

dti

the department for Enterprise

Mr Phillipot⁽²³⁾
cA.

The Rt. Hon. Lord Young of Graffham
Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth
Affairs
Foreign & Commonwealth Office
Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AL

Department of
Trade and Industry

1-19 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

Switchboard
01-215 7877

Telex 8811074/5 DTHQ G
Fax 01-222 2629

Direct line 215 5422
Our ref DW2AFD
Your ref
Date 25 May 1988

Geoffrey Howe
METRICATION

Thank you for your minute of 2 February. I have also seen the letters of 7 December and 4 February from the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, and letters from John Moore, Nicholas Ridley, John MacGregor and Paul Channon.

The Council of Ministers, under the terms of the EC Units of Measurement Directive of 1979, has to decide by the end of 1989, under the qualified majority procedure, on a final date (or dates) for ending the use of imperial units for the purposes set out in my letter of 3 December. The indications are that, in the absence of any steer from us, the Commission will simply propose that imperial units should cease from the end of 1992, the target date for the completion of the single market. But there are also indications that they will be sympathetic to our concerns about specific areas of difficulty.

Given that the decision is subject to qualified majority voting, and that our only potential ally is Ireland, our negotiating capital is limited, and we need to ensure that we spend it to best effect.

And as we are making much of the running on moving swiftly towards the completion of the single market, there are wider negotiating difficulties in our seeking to retain what are undoubtedly seen by other member states as barriers to trade.

A dual approach seems to offer the best prospects. First, we should identify those areas of greatest difficulty, where it

the
Enterprise
Initiative

is essential to retain imperial units (the pint in the pub, the doorstep pint of milk, the mile and so on), on which the trade barrier arguments are less strong; while showing a readiness to move on those areas where public sensitivities may be less acute and the trade arguments stronger. The attached policy paper examines specific areas in greater detail.

Second, on those areas where we accept that we will have to move, we should aim for long transitional periods, and staggered implementation dates. This is important both for business to adapt smoothly, for consumers to familiarise themselves and to avoid any impression of a metrication "big bang", which would tend to focus opposition.

If we are to influence the Commission's proposals, we need to do so soon. I suggest that Francis Maude should take the opportunity to talk to Arthur Cockfield in the margins of the Internal Market Council on 7 June. While it is clearly not essential for all the details of the negotiating strategy to be agreed by then, I would be grateful if colleagues could indicate any disagreement with this broad approach by Thursday 2 June. Discussions with Commission officials should start at the earliest possible moment and my officials will develop the negotiating brief with other departments as a matter of urgency. This brief will need to take account of the line to be taken on the forthcoming Non-automatic weighing machines directive.

John Wakeham will want to note that when the proposals for the Units of Measurement Directive were debated in the Commons on 19 December 1979, it was resolved that:

"That this House takes note of EEC document No.5247/79, as amended, on Units of Measurement, but affirms that no decision on the phasing out of those imperial units which the EEC Directive requires to be reviewed by the end of 1989 should be taken before the House has first given its approval."

This plainly commits us to a debate before the Council of Ministers reaches a common position, likely to be in mid-1989.

Although this is an issue which can be expected to be controversial, there has been far greater movement towards metrication already than may be generally realised. And given

dti

the department for Enterprise

the familiarity of younger people with the metric system, it may well be that making progress in some of the remaining areas will prove less sensitive than we might have anticipated on the basis of past experience.

I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, other members of the Cabinet, the Chief Whip and to Sir Robin Butler.

Y. L.
Nair