

# British metrication – how can we escape from the mess?

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In July the UK Metric Association published its campaign document, “A very British mess”, which advocates early completion of the metric conversion process. The report can be downloaded from the internet at [www.ukma.org.uk](http://www.ukma.org.uk).

Scientists, engineers and industrialists the world over use metric units for almost all research, product design and production. The advantages of the International System of Units over Imperial measures should not need to be rehearsed in a publication read by persons interested in science and industry.

Yet British society remains obstinately stuck in a muddle of incompatible measurement units: 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. The conversion process begun by the Wilson Government in 1965 and carried forward with all-party support has ground to a halt, and there are no current plans to resolve this “very British mess”.

Some might argue that this mess doesn't really matter; that people are used to it and have become bilingual; that it will cause more trouble than it is worth to sort it out; and that it will probably resolve itself eventually anyway. Unfortunately, all these statements are wrong.

The mess matters because it undermines consumer protection, causes mistakes and waste, and leads to accidents and incomprehension. It is not only science and industry which require clarity, precision and certainty. Just as clarity of verbal communication requires that everybody understands and uses the same language, so communication about dimensions and quantities requires that everybody uses the same units of measurement. Sadly, this is not the position in the UK today.

A further worrying consequence of this muddle is a widespread lack of numeracy in the general population and a resulting inability to perform simple calculations such as working out the area of a room to be carpeted or how much fuel is needed to complete a car journey.

Politicians' reluctance to confront the issue derives in part from fears that any solution will cost money, be unpopular, and involve unacceptable erosion of civil liberties. The truth is that the costs of conversion have already been largely met except in the field of road signage, whose cost, though not insignificant, is likely to be modest. The perceived unpopularity could be overcome by a proper campaign of public information. The “civil liberties” argument has been comprehensively rejected by the Courts. The evidence of the last 39 years shows that the problem will not resolve itself of its own accord. Indeed it is becoming entrenched.

So what is to be done? Much depends on key opinion-formers (such as readers of *Science in Parliament*) letting it be known to political leaders in both Government and Opposition that the present situation cannot be allowed to continue and that the conversion process which was begun in 1965 should be completed as soon as practicable – with a target date of 2009.

In order to achieve this it is important that politicians should resist the temptation to score political points by exploiting public misunderstanding and resentment about a change which has never been properly explained or justified to them. In particular the

misconception that “Brussels Bureaucrats” have imposed an alien system on an unwilling country needs to be exposed as a myth.

The Government should respond, in a joined-up way and at the highest level, by announcing its intention to complete the metric conversion programme as soon as practicable. This will include strict observance of the 2009 cut-off date for “supplementary indications” (Imperial equivalents on price labels), as well as bringing product description and advertising within the same rules. (As a harmless concession to traditionalists draught beer can continue to be served in pint mugs, but it should also be *permitted* to be dispensed in metric measures). Unit pricing should be per litre (for consistency with off-sales).

On the roads, distance signage should be converted to metres and kilometres (possibly phased over several years), speed limits need to be reviewed and expressed in km/h, and an early date fixed (preferably within about three years) for an overnight change of speed limit signage.

All this will need to be accompanied by a major programme of public information as each stage approaches.

Given the necessary commitment and determination by the Government and with the support of stakeholders and opinion-formers, this programme could be achieved and the UK could join the modern world and become a fully metric country within this decade – thus fulfilling the aspiration of Magna Carta (1215): “Let there be standard measures ... throughout the kingdom.”