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15 September 2004

THE PRIME MINISTER

Dear Geoffrey,

Thank you for your letter of 5 July enclosing a copy of the booklet "A Very British Mess" which argues for a campaign to make the United Kingdom fully metric by the end of 2009. I understand that you have written in identical terms to Peter Goldsmith, Peter Hain and Gerry Sutcliffe. I am also replying on their behalf.

As you will be aware, all Governments since 1965 have adopted the policy that the United Kingdom should – in stages – switch from imperial to metric units of measurement for an ever-increasing range of uses. That policy continued to apply when the UK joined the then European Economic Community and accepted obligations to complete metrication according to an agreed timetable (depending on the uses in question).

When the present Government came into office we reviewed the progress of UK metrication, the results of which were set out by the Department for Trade and Industry in its report "The Adoption of the International System of Units as the Primary System of Measurement in the United Kingdom 1999".

We concluded that the switch from the pound to the kilogram for pricing and weighing loose goods – legislated for in 1994 and planned for the end of

1999 – should proceed. But we also concluded that the optional use of imperial units as supplementary indications alongside metric units should be permitted after 1999, and we secured a ten-year extension (ie until the end of 2009) in EC negotiations.

We continue to take the view that this approach strikes the right balance. There are, of course, many in Britain for whom it remains more convenient to use imperial and other non-SI units. The longer period of adjustment, which we have negotiated, may result in a situation, which in UKMA's view is untidy. But I do not believe it would be right to take further initiatives on metrication merely for the sake of tidiness. Our aim remains to strike the right balance between efficiency and the convenience of all users, taking account of the range of uses involved, and the range of experience and preferences, which users will bring to that use.

Yours truly,
Tony

The Right Honourable The Lord Howe of Aberavon, CH, QC