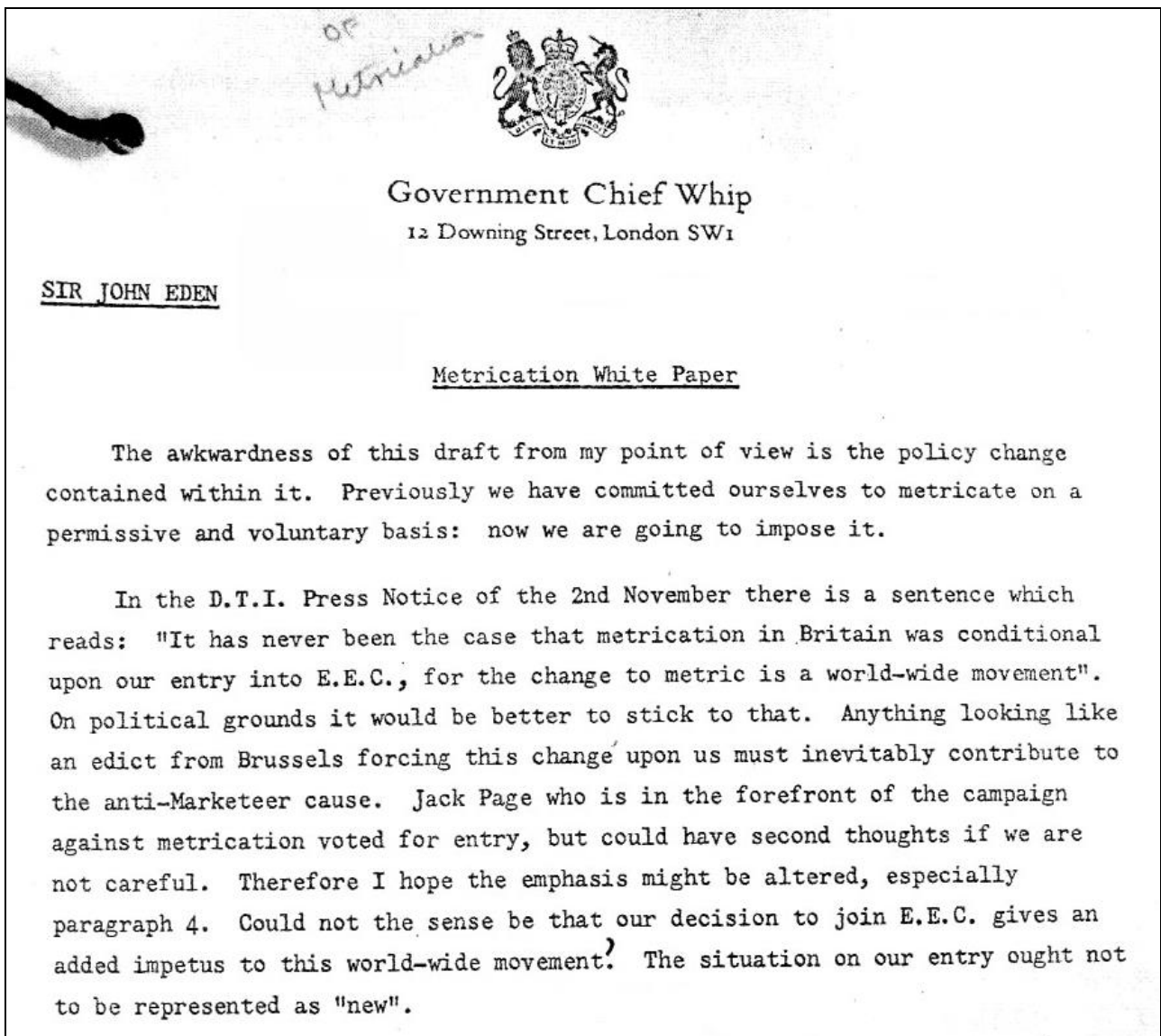


# Ministers' Metrication Conspiracy

How legislation for compulsory metrication in 1971 was achieved by the bypassing of Parliament and public, in order to ensure admission to the EEC

*- and how politicians buried this conspiracy by creating the myth that compulsory metrication had followed a decision by Parliament in 1965*



From Francis Pym, Government Chief Whip and Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury,  
to John Eden, Minister of State for Industry - 22 November 1971

**Tuesday, 27 October 1970**

**Julian Amery, Minister for Housing and Construction,  
speaking in the House of Commons**

"I have made it plain, as did my hon. Friend in opening the debate, that we favour going forward towards voluntary metrication. I have tried to make it plain that we are opposed to compulsion in any respect."

**Tuesday, 29 December 1970**

**A Memorandum from the European Commission to Member States:**

"... the European Commission has adopted a proposal concerning the approximation of the legislation of the Member States relating to units of measure ... The consequences of the unification of the units of measure will of course be felt in the field of trade of goods ... The EC has selected, as a harmonisation formula, that of "total harmonisation". This means that the Community provisions and definitions will have to replace the national provisions and definitions ... The Commission has therefore laid down a transitional period of five years, during which the Member States will have to gradually eliminate the "units of measure" which do not conform ... Certain units commonly used in the various Member States do not correspond to the International System of units and must be eliminated ... Member States will have 18 months, after the adoption of the Directive, to make their national legislation conform to this ..."

## **Introduction**

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the government's 24 May 1965 announcement that Britain should adopt the metric system voluntarily. This year is also the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of compulsory metrication regulations, implemented 1 October 1995. During my consultations in 1996 with Leolin Price CBE QC (1924-2013), senior counsel to the 'Maastricht Rebels' in 1991-92, and Norris McWhirter CBE (1925-2004) – the time-keeper at Bannister's record mile run in 1954, co-founder of the Guinness Book of Records with his twin brother Ross and Hon. Member of BWMA – I acquired copies of confidential correspondence between government Ministers in 1971 relating to the proposed imposition of compulsory metrication of imperial weights and measures that would follow the UK's admission to the EEC in 1973. So far as the BWMA is aware, these have never been published. To put them in context and fill in the narrative, further papers have been incorporated which have had limited circulation over the years, plus letters obtained by Stuart Delvin from the National Archives at Kew.

**Vivian Linacre, September 2015**

**British Weights and Measures Association**

**26 April 1971: from Francis Pym, Government Chief Whip and Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, to John Davies, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, with copies to the Prime Minister (Edward Heath), and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Anthony Barber), concerning the government's forthcoming White Paper on metrication**<sup>1</sup>

"I am grateful for your letter of the 21<sup>st</sup> April with an advance copy of the Draft White Paper. We both know what a difficult subject this is politically. I attach as an annex some of the comments that would be adduced by our Members if this paper were published. However illogical it may be, they will "go to town" on it. Whether having read my comments you will think you can tone the paper down I do not know, because I realize substantial policy issues are involved.

In my opinion it would be unwise to proceed to legislation without the House first having expressed its general approval in some form.

I should like to add one general point. Although there is a chapter headed "Retail Trade and the Consumer" it does not read in a way that is sympathetic to the consumer. There are 55 million consumers and it is their reaction which MPs will be representing. The White Paper does not read as though it understands the tiresomeness which the housewives will be faced with which they do not want.

As I have previously mentioned my Parliamentary worries on metrication to the Prime Minister, I am sending a copy of this to No. 10. I am also sending a copy to the Chancellor of the Exchequer."

*[Annexed to Francis Pym's 26 April letter]*<sup>2</sup>

**"Draft White Paper on Metrication - Comments on the following paragraphs:**

33 There will be scepticism about the undertaking that public purchasing is not to be used to force the pace.

37 Some Members will say that Parliament should have been consulted before OS maps and Admiralty charts were altered.

38 It will be argued that the CBI is not representative of British industry, and certainly not of smaller firms.

40-41 Members have been receiving complaints from the building industry and will argue that the trade organization is out of touch with its members.

52 Metric beds and furniture will excite some Members. It seems innocuous but, for example, Jack Page has already argued that the effect will be to make beds bigger and more expensive. The manufacturers would like it but not the customers.

58 Again Parliament ought to have been consulted. It will be said that the Women's Advisory Service is not representative. The anti-marketeers will enjoy this paragraph and stress the fact that two basic foods, tea and sugar, will be 10% larger.

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<sup>1</sup> There is no need to reproduce the text of the Draft White Paper itself, since the present interest lies in Ministers' correspondence.

<sup>2</sup> At this stage, April 1971, the White Paper is still being drafted to formalise the government's *domestic* policy of metrication, which is based on exhortation, not legal compulsion. Francis Pym's comments therefore display sensitivity to the one mandatory element found within it (see his response to paragraph 68), as well as his acute awareness of political and public opposition to metrication. His comments also reflect the Government's general disdain for the 'anti-marketeers'.

59 This is a field day for the anti-marketeers. "Hands off the British lb and pint"! The idea of a kilo of butter and a litre of beer is more than some people can take. This may be illogical but that is not the point.

68 This paragraph is likely to be opposed bitterly by the [anti-]metrication lobby. Any idea of a mandatory metric measurement is like a red rag to a bull.

70 We shall certainly have a row about pints of beer. Members will argue that the breweries will do best out of litres not the consumer. Legislation to authorize sales in litres will be most dangerous politically.

83 This is another lively aspect of the matter since some Members believe that soon some schools will not bother to teach imperial measures.

98 The Government may appreciate the [Metrication] Board but the metrication lobby certainly does not! In particular they are building against the Chairman [Lord Ritchie-Calder]. If it is practicable I advise you to change him because this would go some way to take some of the heat out of this whole question."

*[The Draft White Paper was revised and recirculated in May]*

***15 June 1971: Telegram from K Christofas of the UK Delegation to the European Community, Rue Joseph II 28, Brussels to John Davies, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, on the Draft Directive on Units of Measurement (as issued to all 'candidate countries') –***

"CONFIDENTIAL - Priority to FCO Telegram No. Codel 499 of 15 June 1971 and info to Bonn, The Hague, Luxembourg, Paris, Rome and saving to Brussels.

I have been informed both by Commission and Council Secretariat Officials that there is a real likelihood that this Directive, which might cause us serious Parliamentary difficulties, will be adopted by the Council of Ministers before the summer recess. It is a Draft Directive which would, if adopted as it stands, enjoin member states to make compulsory the use of the International System (SI) of metric units for commercial and legal purposes within a period of five years from its entry into force. (In terms of the present draft, and if the Council were to adopt it in July 1971, this would mean early 1978 since there is provision for an 18 months delay between notification and entry into force). Member states would also be required to forbid the use of certain other units of measurement after 31 December 1977. The situation of a third group of units would be left to be settled between the adoption of the Directive and 31 December 1977. The Draft Directive would not, however, apply to the use of non-SI units recognized in intergovernmental agreements for the purposes of sea, air and rail travel. Nor does it affect products intended for export to countries outside the Community. The text of the Draft Directive as submitted by the Commission to the Council was enclosed with Cruickshank's letter to Freemantle (DTI) of 5 January copied to Steven (EID) and subsequently published in *Journal Officiel* C14 of 11 February; and the latest report is in Cruickshank's letter to the same addressees of 9 June. There are, however, further minor modifications which will be sent by bag to the Dept. and to DTI.

This is a Draft Directive to the adoption of which the Commission attaches some importance. Although the opinions of the Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee have not yet been given, these are likely to be forthcoming by the end of this month or early in July, and the member states are broadly in agreement on the proposal. It is naturally not an overwhelmingly difficult operation for the existing member countries of the community who basically use the metric system already, though they are being called upon to sacrifice some units of measurement

which are at present in force in one country or another. There is therefore a sufficient head of steam behind the Draft Directive for it to be highly likely that it will be adopted as soon as the remaining processes are completed.

For us, however, it would clearly raise serious problems. I am informed by Rogers of Standards Division of the DTI, who happens to be visiting Brussels on other business, that the delay in the publication of the White Paper is primarily related to discussion on whether or not it is desirable that the adoption of the metric system in the United Kingdom should be legally enforceable and to its timing. This directive, if adopted, would involve legal enforceability. Furthermore, it would do so at a rate faster than that, which he tells me, is currently envisaged in the United Kingdom. If you consider that the adoption of this Draft Directive would indeed raise serious parliamentary and public opinion problems for us, you will no doubt wish to consider the desirability of asking representations to the member governments and to the Commission in the fairly near future.

As seen from this post, a request not to adopt the Draft Directive until we had become members of an enlarged Community would be likely to be unwelcome to the existing Community. The structure of the Draft Directive, however, such that it would be possible, if the member states agreed, for all units of measurement used in the United Kingdom but not otherwise mentioned in the Directive to be put into the group of units the future of which would be left to be settled between the adoption of the Directive and 31 December 1977. This could presumably be done by technical adaptation provided that there has been agreement with the member states and the Commission beforehand that this should be done. But if there were any units of measurement now in force in the United Kingdom which are specifically listed among those the use of which is to be forbidden after 31 December 1977 (and with limited technical knowledge we cannot identify any but cannot be sure there are none) these would presumably pose greater difficulties.

Unless appropriate action is taken, we may soon have another case like fisheries on our hands where the institutions of the community will have adopted a policy eminently suitable for the existing community but without taking account of the problems this would create for the candidate countries, and this could take place at a sensitive moment in our parliamentary timetable for enlargement.

Foreign & Commonwealth Office: Please pass advance copies to Mr Tickell and Mr Statham (FCO). Copy passed saving to Brussels. European Economic & Political Distribution.

Christofas"

***15 June 1971: from Anthony Barber,<sup>3</sup> Chancellor of the Exchequer, to John Eden, Minister of State for Industry –***

"Since I think it unlikely I shall be able to attend tomorrow's meeting of EPC [Britain's European Parliamentary Committee], may I make the following points on the paper on Metrication EPC(71)50. I believe that the presentation has been improved and I accept the present draft of the White Paper. But I should like to reserve my position, in particular on the question of timing. I am very dubious whether it would be wise to publish a White Paper in July. The subject is very likely to become bound up in the public mind with the Common Market negotiations, and my consultations suggest that there are powerful arguments for proceeding cautiously."

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Barber's memo is written the same day as Christofas' telegram and shows no awareness of it or the Directive; he describes any connection to the Common Market as merely "*bound up in the public mind*".

***29 June 1971: from John Eden to the Prime Minister –***

“At EPC on 16 June we considered the attached draft of a White Paper on Metrication and when it should be published. I was asked to tell you of the Committee’s conclusions:

That the draft was generally acceptable; but that a decision on time of publication should be deferred because of the EEC implications. As you will see, the White Paper lays little stress on the implications of joining the EEC. The fact is, however, that when we join we shall have to accept harmonization of weights and measures over a period and this will mean some degree of compulsion incompatible with the voluntary metrication line we have been taking. To draw attention to this now could provide the anti-marketeers and those who are opposed to any change in our traditional measures with a stick with which to try to beat us.

Delay in publication may be criticized since as long as last November we said we hoped to publish the White Paper early in the New Year. But to postpone publication seems the lesser evil. I should be glad to know whether you are in agreement with these views. I shall, of course, be keeping the situation under review and if the balance of advantages on publication changes will consult you further.

I am sending copies of this minute and enclosures to the Chancellor of the Exchequer [Anthony Barber], the Lord President [William Whitelaw] and to Sir Burke Trend [Secretary of the Cabinet].”

***14 September 1971: from John Eden to William Whitelaw, Lord President of the Council –***

“I have been considering what to do about our unfulfilled pledge to publish a White Paper on Metrication. Since I expect you agree that such a White Paper will eventually have to be produced, I would like to offer some views on presentation and timing, assuming that the debate on entry to the Common Market in October goes according to programme.

I think that, despite our agreement on the draft in June, a different emphasis will now be needed. While I would still think it desirable to include some reference to the general international switchover to metric measurements, I think that more emphasis must now be placed on our European commitments. These stem from a Commission Directive recently adopted by the Council of Ministers that defines a set of metric units for trade and legal purposes and also a set of units, mostly metric, to be retained but with their retention subject to review before the end of 1977.

We have persuaded the Commission, who have been very reasonable, that the United Kingdom would have special problems in implementing this Directive. We hope that the more important imperial units will be retained at least until the end of 1977, and perhaps in some cases for longer. Some of this may be embarrassing to some sections of the party, particularly as the obligations this imposes on us have not fully been appreciated, but I see no way round it if we are not to be accused again of “acting by stealth”. I propose we go on to explain the decisions already taken and those now being taken by industry, but to be a good deal more explicit about the commitments which we shall face in the consumer field. With these changes I think that it should be possible to produce a shorter Paper.

We shall need to have further talks in the near future with the Food Manufacturers Federation and other people concerned with the switchover of food packages to metric sizes. I propose to put them in train on an informal and non-committal basis in advance of the debate on the Common Market. This will enable us to produce a considered view for the White Paper on

what the programme for the changeover to metric sizes might be. On milk and draught beer I think we should not make any commitments beyond those of the present draft in which we say that neither we nor the industry have any firm plans for changes in the retail sale of milk; but we would be willing, if the demand arose, to consider giving licensees the choice of selling draught beer in either imperial or metric units but not both in the same bar.

My plan would be to get the draft White Paper to EPC as soon as possible after the October debate, with a view to its publication in the course of November.

I should be grateful for your views on the new presentation that I have sketched out and the proposed timing of publication, though of course we shall not have to reach a firm view until nearer the time. I am sending a copy of this letter to Jim Prior and Francis Pym."

***20 September 1971: from William Whitelaw to John Eden –***

"I have discussed your letter of 14th September about the White Paper on Metrication with the Chief Whip [Francis Pym] and with Donald Maitland.

On timing, we all feel that it is important not to produce this White Paper too soon after the Common Market debate in October, and we suggest that the best time for publication would be late-November or early-December.

On the second paragraph of your letter, the Chief Whip and I are not at all happy about changing the basis of the paper unless this has to be done.<sup>4</sup>

On paragraph 5, all of us are worried at the idea of having informal talks with the Food Manufacturers' Federation and others, as there is bound to be a risk that the discussions will leak. I am sending a copy of this letter to the Chief Whip and to Donald Maitland."

***13 October 1971: from John Eden to William Whitelaw –***

"Thank you for your letter of 20 September about the White Paper on Metrication. I am convinced that we cannot ignore the adoption by the Commission in July of the EEC Directive requiring members to use the International System of metric units. If we join the Community we shall, after a substantial period of grace that is now under negotiation, be bound by this. I am sure we should be open to strong criticism if we were to evade explaining the implications for this country, especially as the Directive is now in free circulation and must be known to many people concerned with the subject.

To take account of the Directive we shall have to make quite substantial amendments to parts of the draft of the White Paper agreed by EPC in June though I entirely agree that we want to keep these to the minimum.<sup>5</sup> I hope you will now agree that I should proceed on this basis. In the meantime I will of course defer the talks with the Food Manufacturers Federation and other consumer interests. I am copying this letter to the Chief Whip and to Donald Maitland."

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<sup>4</sup> Thus, there is divergence on whether the British electorate should be told of the change in policy, from voluntary conversion to compulsion, and the cause of the change, the European Directive.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to this sentence, Chief Whip Francis Pym notes on his copy of the letter: "If this is true, ought the authors of the W.P. not have been aware of it when writing the paper, and take this into a/c. It is no good proceeding with a nonsense - this subject remains highly sensitive in the H of C. FP 18/10".



***12 November 1971: Note of Meeting at 68 Whitehall, between William Whitelaw and Nicholas Ridley, Parliamentary Secretary at the Department of Trade and Industry –***

“Mr Ridley said that it had just been brought to his attention, following a recent meeting in Brussels, that a draft EEC directive, which had already been approved by the Council of Ministers, would require that all members of the Community should go fully metric by the beginning of 1978. There would be a further meeting on 24 November at which Sir Con O’Neill would make certain reservations and seek derogations so far as Britain was concerned in the event of our becoming a member of the enlarged Community. It would certainly become publicly known on that occasion that the draft directive existed, and the question arose as to how the Government should now act in presenting its own proposals on metrication. The line taken by the Conservative Party when in opposition and preserved in the draft White Paper, until the possibility of these EEC developments became known some weeks ago, had been that metrication should be on a voluntary basis. This position could in any event not now be wholly preserved and his own feeling (supported by the Secretary of State [John Davies] and the Minister for Industry [John Eden]) was that it would be best to publish the White Paper, which was at an advanced stage of drafting, as soon as possible and to make clear in it the position as regards the EEC. He would welcome any further guidance which the Lord President [William Whitelaw] might like to give about the form of the White Paper.

Mr. Ridley added that the British team could be expected to get derogations on such matters as preserving the pint of milk and beer and on signposting in miles rather than kilometres. We would, however, be going over to the metre and litre for most purposes and we could not realistically seek derogations on industrial products or indeed such consumer goods as pre-packed food. Industry was, of course, largely in favour of the move.

The Lord President said that this was bound to be an unpopular decision with the majority of the general public. Nevertheless, the situation now seemed to be one in which there was no alternative but to recognize the implications of the EEC proposals. In the circumstances, he agreed that the sooner the White Paper was published the better. He would of course have to reserve the position of the Chief Whip.

Mr. Ridley said that the earliest time-table would be to bring the draft before EPC on the following Tuesday. Publication might be practicable within five days of approval, and that would enable the document to be produced two or three days before the meeting on 24th November in Brussels. He undertook to consult the Chief Whip urgently.”

***17 November 1971: from John Eden to the Prime Minister –***

“In June I sent you a draft White Paper on Metrication that had been considered by EPC. EPC had concluded that the draft was generally acceptable, but that a decision on the time of publication should be deferred because of the EEC implications. We subsequently agreed that it was important not to produce the White Paper too soon after the Common Market debate and that the best time for publication would be late November or early December. We have since been working on that timetable.

However, after a meeting of the Secondary Legislation Steering Group in Brussels on 5th November, we have come to the conclusion that we shall have to put in reservations to the Community on the EEC Directive on Units of Measurement. In accordance with the arrangements agreed in the Negotiations, this now has to be done before the 25th November.

We shall play the point in Brussels in low key and I hope there will be no publicity there. But it is clearly of great importance that our position on this sensitive issue should be first fully explained in the White Paper and for that reason I propose that the White Paper be published as soon as possible. As you know, we are in any case under strong pressure in the House to publish. I am therefore seeking to clear the draft White Paper with colleagues by correspondence and, as instructed by EPC, I am sending copies to the Cabinet at the same time. I hope to get clearance by noon on Monday. If my colleagues have objections in principle to the approach in the draft White Paper, there will of course need to be a discussion, but this will delay publication and increase the risk of embarrassing publicity that would involve. I realise that this hurried procedure would normally be wholly undesirable but it seems the best in the circumstances. I have discussed this with Willie Whitelaw and Francis Pym."

**22 November 1971: the redrafted White Paper caused Francis Pym to write to John Eden –**

"The awkwardness of this draft from my point of view is the policy change contained within it. Previously we have committed ourselves to metricate on a permissive and voluntary basis: now we are going to impose it.

In the D.T.I. Press Notice of the 2nd November there is a sentence which reads: "*It has never been the case that metrication in Britain was conditional upon our entry into E.E.C., for the change to metric is a world-wide movement*". On political grounds it would be better to stick to that. Anything looking like an edict from Brussels forcing this change upon us must inevitably contribute to the anti-Marketeer cause. Jack Page who is in the forefront of the campaign against metrication voted for entry, but could have second thoughts if we are not careful. Therefore I hope the emphasis might be altered, especially paragraph 4. Could not the sense be that our decision to join E.E.C. gives an added impetus to this world-wide movement? The situation on our entry ought not to be represented as "new".

There are many detailed comments that one could make. At a quick reading, I list a number below.

Paragraph 13. People do not want to buy beer by the litre: breweries want to sell it in that way for the benefit of their own profits. It is a good example of the conflict between supplier and consumer that is likely to exist. If milk is going to be sold by the pint, why not beer?

Paragraph 15. I do not quite know what this means. In any case it looks like a gift to the anti-lobby.

Paragraph 17. This seems to suggest that miles will be retained - until you reach Paragraph 107 which indicates that conversion is soon. Could we not be more definite? For example, "There is no intention to change from miles to kilometres in the foreseeable future".

Paragraph 26. I think this and other references to the U.S.A. helps. The U.S.A. is often used by the anti-metricators in their arguments.

Paragraph 30. This underlines the element of mandatory directive from Brussels, which will make a number of M.P.s excitable.

Can we emphasise more the sense of the sentence in square brackets at the end of paragraph 31? The kind of approach we have been making about fisheries should be our example here.

Paragraph 60. Must we include this?

Paragraph 61. The last two sentences were added I think as a result of a suggestion I made to Nicholas Ridley. Seeing it in print however, leads me to the view that it would be better to omit any reference to this. People are still mad about it.

Paragraph 66. Do we need to mention the import of continental foodstuffs?

Paragraph 72. Why not simply "The Government has no plans for any change in the units of sale for milk"?

Paragraph 110. "EEC Directive" is a heading to be avoided at all costs. The feeling ought to be that we are going metric anyway under our own steam and at our own pace, but some adjustment of our programme may result from our joining EEC.

Paragraph 110. "E.E.C. directive" is a heading to be avoided at all costs. The feeling ought to be that we are going metric anyway under our own steam and at our own pace, but some adjustment of our programme may result from our joining E.E.C.

Annex 1, paragraph 6. This sounds rather complicated. I suppose we need to go into such detail?

This is not an exhaustive list of comments, but the best I can do in the time available. We must consider as a matter of urgency how we are to prepare and handle the Party for publication. Public opinion may not in fact be as hostile as one fears, but I suspect we have not done nearly enough preparatory work in the House. I know you are under no delusion as to how tiresome this whole subject will be in the Party.

I am sending a copy of this minute to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Lord President of the Council and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster."

***24 November 1971: memo on behalf of the Prime Minister, addressed to John Eden's secretary Jerry Evans, replying to Eden's letter of 17 November –***

"The Prime Minister has seen the minute which your Minister sent to him on 17 November about the draft White Paper on metrication. The Prime Minister shares some of the misgivings that have been expressed by other Ministers about the presentation and political aspects of publishing the White Paper at this time. He questions whether it is necessary to publish a White Paper before the legislation to give effect to the Treaty of Accession to the EEC has been passed; indeed, he is not convinced that the Government need publish a White Paper at all at this stage."

***15 December 1971: John Davies, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, to the Prime Minister –***

"As you know the Ministerial Committee on Economic Policy agreed last month that a comprehensive White Paper on Metrication should be published before the Christmas recess. Since then you have expressed the view that publication might be delayed and your office and the Minister for Industry's office have exchanged correspondence. The matter rests with Mr Armstrong's letter of 6 December asking for the Minister for Industry to arrange for the matter to be submitted to the Cabinet. I now find that we could not publish before the recess

even if we wished to. I would now like to set out the case for publication shortly before Parliament reassembles. The arguments for doing so are as follows:

i) Ministers promised in November 1970 to publish the White Paper and since then constant assurances have been given to the House and to individual Members of Parliament that this would be done “as soon as possible” and “at an early date”. Numerous enquiries from members and from the public have been left over on the grounds that it should not be anticipated.

ii) In particular, we promised our supporters in the Industry Committee last month that it would be published before Christmas. It is my impression that opinion is now much more ready to look at the question with an open mind.

iii) We are under strong pressure in the House to publish. If we were to decide on a further delay we should have to offer some sort of explanation; this would be difficult and almost certainly would encourage still more criticism of “metrication by stealth”.

iv) We gave a commitment to the House that we would not make statutory instruments on metrication until the White Paper was published. Quite a number of these are now urgent.<sup>6</sup>

v) The EEC directive on units of measurement must soon become known. In the absence of a White Paper the field will lie open to misinformed expositions of the directive and of our policy.

vi) A further delay will ensure that metrication of industry loses momentum. This will hinder exports and will increase long term costs to the whole of the community. It will annoy the CBI and the many other interests who are dismayed by the lack of progress in this field.

In my view these arguments point to publication in the near future and certainly before the House resumes. What I propose therefore, is that we should get the White Paper agreed by EPC as soon as possible. I shall then have an agreed draft to put to the Cabinet early the New Year but if you see any difficulties in following this course of action I should be grateful if we could discuss my proposals. I am copying this minute to our Cabinet colleagues and members of EPC, the Chief Whip and Sir Burke Trend.”

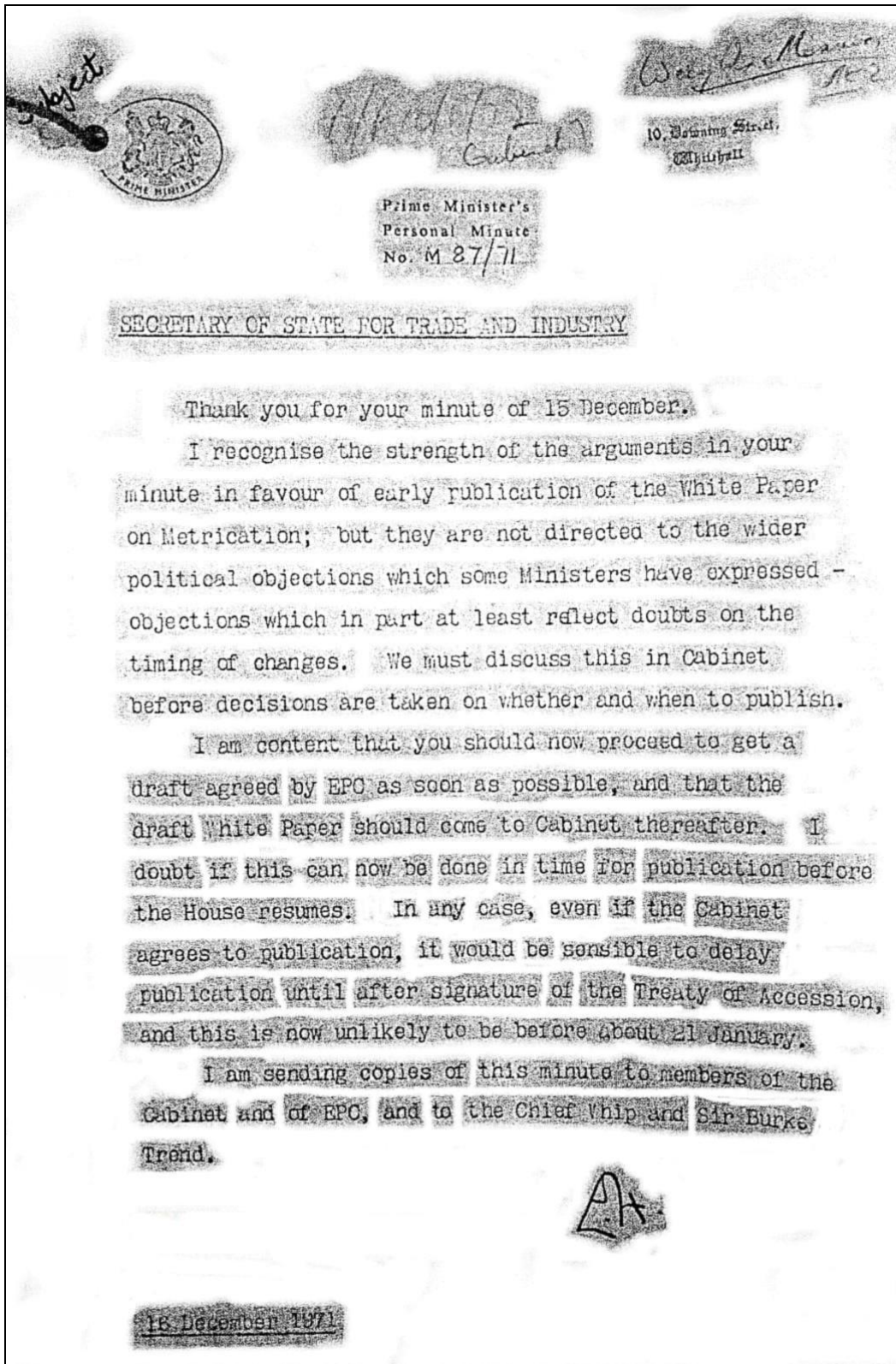
#### ***16 December 1971: the Prime Minister to John Davies –***

“Thank you for your minute of 15 December. I recognise the strength of the arguments in your minute in favour of early publication of the White Paper on Metrication; but they are not directed to the wider political objections which some Ministers have expressed – objections which in part at least reflect doubts on the timing of changes. We must discuss this in Cabinet before decisions are taken on whether and when to publish.

I am content that you should now proceed to get a draft agreed by EPC as soon as possible, and that the draft White Paper should come to the cabinet thereafter. I doubt if this can now be done in time for publication before the House resumes. In any case, even if the Cabinet agrees to publication, it would be sensible to delay publication until after signature of the Treaty of Accession, and this is now unlikely to be before about 21 January. I am sending copies of this minute to members of the Cabinet and of EPC, and to the Chief Whip and Sir Burke Trend.”

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<sup>6</sup> These statutory instruments were proposed in July 1970, before the EEC Directive, and were designed to enable, but not compel, the use of metric units in the building industry.



From Prime Minister Edward Heath to John Davies, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry,  
16 December 1971

## Conclusion

Against the advice of Ministers John Davies and John Eden, Edward Heath says on 24 November 1971 that he questions publishing the White Paper “... *before the legislation to give effect to the Treaty of Accession to the EEC has been passed*”; and on 16 December he says, “... *it would be sensible to delay publication until after signature of the Treaty of Accession*”. The Treaty of Accession to the European Community was signed on 22 January 1972, and the White Paper on metrication was published two weeks later on 7 February. It was amended to acknowledge the EC Directive, but in wording that was ambiguous; for example:

“This directive would apply to the UK as a member of the EEC. But we have reached agreement with the Community on adaptations to take account of our use of imperial units. It has been agreed that a list of imperial units used in our legislation shall be added to the directive, and that decisions should be taken by agreement before 31 August 1976 into which chapters of the Annex to the directive these imperial units should go.”

The White Paper did not spell out that imperial units would be excluded from the Annex of permanent units. The White Paper proposed legislation to allow the use of metric units alongside imperial units, saying that, “... people will become much more aware of it as foodstuffs and household goods measured in metric sizes and quantities come into our shops”, but said, “There will be no ‘M-Day’ for metrication”. But once the Treaty was signed, EC Directives on metrication were binding, making compulsory metrication a *fait accompli*. The White Paper said “... *implementation by the UK of the EEC directive gives legal form to a pattern, already firmly established, which is likely in large measure to be achieved by 1975*”. The correspondence in this pamphlet shows Ministers knew otherwise.

Knowing that future criminalisation of imperial units would be unpopular with both the electorate and retail industry, as well as backbenchers, no Bill for metrication, which would normally follow a White Paper, was brought forward; instead, metrication was provided for by the European Communities Act 1972, with no need for debate, or for the Government to publish any explanatory literature, or to consult trade bodies (although it did solicit the views of the CBI, which represented large companies close to Government).

In due course, the European Commission brought forward its deadlines for the removal of imperial units, and the most the government could achieve was an exemption for the mile on road signs, and the pint for milk and draught beer; which, in fact, had been agreed informally before Britain’s entry into the EEC, as indicated by the note of the meeting on 12 November 1971 between Nicholas Ridley and William Whitelaw. EC deadlines for packaged foods and loose goods came into effect in 1995, and for loose foods in 2000.

No reference was made, throughout the tortuous Ministerial manoeuvrings after 15 June 1971, to any alleged advantages or benefits that would result from compulsory metrication. The merits of the case were disregarded, as the Government’s sole concern was to prepare for legislation, as demanded by the EEC which had made it a condition of admission to membership. Nor does the Ministerial correspondence even hint that the UK would ever have made the metric system compulsory of its own accord.

Thus, compulsory metrication was a condition of Britain’s membership of the EC, while EC membership was necessary to bring about compulsory metrication in Britain; one was needed to achieve the other. But once compulsory metrication was achieved, politicians concealed its true origins by creating the myth that it followed a decision by Parliament in 1965, which their successors have broadcast ever since. See the next page and back cover for quotations.

## **What they told us**

### **Jonathan Evans MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Corporate Affairs, Department of Trade and Industry, 3 May 1995**

The Government first decided that the United Kingdom should convert to the international system of metric weights and measures in 1965, in response to lobbying from British business and well before we joined the European Economic Community. That decision was confirmed in the 1972 White Paper on metrication.

### **John Taylor MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Corporate and Consumer Affairs, Department of Trade and Industry, 20 March 1997**

It has been the policy of successive Governments since 1965 that the United Kingdom should in stages adopt the metric system as the primary system of measurement in recognition of the fact that the adoption of the international system of metric units was spreading throughout the world. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s an increasing number of products were required to convert to the use of metric units.

### **Ian Lang MP, President of the Board of Trade, 24 March 1997**

As regards the European Union directives on units of measurement, the UK had already begun its adoption of metric units before the first directive was adopted in 1971. Successive directives since 1971 have therefore simply taken forward in planned stages the pattern that was already firmly established in the UK prior to our accession to the EEC.

### **Kim Howells MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Consumers and Corporate Affairs, 14 October 1999**

When the present Government came into office we initiated a re-appraisal of national policy on the use of metric units, particularly for consumer goods sold by weight or measure. The results of the re-appraisal were published in July and ... confirms that, following an announcement to Parliament in 1965, all Governments have promoted the adoption of metric units as the primary system of measurement in the UK, in recognition of the global trend in adopting the metric system. In pursuit of this policy, successive Governments agreed a series of EU directives - in 1973, 1976, 1980, 1985 and 1989 - which set deadlines for the harmonised use of metric units for economic, public health, public safety and administrative purposes.

### **Kim Howells MP, as above, 3 August 2000**

Nor is it the case that the UK has been forced to change to the metric system as a consequence of our membership of the European Community. In 1965, well before we joined the EC, the Government announced that the UK would adopt metric units in stages for an ever-increasing range of uses.

### **Metriation Factsheet, Department of Trade and Industry, undated but early 2000s**

In 1965, well before we joined the EU, the Government announced the UK would go metric, in line with the global trend in adopting the metric system. When the UK joined the European Community in 1973, we agreed to complete our metric changes by no later than the deadlines to be agreed in EC Directives.

### **John Denham MP, Secretary of State for Innovation and Skills, 24 February 2009**

In 1965 the UK Government took the decision to move to the metric system in response to its adoption as the global unit of measurement. Since then the UK has gradually adopted metric units for an increasing range of uses, with the last change being its adoption in 1999 for all goods sold loose.

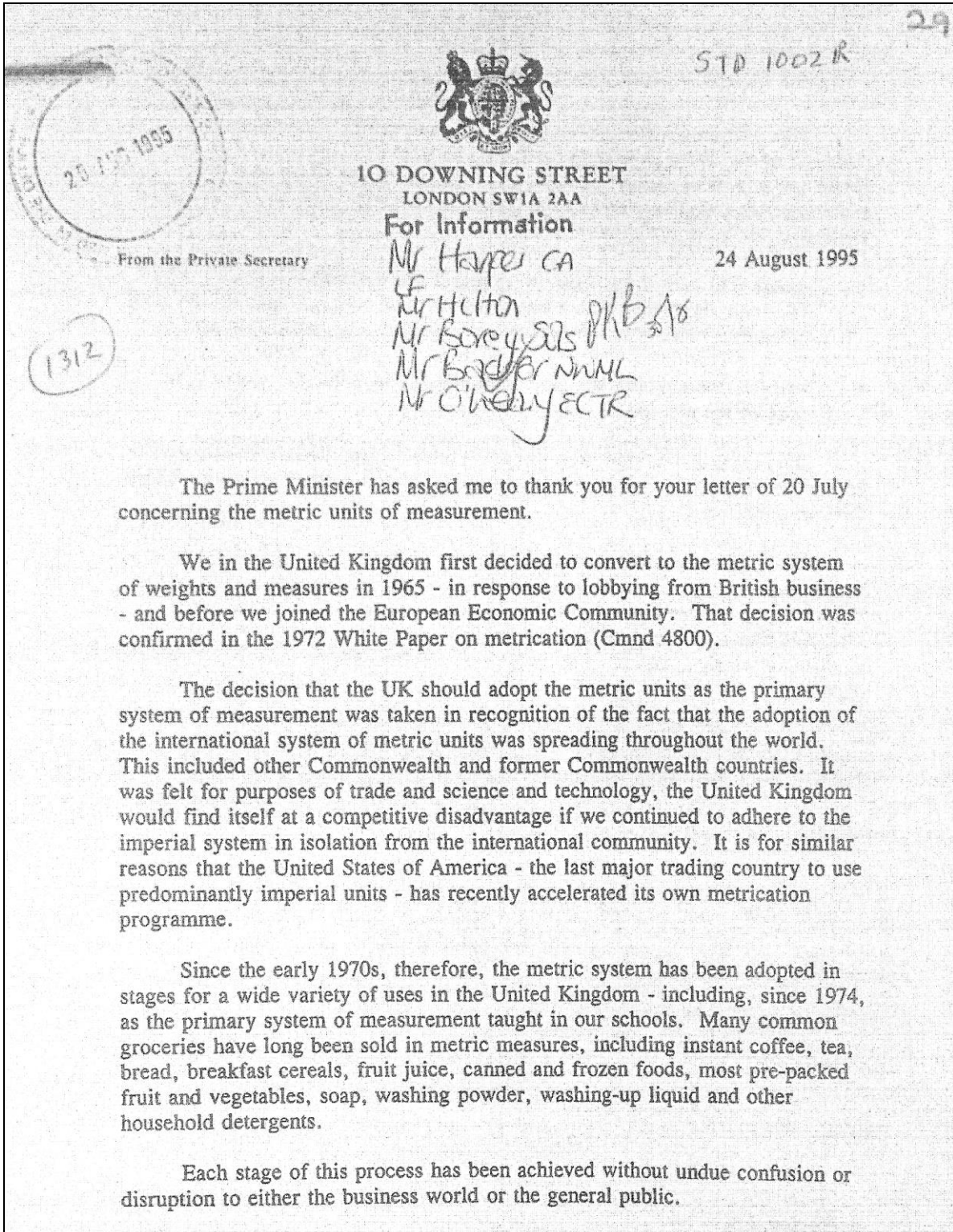
### **Public Communications Unit, Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 16 September 2010**

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.

### **David Willetts MP, Minister for Universities and Science, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 21 November 2011**

The decision for the UK to adopt metric units was originally taken in 1965, and has been the policy of every Government since ... I hope this helps to clarify the situation.





Propagating a myth - letter by Prime Minister John Major's Private Secretary Mark Adams, circulated among senior civil servants - 24 August 1995