

# The Myth of 1965

*Government's relentless  
Big Lie about the origins of  
Compulsory Metrication*

## PREFACE

On 13 March 1995 Glenys Kinnock, prominent MEP (and wife of Neil Kinnock, former Leader of the Labour Party and by then EU Commissioner) wrote to a constituent: “I have contacted the European Commission to check whether there are any proposals in the pipeline which would mean enforced metrication in Britain and have been informed that there are no such proposals afoot. Unfortunately, from time to time such stories about Europe tend to circulate and I understand that a number of people have been in touch with the Commission recently on this matter..... I hope that this information is helpful to you.”

That was written more than two months *after* enforcement (by the Metric Regulations of 1994 in compliance with Directive 80/181/EEC as amended by 89/617/EEC) of the first stage of compulsory metrication, governing the sale of wines and spirits (e.g. millilitres in place of gills) as from 1 January 1995, and barely six months *before* implementation of the second stage, requiring use of metric units on sale of pre-packed goods as from 1 October that year!

Many MPs were likewise in denial; for there had been no public consultation and no mention of the issue in any party’s general election manifesto. Prior to enforcement under powers deriving from Edward Heath’s European Communities Act 1972, any threat of compulsory metrication had meanwhile been discounted by Technology Minister Tony Benn’s repeated assurances in 1968 that “Compulsion is not part of the process” and by Margaret Thatcher’s dismantling of Harold Wilson’s Metrication Board in 1979.

Yet ever since 1995 government ministers and officials have sought to justify metrication by chanting their mantra, “The UK took the decision to adopt the metric system in 1965”, which is quoted in every official communication. Even the Minister for Universities and Science, The Rt. Hon. David Willetts MP, writing to another MP on 21 November 2011, advised: “The decision for the UK to adopt metric units was originally taken in 1965, and has been the policy of every Government since”, which he knows to be untrue. The pretence that conversion from imperial to metric in Britain was voluntary and long preceded membership of the EEC is the ‘Big Lie’ which this pamphlet fully exposes. Accompanying a standard response from the Department for Business is a series of seven letters which I exchanged with its responsible officials. To my last letter, of course, there was no reply.

As our late, great friend Bernard Levin wrote in *The Times* on 15 August 1995: “Do you seriously believe that if this government had come out and told the truth about what was imminent we would have allowed it to happen? But the deeply rooted culture of lying by which this government lives has so sprouted that it towers over everything. If you think that I am making it up, let me tell you that when the secret, the hidden agenda upon which the British people are now impaled, was revealed and our rulers were asked why they had not come out with the truth at once, they said it was not necessary because the British people had already agreed – in 1965.” The ‘Big Lie’ still prevails, seventeen years later.

Vivian Linacre 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2012

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The British Weights and Measures Association exists to protect and promote British weights and measures, and to oppose compulsory use of the metric system.

# BIS

## DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, INNOVATION & SKILLS

Transcript of the standard letter sent to BWMA members.

Dear . . . .

Thank you for your letter of . . . . addressed to Nick Clegg, regarding the use of imperial measurements. I am sure you will appreciate that Ministers are not able to reply to as much correspondence as they would like, therefore on this occasion I have been asked to respond and I apologise for the delay.

We are grateful for your suggestion. However, the Government does not believe that this proposal would result in any deregulatory savings or cut unnecessary red tape.

Imperial units can already be used throughout the UK alongside metric units in dual labelling. The Government believes that, in principle, having a single consistent set of measurement in use for trade, reduces costs for business and enables consumers to make price and quantity comparisons more easily.

The UK is already substantially metric with the vast majority of trade being carried out using metric measures. Therefore, it is important that where retailers choose to label goods with imperial units, they are also labelled with metric units so that consumers can always compare prices between loose and pre-packaged goods or between retailers or brands.

The UK took the decision to adopt the metric system in 1965 and the last changeover to metric units, for goods sold loose, took place over a decade ago. There are no plans for any further changes. The Government recognises that many consumers prefer, or are more familiar with, imperial units and so fully supports the continued use of imperial units as supplementary indications, alongside metric for as long as business and consumers find them useful.

Yours sincerely,

Kerry Aspinall  
Public Communications Unit

**VIVIAN LINACRE FRSA FCS**  
*President: British Weights & Measures Association*

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Your Ref: 2010/00081321

5th August 2011

Dear Kerry Aspinall,

Ever since 1997, Members of BWMA have received scores of letters from Ministers and Civil Servants in reply to enquiries as to the justification for compulsory metrication. A typical example, taken at random, is yours of 19 October 2010. It states as an historical fact – as they invariably do – that: ***"The UK took the decision to adopt the metric system in 1965"***, yet that assertion has never been substantiated. No evidence is presented to support it. All we are ever given is the date.

I am therefore inviting you, once and for all, to provide a reference to that event in 1965 which, over 45 years later, is still proclaimed as the mandate for the process that led to criminalization of customary weights and measures. It is surely a simple matter for you to comply with this request, merely citing the statute or other means whereby the nation became committed to this epoch-making change to our language, culture and customs of trade.

For I can find no legislation on the issue for that year, not even a White or Green Paper; no mention of the subject in any of the political parties' manifestos for the 1964 general election nor in the Queen's Speech announcing the new Parliament's legislative programme. In any event, how could any such radical measure possibly have been passed on that date, squeezed into Wilson's precarious minority administration between the general elections held only one year on each side of it?

We do know that Wilson was preparing a second application to join the EEC – hoping to succeed where Macmillan had failed – and that as a sop to de Gaulle he offered to impose compulsory metrication in the UK, but to no avail as de Gaulle rejected that too. So what happened in 1965 to commit us to metrication – or, for that matter, at any time prior to the UK's third application, by Edward Heath, which resulted in the UK's accession to the EEC in 1972? Note that on each of those three occasions, the first two failures followed by the final success, the pretext for an undertaking by a British Prime Minister to impose compulsory metrication had nothing whatever to do with the will of the people but was solely as part of the price payable for admission to the EEC; so how can you pretend that any decision at all was ever taken *by the UK*?

What we also know is that the only event remotely connected with metrication that did occur in 1965 -- during preparation of Wilson's unsuccessful application to join the EEC -- was the answer given by Douglas Jay, President of the Board of Trade, to a planted question in the House of Commons by a back-bencher, which expressed the "hope" that the country would have adopted the metric system within ten years. That was all, yet on the strength of that brief personal sentiment without further reference to Parliament, a Metrication Board was set up in 1969. But of course one of Margaret Thatcher's first acts as Prime minister, barely ten years later, was to scrap the Metrication Board completely.

Furthermore in 1985 Parliament passed the great Weights and Measures Act which accorded parity to the imperial and metric systems, defining "the pound or the kilogram" and "the pint or the litre" (in that order!) as the UK's standard measures. It was not until after another ten years later, under direction from the EU, that compulsory metrication was enforced, criminalizing the use in trade of our customary weights and measures.

So please supply 'chapter and verse' to verify your historical dogma. If you cannot, will you admit that the entire regime of metrication in Britain is based on a wilful lie, in which all those who regularly express it are complicit?

I await your response.

Yours sincerely,

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16th August 2011

Dear Mr Linacre,

Thank you for your letter of 5th August addressed to Kerry Aspinall in the Public Communications Unit in Runcorn. Your letter has been passed to the National Measurement Office (NMO) for reply given NMO's responsibility for weights and measures policy.

The decision of the then Government that the UK should adopt the metric system of units of measurement was announced in a Statement to the House of Commons by the then President of the Board of Trade, Douglas Jay on 24th May 1965.

Unfortunately, no relevant physical Departmental records relating to the period have been retained. However, there is a copy of the Statement in Hansard Written Answers (Commons) of 24 May 1965 Series 5 Vol. 713, available online at: [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written\\_answers/1965/may/24/weights-and-measures-metric-system](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written_answers/1965/may/24/weights-and-measures-metric-system)

I hope this is helpful.

Kind regards,



Lynnette Falk

Assistant Director  
Regulation Team



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8<sup>th</sup> September 2011

Dear Ms Falk

My letter of 5<sup>th</sup> August addressed to Kerry Aspinall of the Public Communications Unit was obviously intended for direction to an appropriate level within BIS, the department of government which routinely seeks to justify compulsory metrication by reiterating that ***"The UK took the decision to adopt the metric system in 1965"*** – the claim which my letter disproved at some length. I was therefore shocked to receive your response of 16<sup>th</sup> August, emanating not from central government at all but from an executive agency and entirely ignoring the issues that I had raised. Because the whole narrative that I recounted is irrefutable, exposing as a lie 'the myth of 1965' on which compulsory metrication is founded, those responsible within government dare not address the issue – despite its fundamental cultural and commercial importance – and evidently nor can you.

You refer to the "NMO's responsibility for weights and measures policy", but it has none. Policy is a matter for government, not for an executive agency. The NMO is responsible only for implementation of a government's policy. Your own title indicates that your function is to enforce that policy. But my letter challenged the legitimacy of that policy from its origins, with which you are not remotely concerned.

NMO is officially responsible, however, "for the Weights and Measures Act 1985 which is the main piece of legislation covering weights and measures controls in the UK." Part I (1) of the Act reads:

***"The yard or the metre shall be the unit of measurement of length and the pound or the kilogram shall be the unit of measurement of mass by reference to which any measurement of length or mass shall be made in the United Kingdom."***

How, then could the UK have possibly decided to adopt the metric system ***twenty years earlier?*** Why does BIS, a principal Department of State, perpetuate this preposterous lie? I will tell you why: it is because the government dare not admit that in fact – as recounted in my earlier letter – the UK never took any such decision of its own accord but was required to do so as part of the price paid for entry into the EEC.

As you admit, all that actually happened in 1965 was a written answer by the President of the Board of Trade to a planted Parliamentary Question from a back-bencher. You do not pretend that there

was any legislation, not even a White Paper, yet, according to the BIS, that short statement, which committed nobody to anything, constituted a national decision! I am not surprised to learn that "no relevant physical Departmental records relating to the period have been retained"!

Furthermore, it is clear from Hansard that Douglas Jay was not even expressing a firm government commitment, but was merely expressing a *hope* that Britain would have converted to the metric system within ten years! In fact it was only after another *thirty* years, in 1995, that compulsory metrication was imposed by the EEC. In 1968, by the way, the Minister for Technology, Tony Benn, insisted that compulsion would not figure in the metrication process; but in due course the EEC had a different attitude, since its purpose was to break the UK and USA's cultural and commercial bond of a shared system of weights and measures.

The British Weights and Measures Association is determined to shame this administration into withdrawing the 1965 lie and admitting the history of deception by which the use of our customary weights and measures was made a criminal offence.

I am copying this to Kerry Aspinall in the expectation that she will kindly pass it upwards to BIS. Please acknowledge and distribute widely.

Yours sincerely

Vivian Linacre (President)



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15th September 2011

Dear Mr Linacre,

Thank you for your letter of 8 September.

I can confirm that the National Measurement Office (NMO) has responsibility for weights and measures policy on behalf of Ministers in the Department of Business Innovation and Skills. This responsibility was transferred to the Agency from the Consumer and Competition Policy Directorate of then Department of Trade and Industry in 2007. NMO is an Executive Agency, and is part of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). As such, NMO reports directly to BIS Ministers advising them on all aspects of weights and measures policy. While it is true that many Executive Agencies are concerned only with the delivery of public services, the arrangement under which this Agency advises Ministers on policy matters is by no means unique. For instance the Intellectual Property Office supports Ministers in connection with intellectual property policy and the Insolvency Service supports Ministers on insolvency legislation. In that respect the relationship between NMO staff and BIS Ministers is no different to that which would exist with any other BIS policy official.

On the other hand, the Public Communications Unit (PCU), to whom you originally wrote, does not have any policy interest in weights and measures, but acts as a central resource for correspondence handling based on advice provided by policy officials, such as those in NMO. I hope this has helped to clarify the respective responsibilities of PCU and NMO.



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I have noted your further comments concerning the decision of the then Government in 1965 that the UK should adopt metric units. However, it is unclear what further clarification you are seeking. The decision taken by the Government of the day, was made public by way of an arranged Parliamentary Question answered by the then President of the Board of Trade. This was a normal procedure, often used by Governments to make policy announcements to Parliament. The absence of legislation at that time does not alter that the Government's stated policy in 1965 was that the UK should adopt metric units. In fact, the adoption of metric units had been actively under consideration by Governments since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was only in 1965 that the Government took the decision to go metric. Subsequent Governments introduced legislation to authorise metric units for use in trade and then to adopt them as the primary units of measurement for most purposes.

Please let me know, if I can be of further assistance.

Yours sincerely,



*lf* Lynnette Falk  
Assistant Director  
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consumers find it helpful. An example of this policy in action can be seen in the recent change to legislation that authorises a new imperial measure – the 2/3 pint for the sale of draught beer and cider.

I realise that we are unlikely to agree on the historical context of this issue but hope this response at least clarifies the position as regards some of the issues raised in your last letter.

Yours sincerely,



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28 September 2011

cc. Kerry Aspinall

Dear Ms Falk

I am grateful for your letter of 15 September, confirming that the role of the NMO is purely advisory and that – as you have hitherto disputed – policy decisions remain exclusively a Ministerial responsibility. You are on very loose and dangerous ground in pretending that “the relationship between NMO staff and BIS Ministers is no different to that which would exist with any other BIS policy official”. For the difference is that, since you are *not* BIS staff but an Executive Agency, I am denied access at Ministerial level, so nobody of authority will see this, so nobody can seek your advice, so you will have no need to give it. So much for Parliamentary democracy! But I shall persevere, for the record, as this whole correspondence will eventually be published.

I thank you also for explaining that the PCU is merely a letter-box; but I shall nevertheless copy Kerry Aspinall again, while realizing that nobody there will trouble to read it either.

Having completely disregarded all the clarification that *I had given you* in my two previous letters, you astonishingly say that “it is unclear what further clarification you are seeking”! You then proceed, beyond enlightening me on your bureaucratic machinery, to clarify nothing. You have not attempted to clarify or even to address the essential issue which, you may recall, was to provide any evidence or justification for the assertion made continually by or on behalf of BIS and previous administrations that **“The UK took the decision to adopt the metric system in 1965”**. You cannot provide any such evidence or justification because none exists. That assertion, on which depends successive Governments’ policy at the behest of the EEC to criminalize the use of customary weights and measures, is a downright lie, as you are well aware.

Your only defence of the metric myth is that “The absence of legislation at that time does not alter that the Government’s stated policy in 1965 was that the UK should adopt metric units”, but there is a vast gulf between a Minister’s brief announcement of Government policy and your perennial assertion of a commitment by the British people. According to you, an oral Ministerial reply to a back-bencher’s planted question could declare the intention to reintroduce capital punishment or set up armed check-points on the Scottish border, and any such announcement would constitute a national *fait accompli* – the notion is preposterous. Our country is governed by Parliamentary legislative process, not by arbitrary decree or *diktat*.

It is disingenuous to argue that it is a normal procedure for Government policies to be announced in this manner: of course it is, but invariably to be followed by public consultation (e.g. a White Paper), Parliamentary debate and the statutory process culminating in the Royal Assent. You cannot mention any other instance where that bare announcement by itself was forever afterwards quoted as the source and sole authority for some major change in the nation's customs of trade, culture and education that was forced upon the people, for it is inconceivable.

In any event, what did this policy announcement actually amount to? All he said was that he considered it "desirable that British industries on a broadening front should adopt metric units" and that the Government would "encourage the educational work to familiarize future school generations and students....with working in terms of metric units", while emphasizing that "Practical difficulties attending the changeover will, of course, mean that this process must be gradual; but the Government hope that within ten years the greater part of the country's industry will have effected the change." That was all: no suggestion of compulsion, no indication of means for implementation or even for taking the proposal forward at all – but merely the absurd assumption that industry needed to be exhorted by officialdom to do what officialdom decided was in industry's own best commercial interests, coupled with the ludicrous hope that by 1975 most of industry would have converted. Yet BIS and its predecessors revere that bland statement as Holy Writ, perpetuating monumental lie No. 1 in order to sustain monumental lie No. 2, which was that Britain had voluntarily committed itself to compulsory metrication long before entry into the EEC.

The myth of 1965 was created for that sole purpose, to disguise the essential facts that (a) Douglas Jay's announcement was no more than part of the window-dressing for Harold Wilson's 1966 application for the UK's admission to the Common Market – which De Gaulle rejected anyway, just as he had rejected Macmillan's 1962 application – and that (b) it was another thirty years before compulsory metrication was ultimately imposed by the EEC's 1994 Regulations, making most uses of customary weights and measures in trade a criminal offence. So the much-vaunted 1965 announcement was actually no more than an accessory to another botched bid to take Britain into Europe, by an interim administration (between fiercely fought General Elections in 1964 and 66) in constant turmoil and incapable of initiating any long-term policies. Was it Edmund Burke who said: *"Every tyranny must create a myth to validate its origins"*?

Obviously, if there had been any grounds for Douglas Jay's 'hope' in 1965, had any 'progress' been made by 1975, there would have been no need for compulsory metrication, no need for EEC Directives and Regulations. Technology Minister Tony Benn, on the last afternoon before the Summer Recess in July 1968, had issued a statement on voluntary metrication, which twice stated that "Compulsion is not part of the process". Edward Heath's 1972 White Paper (Cmnd. 4880), coinciding with Britain's entry into the EEC, again emphasized that the process would always remain voluntary.

**How paradoxical that the avowed purpose of the 1965 announcement, voluntary national metrication, which was wholly negated by EEC Directives a generation later, has been cited ever since as prior justification for those same EEC Directives!**

Note, incidentally, that Douglas Jay spoke only about industry, with no reference to retailing. Nobody hearing him could possibly have imagined that some thirty-six years later it would be adduced to justify the criminal prosecution of greengrocers for selling fruit by the pound.

I trust that this elaborate clarification is of value to you. It certainly ought to persuade you to advise BIS to desist from peddling the 1965 lie, once and for all. Your current letter entirely ignores all the clarification contained in my letters of 5<sup>th</sup> August and 8<sup>th</sup> September, particularly concerning the salient events between 1965 and 1995 which – even without all the amplification that I am now supplying – had already exposed the deceit of your 1965 mantra.

Your final sentence – “Subsequent Governments introduced legislation to authorize metric units for use in trade and then to adopt them as the primary units of measurement for most purposes” – is wildly inaccurate. “Subsequent”? An Act of 1897 – *sixty-eight years earlier* – had legitimized the optional use of metric units for almost all trade purposes (just as had an Act of Congress in 1866 after the Civil War), so that for almost a century the two systems co-existed in perfect harmony and there was no reason why they could not have continued to do so indefinitely. (That clarifies your reference to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.) We enjoyed *freedom of choice*. That is the attitude of the BWMA: *‘Vive la Difference’!*

So medicine, engineering, etc., converted to metric whereas it suited retailing and other industries better to retain imperial measures. The arithmetic paper in my grammar school entrance examinations in 1939 contained questions of conversion between imperial and metric systems, both of which were learnt in primary school at the age of eight or nine: there never was a problem! So Jay’s reference to “educational work to familiarize future school generations” was nonsense. But of course freedom of choice is anathema to the EU and to BIS, whereas duality still flourishes in the USA.

Professor Connor’s definitive *‘Weights and Measures of England’* (HMSO, 1987) comments on the Final Report of the Metrication Board (1980) which Margaret Thatcher had scrapped: “Factually and fairly, the Board recorded the problems it had encountered: the voluntary approach by Government, with the Board in an advisory capacity only, the problems with the retail trade, the lack of metrication on road signs and speed limits, and surveys which showed that a majority of people were still not in favour of transition to the metric system.” But then he adds: “It would not take a great deal now to complete the move to the metric system, apart from public opposition and the reluctance of some areas of industry to change.” Like the EU, he did not consider that a minor difficulty like “public opposition” should stand in the way of compulsory metrication: does BIS share that view? Is Government’s persistent travesty of history, which I have long exposed, a calculated means of suppressing that opposition? It cannot succeed: the truth shall prevail.

Yours sincerely,

VIVIAN LINACRE (President)s



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24th September 2011

Dear Mr Linacre,

Thank you for your letter dated 28th September 2011 and for providing me with a comprehensive description of your position in relation to events since 1965.

I will try to clarify the position of NMO as an Executive Agency. You are absolutely right that ministers make policy and officials provide policy support to the minister. NMO is an Executive Agency of BIS and (unlike NDPBs) our staff are civil servants working to and directly accountable to BIS ministers. In terms of policy support, the only difference between a BIS official and NMO official is one of location – Victoria Street or Teddington. The main difference between an Executive Agency and its 'parent' department is one of financial autonomy whereby the Chief Executive is accountable to Parliament. Both remain accountable to ministers on matters of policy.

Secondly, you asked if BIS shared the view quoted in your final paragraph, "that a minor difficulty like 'public opposition' should [not] stand in the way of compulsory metrication". I can confirm that BIS does not share this view as it is Government policy to take into account the preference of some businesses and consumers for imperial units. This is demonstrated by the Government's commitment to retaining the use of imperial units as primary indications where they are currently permitted and as supplementary indications alongside metric units for as long as business and



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3<sup>rd</sup> November 2011

Dear Ms Falk

Your letter is dated 24 September yet acknowledges receipt of mine dated 28 September! Your letter should have been dated 24 October.

So now I know that "The only difference between a BIS official and NMO official is one of location – Victoria Street or Teddington" and that "The main difference between an Executive Agency and its 'parent' department is one of financial autonomy": small wonder that my correspondence – and that from colleagues – never gets anywhere! You claim that both BIS and NMO officials "remain accountable to ministers on matters of policy"; yet the issue I raised, concerning the illegitimate origins of compulsory metrication, which is wholly and exclusively a matter of fundamental government policy, was instantly relegated – like all such correspondence – as merely a matter of administration, and is dismissed as such in your final paragraph.

For of course no minister has ever responded to our challenge to substantiate or justify the fictitious doctrine that "The UK took the decision to adopt the metric system in 1965". None ever could, since no substantiation or justification exists, as our correspondence now has shown yet again.

You say my letter of 28 September provided you "with a comprehensive description of your position in relation to events since 1965", implying that I had presented merely my own version of that history; which is insulting, as it is in fact a very full, accurate narrative. You do not dispute or even comment upon any of it – as any acknowledgment would have exposed the official doctrine as a lie – the deliberate lie on which your policy of compulsory metrication was founded. Your conclusion, "we are unlikely to agree on the historical context of this issue", without the slightest attempt to produce any grounds on which you could possibly disagree with the complete historical context that I provided, is intolerable and administratively disgraceful.

This myth of 1965 is such poisonous propaganda, as its sole purpose is to brainwash the nation into believing that we voluntarily adopted the metric system long before joining the EEC in 1972, to conceal the truth that it was imposed upon us, with no mandate, directly by EEC regulations in 1995.

Yours sincerely

VIVIAN LINACRE