

METRICATION

(A Note by Geoffrey Howe)

Following our previous discussion about the legislation which the Government is likely to introduce on metrication, this note is intended to fill in a little of the background which we ought to have in mind.

As I said in our earlier discussion, the way in which this subject has been handled does not do a great deal of credit to our system of government. Even so, I feel that that system might itself be damaged if we were not to look as though we were changing our position solely for reasons of apparent electoral advantage.

We cannot disregard the fact that the last Conservative Government (after an understandable period of anguish) published a White Paper (Cmd. 4880) about this and was following the policy set out in that White Paper. I attach a copy of the three pages containing the summary and conclusions section to that document. Colleagues who can face the prospect could follow the argument further in my speech of 24th July 1973 (Columns 1424 to 1434). Angus Maude's speech begins on Column 1438.

The reply always given about the cost of metrication is that "no well-formed estimate exists or could exist". No statistical basis has ever been given for the figure of £5,000 million, but it is wildly improbable, if only because, at the time when it was first put forward, it must have represented something like 10 per cent of the entire GNP. The BSC and the NCB have estimated that the cost to them of metrication would amount to about 0.23% of one year's turnover. If one applied this figure to the economy as a whole, 0.23% would amount to about £200 million. When one remembers that metrication is already advanced a very long way, that figure would seem to be nearer the right order of magnitude. And a great deal of the cost is not true extra cost. The sugar industry, for example, have held up their capital re-equipment programme for some years in order to ensure that their new machinery can be installed on a metric basis.

The extent to which the process has now gone can be seen from the following extracts from a note that I have received from the Library:

"In consumer goods, there is now a long list of items which are available in metric measures. Fabrics, clothing, carpets, beds and bedding, soap and detergents, hardware, do-it-yourself items, pharmaceuticals, toiletries, knitting wools, paper patterns, have all passed their M-day. Pre-packed confectionery changes from August 1976 and weighed out confectionery from December 1976. In the particular case of prescribed quantity foodstuffs, where Orders are having to be made to amend the Weights and Measures Act, these have been passed for pasta, salt, sugar, dried vegetables, flour and flour products, cereal breakfast foods, and oat products. Mrs. Williams has promised to proceed as quickly as possible with others. As far as resistance in the retail trade is concerned, I only know of the butchers who have actually gone on record as saying they will not change unless forced into it, but fishmongers are in sympathy with them. The brewers are resisting the retail change, but in this they have government support.

"The energy industries had a co-ordinated programme of change planned for 1st April 1974, but all the fuel programmes were deferred because of the fuel crisis. The plans did not include retail sale of petrol, and though the petroleum industry has just announced metrication of bulk sale from January 1976, this does not affect retail sales. The electricity supply industry has gone metric internally, and power stations were planned on the assumption that Britain would be metric in 1975. They now have metric equipment but receive their fuel in imperial quantities.

"The schools certainly teach the metric system as "mother tongue" and at primary level the children are allowed to become "bilingual" merely from the home and shopping environment and are not taught imperial. At secondary level and beyond there still has to be a certain amount of preparation for youngsters going into non-metricated jobs. The teaching profession appears to be reasonably content and would just like more money for metricated equipment. The NUT say that they have had no letters of complaint, nor has metrication been raised at any conferences."

Metriation has, of course, proceeded a very long way in all the old White Commonwealth countries. Even the South African Rugby Pitch is to be metricated (whatever that may mean exactly) from the beginning of next year. And although the position in the United States is still not entirely clear, the only other countries that have still to announce plans for a change-over are Brunei, Burma, Liberia, Naru, Sierra Leone, Tonga, Western Samoa and the two Yemen Republics.

The legislation which we expect to be introduced shortly was more or less precisely foreshadowed in Paragraph 66 of our own White Paper. This does not mean that we should remain mute. The pint and the mile are obvious aspects on which we can press the Government to clarify their position. The European Community allowed us to defer any change in these areas at least for a substantial period and I see no reason why we should not have an extension, if necessary indefinite. So far as pints of beer and milk are concerned, Alan Williams has already echoed what I had to say in the House by asserting that any change in the pint of beer would take place over his dead body.

On road signs, the Library note is as follows:

"I think there may possibly be some reconsideration taking place. At official levels there is absolutely no comment but I have the impression that rumours of a change in road signs are circulating in the Transport Industries Department. As to costs, I have never seen any estimate but comparison with Welsh language signs is not really possible because entire new large signs to take both languages had to be provided for them. For a change to kilometres the figures will only be painted out, or covered over with a small plate showing new figures, on distance signs; speed limit signs will have to be changed and some temporary quick-change cover-up devised so that they all change overnight."

The reference to the cost of installing Welsh language signs was to the figure which I recollect during our period of Government was £2 million; but they really are massive new signs going far beyond re-painting.

On this basis, I should hope we can agree not to vote against the legislation foreshadowed but certainly to press for much greater openness and clarity about the Government's intentions and for the reassurances which should clearly be forthcoming on certain specific points.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

International trade and metrication

1. The adoption of the metric system of weights and measurements is spreading rapidly throughout the world. Nearly every country either has already changed or is about to change to it. The continent of Europe uses it exclusively; all the chief Commonwealth countries and South Africa have changed or are at the moment moving over to it. And in the United States of America the Government has recently recommended the change. If we kept to the imperial system we could soon become the only major trading country using it.
2. Between them, the countries which have gone or are shortly to go metric are already taking more than 80 per cent of our exports. To preserve imperial specifications for home orders while an increasing proportion of our exports must be made to metric standards, would add to the cost of manufacture and make more difficult our penetration of overseas markets.
3. It is their recognition of the fact and extent of metrication in countries to which they must sell that has led wide areas of British industry voluntarily to adopt it for the home market as well. The competitive advantages of doing so were appreciated in Europe many years ago. The member countries of the European Economic Community have now decided to regularise and complete the process and for this purpose have recently ratified a directive setting a target date (1 January 1978) after which only a prescribed system of metric units may be used throughout the Communities.
4. In due course, as a member of the enlarged Communities, the terms of the directive will come to be applied here as well. But we shall naturally need a longer period in which to complete the changeover. Arrangements negotiated with the Community will ensure that units used in our legislation are retained until 31 December 1979. Where there are special reasons they may be retained for ever longer.

Industry and metrication

5. For the reasons already mentioned, British industry voluntarily has gone a long way towards adopting metric specifications for home production as well as for exports. It was expected that in the main the broad programme for the process would be completed by the end of 1975. This still seems a reasonable aim and it is one which has the support of the Government, but it is recognised that detailed examination of particular industries' problems may make an earlier or later date preferable.
6. Progress to metrication cannot be a haphazard affair, left to individual whim and decision. If that were to happen it could cause confusion throughout industry and would present untold difficulties to the consumer. It is in everybody's interests therefore to ensure that it takes place in a well-ordered and properly-regulated manner. To see to this is the job of the Metrication Board. The Board acts under the authority of Government and will continue to do so, concentrating

on its dual role of coordinating the process of changeover in particular sectors of industry and giving general publicity to it.

7. In recent years special programmes have been prepared for the building, engineering and other industries. There is no doubt that these industries consider that the changeover is contributing significantly to their greater efficiency and competitiveness. Discussions with the transport industry and its users, for example, have shown that they would welcome a changeover to metric tariffs for overseas freights, because British goods are increasingly being carried to countries using or changing to the metric system.

8. The present system for showing speed limits and other road signs is unlikely to be changed for a long time to come.

9. The Government acknowledge and support the progress that has already been made. They will not, however, use public purchasing power deliberately to hasten the changeover from imperial to metric units. In their own purchasing they will use metric and international standards only when their discussions with suppliers show that there will be general benefit from doing so.

10. Meanwhile the more industry adopts metric units, the more will the general public become involved in the whole process. The range of products covered will grow and there will be no clear boundary between metric and non-metric parts of the economy. In these circumstances to attempt to keep imperial units for the individual shopper while industry was on metric would be both confusing and costly. It would also deny us the very real savings which stand to be gained when turning over completely to metric.

The general public and metrication

11. There is nothing new about using the metric system in the United Kingdom; it is not some sudden innovation or recent discovery. It has been lawful here for all but a few purposes, at least since the Weights and Measures (Metric System) Act of 1897. So there can be absolutely no question of "metrication by stealth"; not is there any lack of parliamentary authority for the way it has been becoming more generally adopted. This has been a gradual process, proceeding item by item, and that is the way it will continue.

12. There will be no "M-day" for metrication. But people will become much more aware of it - and more familiar with it - as foodstuffs and household goods measured in metric sizes and quantities come into our shops from our own manufacturers as well as from the continent and from other metric countries.

13. Some goods, like vegetables, that are sold loose by weight may even now lawfully be sold by the kilograms. But under the Weights and Measures Act 1963 many items of foodstuff may only be sold here in imperial measures. Steps will have to be taken to allow the wider use of the metric system. The Government will therefore propose legislation to permit the sale of metric packs in addition to the existing sizes.

14. There will also need to be some consequential legislation since our laws include many references to imperial units alone. Exact conversions to metric equivalents may sometimes be impracticable, but in those cases the Government have no doubt that a satisfactory solution can be found.

15. The Government have no wish to discourage the sale of draught beer by the pint, but equally if anyone wants to buy it by the litre or half-litre that too should be lawful. The Government have at present no plans for changing from imperial units for the sale of milk.

The changeover to metrication

16. No matter how carefully-prepared and well-regulated, the changeover to a new system must inevitably cause some difficulties, especially for older people who have throughout their lives known only imperial units of measurement: the younger generation will find it less difficult. The education authorities already give guidance and provide facilities to teachers and others concerned, so that those parts of the curriculum likely to be affected are modified in step with the increasing spread of the metric system.

17. The Government recognise that the period during which some foodstuffs are sold in imperial quantities and some in metric will present problems for many shoppers. The Government intend to take action to ensure that the marking of sizes and quantities is absolutely clear and will consider how best the housewife can be given information to enable her to continue to judge value for money.

18. The move to metrication has been taking place over many years, but the Government believe that the time has now come when they must act to ensure the orderly completion of the process. In doing so they will not hesitate to take whatever steps are necessary to protect the consumer during the period of changeover and to reduce to a minimum any difficulties which the introduction of the new system may cause.

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