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Dear Mr Anderson

Metrication

You requested some background on the issue of metrication and whether compulsory metrication was a firm proposal.

I have enclosed a copy of Library Research Paper 95/78, *Metrication and the Sale of Goods* which reviews the legislation concerning metrication, both domestic and European, and provides a brief history of metrication in the UK. I have outlined the basic provisions for metrication below as well as some of the related concerns which have arisen. Compliance with the metrication rules in the UK is compulsory and there are criminal penalties for non-compliance. These are also set out in the Library Research Paper 95/87 (page 7). The Government is currently looking at the whole of issue of metrication¹ and Nigel Griffiths, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Consumer Affairs, leads on this matter.

Background

EC Directive 80/181/EEC² on units of measurement (last amended by Directive 89/617/EEC³) requires Member States to adopt metric units for "measuring instruments used, measurements made and indications of quantity expressed in units of measurement, for economic, public health, public safety or administrative purposes" by certain fixed dates.

The UK has implemented the directive by a number of regulations but the principal one is the *Units of Measurement Regulations 1986*⁴ as amended by the *Units of Measurement Regulations 1994*⁵.

In order to meet the requirements of the regulations, all pre-packaged goods have had to be labelled in metric units since October 1995. However, goods sold loose from bulk, e.g. loose vegetables which are weighed at the checkout or cheese from a delicatessen counter, can be traded in imperial units until 31 December 1999. After that date, prices will have to be

¹ Telephone conversation with personnel at the DTI, 28.01.98.

² OJL 39 15.02.80 p40-

³ OJL 357 7.12.89 p28-

⁴ SI 1994/1082

⁵ SI 1994/2867



displayed in metric units, such as by the kilo or by the 100grams, and once weighed, goods will have to be labelled in metric units.

It will also still be possible to sell products in units of 454g (i.e. 1 lb) instead of in pounds (unless legislation specifies otherwise⁶). The regulations do not require a product to be sold in uniform units such as 100 grams. This means that a customer will still be able to go into a shop and ask for 3lbs of apples, but the shop assistant will weigh out 1.36kg and label it as such.

Dual use of measurements

The dual use of imperial measures is not banned, so the weight in pounds could still be shown on a label but the metric measure has to come first or be more prominent. However, the Directive does ban dual use after 31 December 1999. The UK regulations do not include this ban because the DTI has called for its repeal and hopes that the Commission will reconsider its proposals. The Directive and this ban are being discussed at a meeting of Member States next month. The DTI believes that a future ban on imperial units could affect the export of products to countries such as the USA where imperial measurements are still widely used and indeed it is law to dual mark products⁷.

Exemptions

There are exemptions to the regulations where particular imperial units can be used indefinitely. For example, a pint can be used for beer and cider in pubs and for milk in returnable containers, and the yard and the mile can be used for road traffic signs, distance and speed measurement.

Metriation – the debate

The common supporting arguments for metriation tend to centre upon the following:

- **Creation of a level playing field:** For the purposes of trade and science and technology the UK would find itself at a competitive disadvantage if it continued to adhere to the imperial system in isolation from the international community⁸.

⁶ For example, bread has had to be sold in 400g or 500g units for a number of years

⁷ Telephone conversation with personnel at DTI, 28.01.98.

⁸ Letter from Jonathan Evans MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Corporate and Consumer Affairs to unknown MP, 19 July 1995.



- **European Integration:** metrication is a necessary move towards European integration.
- **Conversion has already largely taken place:** Since the 1972 White Paper on metrication and the 1995 regulations, the UK's science and technology and export trades have largely converted to metric units already and schools have taught in metric since 1974⁹.

The response to metrication has been very mixed despite the Government's policy to encourage its adoption. It is often reported that the Labour Government in 1965, supported the implementation of gradual change to metric following requests from industry¹⁰. However, the presence of such a lobby has been disputed in a number of press articles since. In addition, The British Weights and Measures Association was set up in 1995 to form a lobby for the survival of imperial weights and measures.

In the lead up to Metrication (M) Day in October 1995 it was reported that the British Retail Consortium backed metrication. The Association of Convenience Stores was also positive and said it did not believe that metrication would have a significant impact on businesses but was concerned that it might cause confusion amongst customers. The National Consumer Council also gave its support but had not tested public opinion on metrication since the early 1980s.¹¹

In March 1996, in response to an oral question in the House, the DTI Minister, John Taylor commented that his Department had "carefully assessed the costs to business of complying with the latest metrication changes" and that between 1988 and 1993, the Department had "consulted business organisations, consumer groups and others, who generally supported further metrication because of the very real savings and other benefits that this would bring".¹²

Recent concerns regarding metrication have centred upon the scope for prosecution for non-compliance with the metrication rules. Although there had been no prosecutions as of February this year¹³, some trading standards officers have threatened traders with action. This has attracted press coverage and I have enclosed a recent article for your information¹⁴.

⁹ Metrication and "Metricery": A commentary on replies by Ministers and officials to letters from British Weights and Measures Association members, pg 7, April 1996.

¹⁰ HC Deb 24 May 1965 c.32W

¹¹ Campaigners fight against metrication, Financial Times 30.9.95

¹² HC Debate col 21, 13.03.96.

¹³ HC Debate, col 171, 25.02.97

¹⁴ Consumer: Carpet sellers face court cases by the Yard: Press Association 17.04.97



I hope this information is helpful

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emma Downing".

Emma Downing
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