

A very British mess

A response to the National Standardization Strategic Framework
by the United Kingdom Metric Association

www.ukma.org.uk

© UK Metric Association 2004

ISBN: 0750310146



Acknowledgements

The UK Metric Association (UKMA) wishes to acknowledge with thanks the help and support of the Institute of Physics in the design and printing of this report.

The support of the Institute of Measurement and Control is also acknowledged.

UKMA is entirely responsible for the content of the report.

[**www.ukma.org.uk**](http://www.ukma.org.uk)

Contents

Foreword by Lord Howe of Aberavon, CH, QC	6 – 7
Executive summary	8 – 9
1. Introduction - purpose of the report	10 – 11
2. The National Standardization Strategic Framework	12 – 14
3. The mess we’re in - and why it matters	16 – 20
4. How did we get into this mess?	22 – 26
• History/analysis (4.1 - 4.5)	
• Why did it fail? (4.6 - 4.23)	
• Lessons (4.24)	
5. How can we get out of this mess?	28 – 34
• The case for completing the changeover (5.1 - 5.5)	
• Costs and benefits of conversion (5.6 - 5.10)	
• Myths and disinformation around the metric system (5.11)	
• Opposition to further progress (5.12 - 5.14)	
• Enforcement and civil liberties (5.15 - 5.18)	
6. Principles of changeover	36 – 40
• The role of opinion leaders (6.2 - 6.3)	
• Government planning and management of the changeover (6.4 - 6.7)	
• Think metric (don’t convert)! (6.8 - 6.9)	
• Phase out “supplementary indications” (6.10 - 6.14)	
• Avoid or minimise transitional periods (6.15 - 6.17)	
• Accept “user-friendly” metric units (6.18 - 6.21)	
7. Specific policy areas	42 – 51
• Official use of measurement units by public bodies (7.1 - 7.6)	
• Retailing (7.7 - 7.9)	
• Advertising (7.10 - 7.13)	
• Transport (especially road signs) (7.14 - 7.22)	
• Land and property (7.23 - 7.26)	
• Weather reports and forecasts (7.27 - 7.29)	
• Health and body (7.30 - 7.34)	
• Media (7.35 - 7.37)	
8. Conclusion	52 – 53
Appendices	54 – 60
A. Lessons from experience of other countries	
• Australia	
• Canada	
• South Africa	
• New Zealand	
• Ireland	
B. Quotations from Magna Carta and the Act of Union	
Bibliography and references	61 – 63



Foreword by Lord Howe of Aberavon, CH, QC

British weights and measures are in a mess. Litres for petrol and fizzy drinks, pints for beer and milk. Metres and kilometres for athletics, miles per gallon for cars. The metric system for school and yet, all too often, still pounds and ounces in the market.

And this muddle does matter. It increases costs, confuses shoppers, leads to serious misunderstandings, causes accidents, wastes our children's education and, quite bluntly, puts us all to shame.

Almost 800 years ago, Britain's first charter of human rights - Magna Carta - proclaimed that there should be "one measure of wine throughout our whole realm...and one measure of corn...and one width of cloth". And before then and ever since, every civilized society has recognized the need for one set (and only one set) of standard measures.

So how did Britain get into this mess? Because we've been dithering for almost 150 years! As long ago as 1862, a House of Commons Select Committee unanimously recommended the adoption of the metric system. And a century later, in 1965 (years before we entered the Common Market), the decision was taken to go metric over the next ten years.

But in 1979, alas, the Government (of which I was a member) foolishly decided to go slow on the whole process. So we're still stuck half way. And the rest of the world has moved on. Australia, Kenya, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Jamaica - members of what we used to call the British Commonwealth - have all completed the change. By the end of the year, Ireland will have done the same.

Plainly we can't stay where we are, with two confused, competing systems. And it would be madness to go backwards. The only solution is to complete the changeover to metric - and as swiftly and cleanly as possible. It is long past time for us to summon up the will to get ourselves out of the present wasteful, untidy mess.

That explains the existence of the UK Metric Association, a small group of “ordinary people” (from every part of Great Britain), so fed up with the measurement muddle that they have decided to try and tackle it themselves. Teacher, nurse, architectural model maker, software expert, electronic engineer, cooking writer, office supplies manager, journalist, town planner, translator, librarian, police officer - all these are among our members. But not one politician - and no other hidden agenda!

So what am I doing here? Two or three years ago, I gladly accepted the invitation to serve as UKMA’s Patron. I did so because I felt ashamed of my role in allowing the present shambles to develop. Having been responsible for Britain’s metrification programme when I was Minister for Consumer Affairs, I didn’t challenge the decision to abolish the Metrification Board, when I was Chancellor of the Exchequer. I didn’t often run away from difficult decisions - but this is one that I did duck.

That’s why I’m glad to commend this brave and sensible booklet. The authors argue that the time has come for all responsible opinion-formers - industrialists, consumers, academics, politicians (above all, perhaps, the younger generation) - to join together in recognizing that we are all collectively responsible for this “British mess”. In the end, of course, it will be for Government to give the lead but, hopefully, upon the basis of a consensus which we can all help to establish.

George Osborne

The purpose of this report by the UK Metric Association (UKMA) is to persuade responsible opinion formers that the UK should complete the changeover to exclusive use of the international metric system as soon as practicable.

Executive summary

- The purpose of this report by the UK Metric Association (UKMA) is to persuade responsible opinion formers that **the UK should complete the changeover to exclusive use of the international metric system as soon as practicable**. The UK is the only significant country in the world (apart from the USA) which has begun and then failed to carry through a metric conversion programme. UKMA calls upon the Government to demonstrate its commitment by announcing early completion dates for all remaining areas of national life, including retailing and road signs (paragraphs 1.1 - 1.4).
- The report is prompted by a recent publication by the National Standardization Strategic Framework (NSSF) - a joint project of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), British Standards Institution (BSI) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). The NSSF attempts to deal with harmonisation of standards in industry and commerce without confronting the central issue of measurement units. It is a map without a scale. Furthermore, the NSSF also tries to deal with standards in isolation from the rest of society. UKMA believes this to be a serious error of judgement, which has bedevilled and undermined the entire British metrication process. **The blame for this failure lies primarily with successive British governments since 1965** (paragraphs 2.1 - 2.9).
- **British weights and measures are in a mess**. This is because although many aspects of national life are metric (including most industry and building, school mathematics and science, athletics, rugby union and Ordnance Survey maps), many imperial relics remain (e.g. in road signs, football commentaries, estate agents' advertisements and most non-specialist media). The result is a confusing muddle (paragraphs 3.1 - 3.4).
- **This half metric, half imperial muddle matters**. It matters because it increases costs (dual pricing and marking of packages), prevents fair comparisons in shops, requires constant conversions, leads to misunderstandings, wastes our children's metric education, confuses overseas visitors, and, not least, frustrates one of the great advantages of metric units - that they constitute a proper coherent system in which all units are inter-related and easy to calculate in (paragraphs 3.5 - 3.6).
- We are in this mess because successive **British governments lacked the commitment and political courage to carry through a necessary reform in a decisive and co-ordinated manner**. Instead they have lapsed into a piecemeal, "voluntary/gradual" approach without attempting to explain the reasons for change or to win hearts and minds. The result has been that opponents of change have been able to exploit fears of the unknown and misrepresent metrication as though it were a foreign imposition. **The reform has therefore stalled** (paragraphs 4.1 - 4.24).
- UKMA contends that there is **a way out of this mess**. It involves moving on from the current "two systems" policy and standardising on one single system and as soon as possible. The idea of a single set of units has been regarded as essential for fair trade for centuries and is embodied in many important historic documents including Magna Carta and the Treaty of Union between England and Wales and Scotland. For many practical reasons it is not remotely desirable to revert to the imperial system, and the only solution therefore is to complete the changeover to metric. This would also have many other advantages as the metric system is inherently superior to imperial because it is decimal and

consistent. Metric completion would also bring the UK into line with most of the rest of the world (paragraphs 5.1 - 5.5).

- **Costs need not be a serious obstacle to completing metrication.** Indeed most of the costs have already been met. Yet, by failing to complete, Britain has not reaped the benefits of this expenditure. All Commonwealth countries which converted in the 1970s reported that benefits and savings far outweigh the costs (paragraphs 5.6 - 5.10).
- Although there is some popular resistance to change, UKMA believes that this **opposition is shallow and is based on fear of the unknown** and the feeling that unexplained change has hitherto been imposed by stealth. Objections based on civil liberties and “freedom of choice” do not withstand examination. These fears and unfounded objections can be overcome **by a proper campaign of public information** at the appropriate time (paragraphs 5.12 - 5.18).
- The metric changeover can be swiftly and painlessly completed provided that there is clear planning and management of the process. This will involve:
 - (a). The Government publicly declaring its support
 - (b). Explaining to the general public the benefits of the change
 - (c). Declaring unequivocally that all imperial measures will be phased out for official use
 - (d). Empowering a cross-departmental authority to manage the change
 - (e). Requiring public agencies to be fully metric
 - (f). Setting targets and timetables
 - (g). Enacting and enforcing any necessary legislation
 - (h). Campaigns of public education (paragraphs 6.2 - 6.5 and 7.1 - 7.4).
- Specific policy issues to be addressed include:
 - (a). In retailing, ending dual pricing and labelling (including in advertising) (paragraphs 7.7 - 7.13)
 - (b). Setting a date and a conversion plan for changing to metric road signage (paragraphs 7.14 - 7.22)
 - (c). Phasing out imperial units in property transactions, weather reports, the National Health Service, and clothing sizes (paragraphs 7.23 - 7.34)
 - (d). Encouraging the media to co-operate in the changeover plan (paragraphs 7.35 - 7.37)
- UKMA believes that, **given full and rapid commitment from the Government**, this programme could be achieved within three to five years so that the UK could be **a fully metric country by the end of 2009 or earlier** (paragraphs 8.1 - 8.5).

UKMA believes that, given full and rapid commitment from the Government, this programme could be achieved within three to five years so that the UK could be a fully metric country by the end of 2009 or earlier.