

BRIEF

CONFIDENTIAL

108

Mr. Buckle Sum

p/s Reuss (ICAT)

Reuss

Mr. Stroud

Dr. Eden

John [unclear]

[unclear]

to [unclear]

METRICATION OF SPEED LIMITS AND ROAD SIGNS

1. PAST HISTORY On 5 March 1969 the then Minister of Transport, Mr Richard Marsh, announced in the House that, subject to further consultation, speed limits would be metricated in 1973. The present Minister for Transport Industries (Mr Peyton) announced in reply to a Question on 9 December 1970 that the Government had reversed this decision and had no other date in mind.

2. THE WHITE PAPER Para 107 said that conversion of road signs showing miles (or mph) to kilometres (or kmh) would be the most expensive metrication operation within the field of public administration; that costs for speed signs would be about £2m and for signs indicating distance considerably more; and that the change would not need to be considered in detail for some years.

3. POLICY Present policy is to leave this change as late as possible, and not to alarm people at this stage by announcement of dates. 1979 is the earliest date that allows an orderly and efficient conversion operation, and also the latest date EEC-wise (see Para 4)

([In current correspondence, Minister for Transport Industries and
 (Lord President have agreed that because of the sensitivity of the
 (subject, confidential discussion of the conversion operations with
 (local authorities etc shall be held up. Minister (TI) has, however,
 (suggested that new design rules for distance signs, about to be
 (issued, should include provision for a space for an extra digit, in
 (order to reduce the cost of eventual conversion. The Lord
 (President has agreed to this.])

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(A recent "Sunday Telegraph" report that metric "130" speed limit discs would appear on motorways next year alongside imperial "80" ones was pure journalistic fantasy.)

4. EEC IMPLICATIONS The Directive on units of measurement could be read as requiring road signs to show metric measurements (either alone or alongside imperial units) by 1976. It clearly requires abolition of the imperial units by 1979 (unless a later date were to be negotiated). We hope we can, if challenged in Brussels, defend the 1979 date for road signs by reference to the uncertainty of the implications of the Directive and the practical difficulties of an earlier date.

5. QUESTIONS ABOUT DATES If pressed, the following answers can be given:-

Q. What is the date for metrication of speed limits and road signs?

A. No date has yet been fixed but the Government have a completion date of 1979 in mind.

Q. Why not earlier?

A. This is a complex operation requiring several years for careful planning and efficient execution, integrated with the normal work of installing and maintaining road signs.

Q. Why not later?

A. Quite apart from EEC commitments, road signs cannot remain imperial in a metric world.

Q. What about bi-lingual signs in Wales?

A. A matter for the Secretary of State.

Q. Are we not committed to 1976 by EEC?

A. The Directive was not drafted with traffic control in mind; 1979 accords with its general intention and is in any event the earliest practicable date.

6. LEGISLATION Metrication of speed limits will require either a Bill or Regulations under the European Communities Act. Distance, etc signs can be metricated by Regulations under the Road Traffic Regulation Act, 1967. No legislation required before 1975.

7. METHODOLOGY For legal and road safety reasons, speed limits must be metricated in one fell swoop. No detailed planning has been done but one method would be providing metric signs covered by imperial "stickers" which would be removed during, say, a fortnight in the summer of 1979 - preceeded by a big publicity operation. Distance signs etc can be metricated over, say, 5 years in conjunction with the normal work of installation and maintenance.

8. COSTS There are some 200,000 speed limit signs: Cost of metrication is of the order of £2 millions. Distance etc signs are more numerous, but cost can be reduced by phasing. Most of the costs will fall on local authorities (partly offset by Exchequer grants).