



WEB SITE TO BE EXPANDED

Robin Paice

Following the successful launch of the new UKMA website in early November, the Website Working Group (WWG) is planning the next phases of expansion of the site. (The WWG comprises Phil Hall, Owen Massey, Chris Keenan, Roddy Urquhart and Robin Paice).

The WWG will firstly look at all the many helpful comments and constructive criticisms which have been made by members, and it is hoped to reply to them all in due course. Any changes will be decided by the Group.

The sitemap will be reviewed, priorities for expansion examined and a timetable set out. Tasks (such as research, drafting an article, taking photographs or making a drawing) will then be allocated to Group members and (it is hoped) to other members and supporters of UKMA. If any member would like to volunteer for an article etc, please contact any member of the Group.

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FRIDGE-FREEZER CONFUSION EXPOSED

Phil Durden

The UK Metric Association believes it has uncovered a potential source of consumer-confusion within the Refrigerator/Freezer market. UKMA believes that consumers are being misled – albeit unintentionally – by the imperial-metric muddle in the UK, and that the industry as a whole has not made any effort to address the problem of ensuring customers are clear about the real, usable storage capacity of their appliance before they buy it.

Whilst UKMA does not have any reason to suggest that the industry is collaborating to deliberately deceive customers into thinking they are buying an appliance with a greater storage capacity than is actually the case, the association is concerned that people are not getting what they think they are getting, and can see a worrying trend across the industry which raises a few questions.

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The sitemap will be reviewed, priorities for expansion examined and a timetable set out.

Tasks (such as research, drafting an article, taking photographs or making a drawing) will then be allocated to Group members and (it is hoped) to other members and supporters of UKMA. If any member would like to volunteer for an article etc, please contact any member of the Group. [The current sitemap, which indicates the type of material which will be required, can be obtained from Roddy or any WWG member].

Finally, the Group has been made aware of the potential legal pitfalls of owning and publishing a website, and action will be taken to deal with any problems that can be anticipated.

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UKMA TO CHALLENGE DfT ON SIGNS – POSSIBLE JUDICIAL REVIEW?

Robin Paice

With the approval of the Committee, UKMA Secretary, Roddy Urquhart, has written to the new Permanent Secretary of the DfT, David Rowlands, pointing out the nonsensical and contradictory statements made by DfT officials and politicians concerning metric traffic signage. Roddy also drew attention to the conflict between the EU Directive, the UK's Units of Measurement Regulation and the Traffic Signs Regulations (TSRGD). He asked Mr Rowlands to get ministers to look again at their policy.

Mr Rowlands' rather belated reply included the following:

“FIXING A DATE FOR THE ADOPTION OF METRIC SIGNING

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One of our members discovered the problem when purchasing an upright freezer within the past few months. The retailer's label promoting the appliance clearly stated “4.2 cu.ft. capacity”. Being metric-minded, this member soon converted the figure to its approximate metric equivalent of 120 litres. On this basis it was fair to assume that the appliance would in fact have the ability to store 120 litres. Not so.

Upon delivery, both the cardboard transportation box and the cover of the user-manual again clearly stated 4.2 cu.ft., in line with what the retailer had promised.

It was not until opening the instruction pack when the standard fridge-freezer Energy label came to light, that the discrepancy started to reveal itself. This label is intended to be affixed to the outside of the freezer, and gives other information such as power consumption and an energy efficiency rating. It clearly stated the capacity as 96 litres, not 120 litres as previously thought after converting from 4.2 cu ft. Upon further investigation of the manufacturer's booklet, inside was a table of basic useful data, similar to the Energy label. It told our member that the net storage volume of the freezer was “96 litres (3.4 cubic feet)”. Puzzled, our member did a few quick checks on the internal dimensions of the freezer, and came to the conclusion that the gross capacity of a fridge or freezer is the *overall volume, and the net capacity is the overall volume minus the space taken up by the shelves, light, and most significantly the space lost to the pump housing.*

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This is indeed a requirement of the Directive, though not one which itself must be implemented within a set time period.

Ministers have, therefore, chosen to use its flexibility to postpone setting a date until it is clear that a change can be managed safely.

NOT BANNING METRIC UNITS

The Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions already permit certain signs to show metric alternatives alongside imperial dimensions (i.e. those handling height and width restrictions). Many such signs already use metric alternatives. But ministers do not think it appropriate for signs to show metric alternatives for distances and, in particular, speed limits: they have taken the view that all such signs should only be shown in imperial units, to avoid confusion in a safety critical environment. Both the 1994 and 2002 Regulations were notified to the Commission before being published, without it raising any issue on this.

USING "CORRECT" ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations are rarely prescribed in the UK's own Unit of Measurement Regulations, being more often established by common usage.

You suggest though, that the abbreviations for miles, feet and inches prescribed in the Traffic Signs Regulations are incompatible with the terms of the Directive. Again, the Commission raised no issues on this point when we consulted them on the Regulations.

As the clear intention of the 1989 amending Directive was to allow the continued use of imperial signs (subject to the first point above), Ministers have chosen to continue to use the forms of imperial abbreviations that were in use before the Directive came into effect.

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The net capacity - in this instance 96 litres - is therefore the useable space for storing food. In no less than five separate places the capacity was given as 4.2 cubic feet, without indicating that the figure was the gross volume: retailer's in-store label, retailer's delivery note and receipt, manufacturer's box and user-manual cover.

Other manufacturers and retailers have been checked and the tendency is to give the gross capacity of appliances in cubic feet, and the net capacity in litres, thereby making it impossible without the aid of a calculator to compare the difference between the gross and net figures.

UKMA believes that industry practice needs reforming to put an end to this confusion, with legislation if necessary, to require the following:

- Capacity of fridges, freezers and microwaves to be given in litres only, to avoid any possibility of customers being led to believe they are getting an appliance with a greater storage capacity than it actually the case.
- This would apply to the retailer's in-store labels and other promotional and advertising material, receipts and delivery notes, manufacturer's packaging, user-manual and any badging on the appliance itself.
- Capacity of the above to be always given as a NET i.e. useable figure, with gross figures not permitted at all.

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On process, I do apologise for the unreasonable delay in the response to your colleague's [Martin Vlietstra's] letter.

For the reasons I have set out above, I do not think that the consultation on the 2002 Regulations was, in practice, flawed. I understand your doubts as to this argument, but I trust that you can also understand why Ministers, in exercising their judgement, might put greatest weight on public safety; and why the Commission appears to recognise this."

While it is pleasing that the reply comes from the Permanent Secretary personally (it carries his reference and e-mail address), its content is clearly disingenuous – and arguably somewhat insulting to our intelligence.

The Committee have therefore agreed the following strategy:

- Taking Mr Rowlands at his word (i.e. that public safety is paramount), to compile a dossier of authoritative evidence of how the changeover has been conducted safely in other countries, and demonstrating that the DfT's own approach conflicts with best practice.
- Submit this dossier to the Permanent Secretary, requesting that Ministers review their policy in the light of this evidence.

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The lesson here is that the vast majority of customers would not have bothered converting the cubic feet figure to litres, and so would never know that their appliance holds significantly less than they had been led to believe by both the manufacturer's and retailer's labelling. Though the figure will vary from one appliance to another, in this particular case the gross figure was 25% higher than the net figure, a significant difference in the eyes of trading standards, particularly as the 4.2 cubic feet figure was never stated as being gross.

There may be many other similar situations of confusion, about which the public would never know if it were not for the eagle eyes - and calculators - of UKMA members.

UKMA is intending to bring this matter to BBC watchdog, and other consumer organisations if necessary.

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LORD HOWE REQUESTS DOSSIER

Robin Paice

UKMA patron, Lord Howe (former Conservative Deputy Prime Minister), has asked for UKMA's help in compiling a dossier which he can use to influence the "great and good" to support completion of the metric changeover.

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- If Ministers refuse, or persist in a policy which flies in the face of the evidence, consider the possibility of judicial review. This is the process whereby we could ask the Court to declare that the government's policy (specifically the TSRGD) is itself illegal since it either does not take into account the proper factors (e.g. public safety, the EU Directive) or is so perverse that no reasonable government could have adopted it. Such a challenge would be expensive, but if we get to that point, we would consider appealing to potential donors to raise the funds. Meanwhile we are consulting Lord Howe on the chances of such a challenge succeeding.

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THE CBI AND METRICATION

Editors note

The article that follows by John Hyde is an historical note about the role played by the Confederation of British Industry (better known as the CBI) from the early sixties onward in bringing about the well informed and wise decision by the British Government to change over to the metric system. Prior to 1965 the CBI was entitled the Federation of British Industries or FBI.

The FBI, a lobbying organisation for British Industry, played a significant part in bringing about the broad consensus in the early sixties for Britain to adopt the metric system.

Further information about that respected group in its modern incarnation can be found on their web site www.cbi.org.uk.

Our sincerest thanks to John, a former Librarian to the CBI, for the article ...

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Lord Howe wrote to UKMA in August pointing out that the British Standards Institution (BSI), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) have jointly produced a document called "National Standardisation Strategic Framework" which – incredibly – deals with a national approach to standardisation in industry, commerce, government and education without raising the issue of measurement units.

At the same time, the Consumer Policy Committee of the BSI has produced a report called "Consumers and Society – putting the heart into standards", which again ignores the issue. It is as though measurement units have become a no-go area which we are not allowed to talk about: "Don't mention metres", as Basil Fawlty might have said.

Anyway, Lord Howe wants to tackle the key figures in these organisations, many of whom he knows personally, and try to persuade them that the nettle of measurement units needs to be grasped. To help him in this he has asked UKMA to provide him with a well-researched dossier of facts and arguments which he can use in his discussions.

At a telephone conference call on 24 September, the Chair and Secretary promised to do what they could to help. Unfortunately, other commitments (especially, the website relaunch) have hitherto taken priority, but it is now hoped to produce a draft before the end of the year.

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"A rational system of measurement for the UK" - THE CONFEDERATION OF BRITISH INDUSTRY'S PART IN ESTABLISHING THE METRIC SYSTEM IN BRITAIN.

*John Hyde**

With its customary acuity, the FBI noted in 1960 that the British government had adopted an international convention on 'SI' units of measurement - 'Système International' 11th General Conference on Weights and Measures 1960. 'SI' is a closely defined form of metric measurement - cultivated as opposed to hybrid. Designed to eliminate the anomalies of 'custom and practice' still to be seen on the Continent; the very same style of anomaly which plagued the 'Imperial' hybrid system of weights and measures. The very purity of 'SI' came to cost us dearly; the system we have adopted was designed not by or for citizens and consumers.

1960 was only fifteen years after the end of most dreadful conflict ever known.

What was FBI and then CBI? Industrialists striving, in 1917, to meet the demands of a government and country at war to the death formed the Federation of British Industries. Co-ordination of effort and the communication of the National Will was seen then as inadequate and FBI filled the role. The FBI became an industry civil service and spokesman for globally minded, free-trading manufacturers and traders in Britain - then an immensely rich and powerful country. In 1965, after protracted negotiation, a new organisation based, amongst others, on FBI was formed - the Confederation of British Industry. It picked up the ethos of free trade and global vision; bidden under Royal Charter to act on behalf of its Members.

From 1960, the FBI proceeded 'as per usual' to discover and record, through its network of trade associations, how its Member Companies reacted to the prospect of a changeover to metric measurement - a momentous undertaking. (FBI Annual Report 1964). But this was not unusual - this style of investigation prior to forming credible policy for recommendation to government was and remains the norm at FBI/CBI. Where did the realisation that 'something must be done' about a new standardisation of weights and measures begin? The answer is the stuff of doctoral theses. Yet it is clear that a final coming together of minds occurred in Britain; industry and trade, science and government: a defining moment in measurement had arrived. The reaction then from a majority of British trade and industry was positive towards a wholesale change to SI: worries existed and they too were taken on board. From that moment the consummate skills of the British civil service revved up and proceeded to organise a national changeover. As industry spokesman, the FBI led the national debate in government departments, board rooms, the British Standards Institute, and the great professional and scientific institutions in a national endeavour.

The decision to introduce metrication into Britain came via the Weights and Measures Act of 1963 under the then Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas Home. The FBI revved up again with yet another of government/industry interface to be managed - one of many.

FBI Working Parties, drawn from experts from Member Companies, as ever reported carefully and cautiously on technical and practical questions of a change. Industrialists, for their part, wished to avoid isolation; *"the adoption of the metric system by all sections of the economy in the years ahead"* was of paramount importance from the first. Incomprehensibly, that feared isolation did indeed become reality.

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In 1965 the Wilson Government, in response to a request from the FBI for a target date, announced that metrication should be substantially completed within ten years. A ministry-led Standing Joint Committee for Metrication in Industry (SJCM) pulled the strands together. The pace quickened; several industries planned their changeover for 1970 (*CBI Annual Report 1967*). But by December 1967 the CBI were bothered enough to send a stiff reminder reiterating to government the need for full support for delivering metrication in all sections of the economy and calling for a 'Metrication Board' following the success of the 'Decimal Currency Board'.

Doubts were surfacing about the determination of politicians to weather any metric squalls in retailing in particular, despite the need for an export drive - a classic divide in British business life. The isolation which industrial leaders so feared was becoming a real and unwelcome possibility. Meanwhile the CBI's advice, sought by SJCM, on the following topics was accepted, viz:

- adoption of SI by retailing - where it was desirable to be in step with manufacturing and ought to be enabled in 1971 via the Weights & Measures Act with the aim of completion by 1975, simultaneously with decimal currency.
- promoting the use of ISO paper sizes
- target date for teaching the metric system in schools

Early in 1968, the CBI again polled its Members extensively on their views on changeover. Most felt that the change would be advantageous; some aired their worries on retailing matters and were naturally cautious about their business interests despite prospects of increased competitiveness in world markets. Later that year SJCM, in 'The change to the metric system' welcomed the government's acceptance of a Metrication Board and the target of 1975 for completion of the changeover throughout the economy. From its inception, the Metrication Board was closely monitored by the CBI, with which it worked closely to ensure, among other things, a sense of urgency and control of costs. Member Companies were kept informed by *CBI Guidance Note: Metrication questions for management and the regular CBI Metrication Bulletin*.

By April 1970, everything seemed set fair; much of industry was expected to be a metric environment in 1971/2. In October, parliamentarians heard of industry-wide commitment, of the growing impetus of change and of concerns that the whole economy should move as one to metric. The government responded by announcing plans for a White Paper on legislative moves. Meanwhile, the CBI led the way on questions concerning international freight movements. Commonwealth countries embarked upon metrication led by Britain - not surprisingly, as the economy about to join an entirely metric single market.

Then the unravelling began. No politician complained much but industrialists felt let down and abandoned in this un-sexy but critical area by those they imagined sympathetic to industry and commerce. In 1973 the CBI sent a lengthy and furious note to the government:

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"We are most concerned at the present situation and rate of progress in metrication. A period of ten years was originally envisaged for the metric change. We are now in the eighth year and the target date for virtual completion - 1975 - is no longer realistic". "Conversion programmes arranged with great care...disrupted...costs are mounting sharply...wholly inflationary...harmful to consumers, investment...and the nation's trading position."

"Decisive action now could limit the overall delay...economy as a whole...take advantage of...increasing trade...[from elimination of] intra-Community tariffs." "Once parts of a closely integrated programme are delayed...entire structure undermined...contributions of all concerned...largely a waste of time and money". "The 1972 White Paper and subsequent events have done little to restore confidence."

In CBI terms this outburst was very angry indeed: that intangible commodity "confidence" has been compulsively measured by the CBI by its Industrial Trends Survey series for nearly 50 years.

Unnecessary damage to "confidence" is always the most galling circumstance to British board rooms. The Metrication Board was abolished in 1980, when 'Euro-sceptic' politicians imagined the changeover to SI in industry and the rest could be ignored. It is easy to forget the volatility of political life in those days but assuredly the board room trauma about SI units was not something that pushed headlines off the front pages of the Times, Mail and Telegraph. Distant fears of industrial isolation from consumer society and daily life had come to pass.

Metric measures were then commonplace at school and at work but the heady days of progress to a naturally metric environment, as seen in Australia and New Zealand, evaporated.

Many people, led by UK Metric Association, know well that significant gaps still remain; road signs for example. Further metrication was hampered because it became inadvertently but irretrievably confused in the political mind with 'Euro-scepticism'. No amount of pleas for "a rational system of measurement for the UK" has so far re-ignited the spark of political enthusiasm. A Metric Sense campaign led by Countess Attlee strove to prevent 'SI' taking a stranglehold on conversational usage of metric terms.

Dangers of isolation and lack of clarity still plague our business and domestic life. Travelling on British roads and under British bridges has its own special hazards by being marked in measures fewer and fewer people use. The insurance company AXA reported in July 2003 that drivers were dangerously confused by changes in road signs from metric, 'imperial', metric when travelling across borders. CBI Member Companies in road haulage, a huge part of our economy, are still faced in 2003 with ludicrous anomalies - the very thing the FBI warned about in 1963. Long-distance lorry drivers, their loads and other road users are put at real risk, say AXA, because bridge heights are not consistently shown.

Perhaps it doesn't matter, but Britain has added another 'quaintness' to its tourism armoury. "Oh!" said American travel writers in the *New York Times* last week, "Britons love to be thought eccentric and quaint - look at their road signs, some in one system, some in another!" Do we love that? Bill Bryson may have made a fortune praising the eccentricity of British life and country but not about lorries with their loads blocking the highway or falling on people's heads.

The purity of 'SI' came to cost us dearly; the system we have adopted was designed not by or for citizens and consumers. People seemed unable to feel friendly towards it although it is never safe to underestimate the capacity of the British at large to cope with and be proud of sensible change.

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"Thirty years after decimalisation, we're still inching into the metric world". Geoffrey Howe
Measure for measure, a comedy of errors

Times October 10, 2001

JAH August 2003

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