of specified materials, construction, or size.

The Secretary of State is also given the power, by order, to modify any requirement imposed by some of the Weights and Measures or Food and Drugs Act which appear to be causing shortages or irregularities in the supply of certain goods. Interests substantially affected will have to be consulted.

Section II - 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) - there was no vote. Most Conservative speakers were against (ratio 10-1). Hardly any Labour speeches. The Government proposed to encourage voluntary developments:

1972: Command 4880, the Metrication White Paper - the main conclusion was that there should not be an M day but rather a gradual process. There was no debate on this.

July 1973: Short Debate on Metrication (on Adjournment Motion). Once again there was no vote.

The majority of Conservative MPs spoke against. Hardly any Labour Members spoke.

Section III - The Conservative commitment

The principle of metrication is not in question; it was accepted in the 1972 White Paper. We subsequently negotiated with the EEC to switch completely to metrication by the end of 1979 (except for beer and milk). However there are provisions for metrication to be delayed in any EEC country if there are adequate reasons for doing so.

The only commitment to which a date was attached was that made by Sir Geoffrey Howe in 1973, when he stated that we had undertaken not to discriminate against metric units by late 1976 (Hansard, 24th July 1973, Col. 1428).

Section IV - Conservative objections to the present Bill, and to the Government's handling of metrication

- (1) No vote on metrication has ever been taken in the House.
- (2) Once the present Bill is passed, the Government will be able to metricate as it pleases and when it pleases. Metrication will proceed by stealth, and the orders made under this Act will be debated late at night.
- (3) No timetable has been given for metrication. The Government should be pressed to publish a timetable as soon as possible. Industry badly needs a timetable in order to plan ahead; and if all firms in one sector do not convert at the same time, those that

convert late will have an advantage over the others. Compare with Alan Williams' demands for statements in 24th July 1973 debate.

(4) Metrication is inflationary: there will almost certainly be rounding-up, and so this is one of the worst possible times to choose to metricate. Small businessmen and shops will be blamed for inflation and rounding-up, even if they do not round-up.

(5) Metrication is expensive, especially for small businesses and shops. No accurate estimate of the cost exists, but figures as high as £5,000 million have been mentioned.

(6) There has not been enough consultation: the Weights and Measures &c Bill was itself sprung on an unsuspecting public.

(7) The uncertainty to which industry has been subjected has been damaging and disruptive; the Conservative Party (see quotations in next section) would have handled metrication in an orderly fashion, and with adequate consultation.

(8) Metrication has proved chaotic for both businesses and consumers in most of the areas in which it has so far been introduced. There have been reports that some industries have had to change back to the old system after going metric.

(9) There have been no announcements from the Government about any steps they will take to minimise confusion for shoppers. This should be contrasted with the detailed knowledge of the possible confusions shown by Alan Williams in the debate on 24th July 1973. There have, however, been advertisements in the newspapers.

(10) No significant exceptions have been made so far; compared with Alan Williams' concern for pints of beer and milk (see quotations).

(11) The Government should be pressed to give small businesses some other concession - such as single rate VAT - to compensate them for the expense of metrication.

Section V - Quotations

Conservative

Sir Geoffrey Howe: "... We shall take closely into account the views which will be expressed in the House and by outside interests."

"... the House will appreciate the importance of the matter being approached in a rational and orderly fashion. That is why I have identified those commodities for which orders will come before the House before the end of the session. We shall take close account of the views inside and outside the House, because we are determined to see that the changes are brought into effect in a manner which fully informs, and, as far as possible, protects the consumer."

(Hansard 24th July 1973, Cols. 1433 and 1434)

Labour

Alan Williams: "It will be hard to convince people that there are advantages for consumers in cost gains when prices are being increased on conversion and when no cost saving is being passed on."

"The Government should state clearly which goods will be allowed to retain imperial measurements.

We are all delighted that there has been a reprieve for the pint of beer. The same arguments can be adduced for reprieving the pint of milk. Milk is not a matter of major international trade, and industry does not have to change over its bottling plant."

"The Government could easily give an assurance on milk and could give assurances in other sectors where metrication will go ahead. Those assurances have not come today. Industry is still waiting to know what the Government intend to do. The Government should insist that where industry goes metric it should use identifiable, manageable and intelligible units with simple multiples so that shoppers can assess value for money. It should apply unit pricing wherever possible."

Mrs. Sally Oppenheim (Gloucester): "Is the hon. Gentleman saying that if the Labour Party win the next General Election they will immediately move to metrication? He keeps evading the issue."

Mr. Williams: "I have already indicated that we would then have a phased movement to introducing the necessary orders."

(Hansard 24th July, 1973, Cols. 1454, 1460, 1460-1, 1462)

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