



# UKMA news

The newsletter of the UK Metric Association  
campaigning for a single rational system of measurement

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## **DfT in denial over metric road signs**

### **"Metric signs ahead" launched**

Former Transport Secretary, Alistair Darling, has denied that the Government has any plans to convert the UK's roads signs to metric, citing costs of "£600 - 700 million" as being "a waste of taxpayers' money". His statement was provoked by the publication on 23 February of UKMA's latest report, "Metric signs ahead", which argues for conversion within 5 years, estimating the cost at a "most probable" £80 million.

In its resistance to metrication, the DfT has in fact changed tack. Previously, they have accepted that in principle the UK will convert "at a date to be fixed" but have argued that it  
(cont. on p. 2)

## **"Grumpy old men" (and two women) write to the Times**

On 21 April, 21 patrons of the so-called "British Weights and Measures Association" (BWaMA) wrote to the Times newspaper asking the Government to seek a permanent derogation from the European Union to permit "supplementary indications" on price labels. (They had previously sent a longer letter to the Prime Minister). This resulted in a small flurry of correspondence in the columns of the Times - although, regrettably, its Letters Editor did not see fit to publish UKMA's response (appended below).

Interestingly, UKMA Secretary, Derek Pollard, has drawn attention to the common membership between the BWaMA signatories and the BBC's "Grumpy Old Men". Moreover, some quick research has shown that at least  
(cont. on p.7)

## **Monitoring the BBC**

Help is wanted with monitoring the BBC's alleged policy on the use of measurement units in their tv and radio broadcasts and online.  
(cont. on p.8)

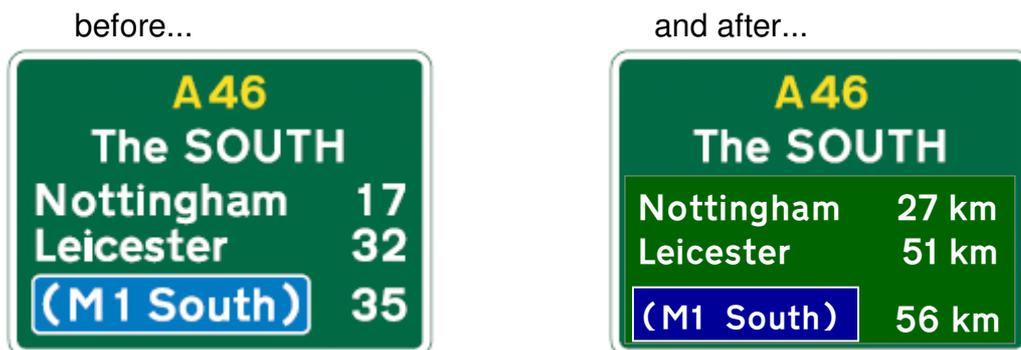
## DfT in denial (cont. from p. 1)

would be "confusing" for motorists as long as a majority of drivers have not received a metric education at school.

The "confusion" argument is of course invalid. It didn't cause confusion in Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland - or anywhere else where signs have been successfully converted; and what about younger drivers who have received no formal "imperial" education? But in any case we have now probably reached the point where a majority of drivers are aged under 46 and would have received metric education at school. The DfT therefore needed a different argument.

So they have tried to frighten people away from considering the issue by producing absurdly exaggerated costings and claiming loftily that there are more important priorities. In support of their "£600 - 700 million" figure, the DfT have placed some sketchy information on their website at [www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft\\_roads/documents/page/dft\\_roads\\_611241.hcsp](http://www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_roads/documents/page/dft_roads_611241.hcsp), but a cursory examination reveals that they have assumed the most expensive possible methods of conversion - e.g. it is assumed that the whole of the conversion would have to be carried out as a single operation (rather than spread over a number of years and hence partly absorbed within natural repair and replacement). The estimate also assumes that, since distance signs will have to include the "km" symbol (which would not fit onto existing signs), most will have to be replaced rather than amended. They appear not to have considered the obvious alternative of a narrower or slightly smaller font - not ideal, perhaps, but if you are genuinely concerned about "wasting taxpayers' money".....

An illustration of one way in which signs could easily be amended is given below (they are obviously to the same scale):



According to the DfT, there are half a million signs in the UK which would need to be replaced, of which about half are speed limit signs. If their figure of £600 - 700 million were correct, this would give a unit cost of £1200 - 1400 per sign. The absurdity of this claim can be gauged from the fact that the unit cost of both new and replacement speed limit signs in the Irish Republic in January 2005 was £100 per sign (according to the Irish Government website [www.gometric.ie](http://www.gometric.ie)).

(cont. on p. 3)

## DfT in denial (cont. from p.2)

In correspondence with Lord Howe, Alistair Darling declined to submit his Department's figures for independent auditing and refused to give further details. UKMA will therefore be undertaking further analysis and hopes to obtain more information from the Irish Department of Transport on the actual cost of amending or replacing distance signs in Ireland phased over a number of years. **UKMA members could also help by writing to their MPs asking them to challenge the exaggerated figures produced by the DfT.**

## Has anybody seen a mm-only tape?

UKMA has previously complained about the difficulty of buying metric-only tapes (and other measuring instruments) in the UK. Almost all kitchen and bathroom scales, rulers, spring balances, pressure gauges, thermometers and tape measures on sale in the UK are calibrated in dual units, normally with imperial as the default. Some guidance is on our website at <http://www.ukma.org.uk/Practical/homediy/metrictapes.htm>

A further twist to this story came when the Chairman received a rather plaintive e-mail from Pete Carr, proprietor of AAC Design ([www.aacdesign.co.uk](http://www.aacdesign.co.uk)), as follows:

"Like many people (judging from your site) I also need an all metric tape measure, in fact it is to replace my trusty measure that I bought in Australia 12 years ago. Which has 300mm specified as 300mm & not 30cm.

My problem is that all the metric tape measures I can find are graduated in cm's. (including the ones recommended on your site, as far as I can tell).

I have been an engineer all my working life & I have never dimensioned or specified anything in cm it has always been mm. In fact I am finding it difficult to think of a single engineering item that is specified or sold in cm. If a machine was 2250mm long that's how it was written not 225cm, Car tyre widths are 165mm or 225mm etc not 16.5 or 22.5cm. Bricks are 215mm long not 21.5cm. Timbers are 50mmx200mm not 5x20cm. Etc etc.

Do you know of any UK suppliers of genuine mm tape measures (not cm) ??

or is a trip to Australia for a replacement on the cards (now there's an idea)."

(cont. on p.4)

### mm-only tapes (cont. from p.3)

A Google search for mm-only tapes drew a blank until, a few weeks later, Pete himself provided the answer. See the following Australian site: <http://www.justtools.com.au/prod3263.htm>

Pete asks whether there would be sufficient demand in the UK for it to be worth his while to import a quantity for resale. Unfortunately, they would have to be retailed at about £18 - 20 for an 8 m tape, which compares badly with European and American products showing cm which are priced at £8. So if you want this tape (illustrated below) you will have to get it from Australia.



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## AGM/Annual Conference - 8 July 2006

This year's AGM and Annual Conference will be held at the Franklin Wilkins Building, 150 Stamford Street, London, SE1 9NH near Waterloo Station (part of King's College) from 10:00 to 16:00. As in previous years it is hoped to deal with the formal AGM business in about an hour, which, assuming half an hour lunch break, will leave about 4½ hours for presentations and discussion.

**Diana Garnham**, Chief Executive of the Science Council, has agreed in principle to participate, and our various patrons and VIP supporters have been invited. Topics to be covered are likely to include:

- Strategy review and campaign targets
- Highway Code consultation - UKMA's submission
- Education standards, science and measurement units
- Future work programme
- Website progress and plans (inc. possible alternative to Smartgroups)
- Dual labelling, supplementary indications and 2010

So please put the date in your diary (by the way, it does NOT clash with the football World Cup final - that's the next day).

## Facts behind the "pinta" scare stunt

.....  
On 30 January 2006, Britain's tabloid newspapers were beside themselves with indignation at a report that Brussels Bureaucrats were about to abolish the British daily "pinta" milk. Like many such Europhobic scare stories, it was a travesty of the facts. On this occasion it arose from a completely inaccurate press release issued by the British Retail Consortium (an otherwise reputable organisation who really should have known better).

The background is that package sizes are not generally regulated at the EU level. Each member state fixes its own range of sizes. Thus, for example, the UK mandates butter in multiples of 250 g but jam and honey in multiples of 227 g (i.e. half an imperial pound). Milk must be packaged either in multiples of 500 mL or (confusingly) in multiples of 568 mL (i.e. a pint). However, if a different package size is legal in another EU country, it can be imported and sold in the UK. Bonkers, you may say.

The European Commission have spent two years consulting on whether to harmonise mandatory package sizes at the European level or alternatively to deregulate package sizes completely. Following this consultation they have proposed almost complete deregulation (with minor exceptions such as wine and spirits, sugar and coffee), which would mean that national governments could no longer insist on any particular sizes, and packers would be free to use any size they liked. (Obviously, this would include "soft conversions" of imperial amounts such as 12 ounces or 2 pints, although they would still need to be described as 340 g or 1.136 L respectively, with supplementary indications permitted until 2010).

The British Retail Consortium chose to portray this deregulation proposal as an attack on the traditional British pint of milk, and issued a completely misleading press release demanding that British MEPs should oppose the proposal. Much of the popular press, not to mention the BBC Radio 4 "Today" programme, swallowed this non-story without checking the facts, resulting in the familiar anti-EU and anti-metric headlines. British MEPs were split on the proposal, with the Liberal Democrats supporting the Commission's proposal, while both Conservative and Labour MEPs supported amendments which preserve the pint (so described) for drinking milk. However, since a range of no less than nine metric sizes were also agreed by the Parliament, the outcome is that BOTH metric AND imperial sizes would be mandated in the UK. In a subsequent exchange in the House of Lords, some Conservative peers claimed the "credit" for this debacle (although UKMA patron, Lord Howe, distanced himself from it). It fell to a Government Minister, Lord McKenzie, to point out that there never had been a threat to the 568 mL (pint) size of package.

UKMA has pointed out to the Labour spokesperson on the matter, Arlene McCarthy MEP, that the amendments which she and her colleagues have

(cont. on p. 6)

## "pinta" scare stunt (cont, from p.5)

supported would maintain and indeed entrench the current confusion for shoppers, especially as the concept of "unit pricing" (i.e. price per litre or kilogram) is so poorly understood in the UK. However, she has been unable (or perhaps unwilling) to understand the point, and has declined to withdraw the Labour Group's support for the amendments.

The European Commission has rejected these amendments, commenting that "no compelling reasons were provided" to justify them. The issue will next go before the Council of Ministers, who will have to decide whether they agree with the Commission or with the Parliament.

Perhaps the best outcome would be for the Commission to persuade a majority of the governments of the member states to support the Commission's original proposal, and for the European Parliament to back down. If total deregulation does come about, there would then be a strong case for either the Commission or the UK Government to promote the "unit pricing" concept for the benefit of consumers.

### **Wanted! Editor for UKMA News**

For the last year or more, UKMA Treasurer, Phil Durden, has been combining his financial duties with editing UKMA News. However, personal commitments have now compelled him to give up this task, and the current issue has been compiled by Chairman, Robin Paice.

UKMA News is important for keeping members informed of the progress of our campaign, and the aim is to produce three or four issues per year. We **NEED** a new editor. He/she need not write very much of it but should be prepared to plan the content and then nag other members to contribute articles. A reasonable facility with using MSWord (or a Desktop Publishing programme) would be an advantage. Ideally, the editor should be a member of the Committee, or at least should keep abreast of current activities.

**Is there a volunteer? (Offers to [secretary@metric.org.uk](mailto:secretary@metric.org.uk))**

## **Grumpy old men (cont. from p.1)**

15 of the 21 are aged over 60. Nothing wrong with that, of course. UKMA's Patron, Chairman, Secretary and several members are equally ancient - but at least we have not lost the ability to adapt to modern life.

UKMA's response to the BWMA letter was as follows:

"Dear Times Letters Editor

### **Weights and measures**

In the national interest it is to be hoped that the Government will ignore the call from assorted correspondents ("Weights and measures", 21 April 2006) to seek a further derogation to permit "supplementary indications" (i.e. imperial conversions) on price labels after 2009.

Every country needs a system of weights and measures which everybody understands and uses for all purposes. Nobody needs a confusing muddle of two systems.

We are in the present muddle precisely because successive British Governments have lacked the political courage to complete a conversion which was announced and begun in 1965 - eight years before we joined the then Common Market. An adjustment period of 45 years is sufficient and, having been extended twice already, should not be extended yet again.

If your correspondents wish to continue using obsolete measurement units in their private lives, they are free to do so. But their refusal to move with the times should not prevent the country as a whole - above all our children and grandchildren - from enjoying the benefit of a single, easy system for all official, trade and legal purposes.

The UK Metric Association urges the Government to keep its nerve and not to yield to this selfish and ill-informed pressure.

Yours faithfully

Robin Paice  
Chairman, UK Metric Association"

The Times did of course print a number of other replies - some of them flippant or misinformed, but without wishing to exaggerate our own importance, UKMA thinks it would have been appropriate for the Times to publish a short response from the main or only organisation which opposes BWaMA. So much for balance.

## Monitoring the BBC (cont. from p.1)

In correspondence last year, the Deputy Director General of the BBC, Mark Byford, claimed that the BBC **does** have a policy on measurements. He wrote:

In brief, we try to provide content, whether on TV, Radio or Online, which is accessible and understandable to our audiences. Different parts of society have different understandings of the Metric system and we have to respect and reflect this fact. Hence CBBC and CBeebies use the Metric system as this is the system which children are taught and which they understand. Even so, we believe that there are still occasions when both the Metric and Imperial systems have to be used - mainly when older interviewees or contributors use Imperial terms, which are then "translated" into Metric.

However, many older audiences still use the Imperial system and we have to reflect that in our content. In cookery programmes, for example, Metric measures will be used and the presenter will invariably provide the Imperial equivalent as well.

UKMA is sceptical. While not doubting Mr Byford's sincerity or good intentions, we do not believe that this policy is well known to the BBC's contributors or that it is monitored or enforced in a consistent way. There is much anecdotal evidence that some children's programmes continue to use imperial measures as standard (presumably because of the preferences of the presenter). Foreign news reports sometimes give measurements in the original form (a 50 kg bomb in Baghdad) but sometimes translate into imperial (a "93 mile" exclusion zone). Weather forecasts are a particular mess: some presenters give Celsius only, some give the occasional Fahrenheit temperature, while others give both C and F for every value!

Even if the BBC's claimed policy were genuine, UKMA does not believe that it is appropriate for a public sector organisation to disregard the general objective of moving toward general use of the metric system. The BBC also has as its mission statement: "inform, educate and entertain". Yet the broadcasting of news and other programmes in a confused muddle of incompatible measurement units fails to give clear information and does nothing to further the general public's understanding of or familiarity with the metric system.

However, if we are to make any impression on the BBC, we shall need irrefutable, objective evidence that even their claimed policy is not being followed. UKMA would like to record systematically a representative selection of programmes and analyse in detail the use of measurement units. It will need a volunteer to manage the project overall, but other members could contribute by recording specific types of programme - e.g. children's, cookery, motoring, DIY, news, weather forecasts - for a set period (say, a week). Once these programmes are "in the can", they can be analysed for compliance with the BBC's policy.

So, the question is: are there volunteers amongst UKMA's membership for (a) managing the project overall, and (b) recording individual types of programme? Offers in the first instance to the Chairman at [chair@metric.org.uk](mailto:chair@metric.org.uk).

# UKMA becomes a publisher

(by Roddy Urquhart, Committee member)

## *Background*

Nearly two years ago, UKMA wrote and distributed its first report – ‘A very British mess’ – and from November 2004 offered it for sale publicly. However, in the world of books this did not of itself make UKMA the “publisher”.

The selling of books typically involves a number of roles and responsibilities. An author is responsible for the content of a book. A publisher has overall business responsibility for a book and aims to make a profit on it. A publisher is likely to work with the author on editing a book in order to meet the needs of its market. Publishers typically involve distributors who provide warehousing and shipment services for their customers. Finally books are sold to the customer via a retail outlet such as a bookshop or website.

## *‘A very British mess’*

When we wrote ‘A very British mess’ (VBM) we were given the help of Institute of Physics Publishing to both produce and distribute our title. We had complete freedom as authors but for example they obtained an ISBN number for us and our book was published under their flag.



ISBN 0750310146

Unfortunately early last year, the Institute of Physics decided to sell their publishing arm so we were decoupled from their distribution arrangements and were no longer listed on their website. We looked into third party distribution services but none of them were interested in a single title.

In the end we decided to take over the distribution of VBM ourselves. Right now VBM is for sale via our own website, various internet books sellers and we fulfil any orders received. With this arrangement we save overhead costs (fees that need to be paid to third parties) but of course lack marketing “muscle”.

(cont. on p.10)

## ***UKMA becomes a publisher (cont. from p.9)***

### *'Metric signs ahead'*

With our second publication – 'Metric signs ahead' - we have had to play the role of publisher, distributor and (with our website) retailer. Derek Pollard, UKMA Secretary, has obtained a series of ISBN numbers for UKMA which means that we are formally listed as a publisher.



ISBN 0-9552351-0-3

When 'Metric signs ahead' (MSA) was published, data on the book was provided to a Nielsen BookData who run a database used by wholesalers and retailers. As a result information on MSA is now widely available on internet booksellers such as Amazon and Blackwells.

### *How you can help*

The UKMA publications have been targeted at influencers and stakeholders in measurement in the UK. However, it would be very valuable if they are read by interested members of the public. We believe we have stated an objective and compelling case for metrication and are convinced that the more people who read our books the better. Specialised publications such as ours are unlikely to be stocked by normal bookshops that focus on high turnover, bestseller titles. However, the books are potentially of interest to libraries.

You can help UKMA by recommending these books either to your local library or, if you are studying or teaching, to your academic library. Please recommend these titles for purchase.

Another way you can help is to write reviews. Some internet booksellers such as Amazon or Blackwells invite customers to write reviews which can be uploaded to their website.

**Above all, if you haven't already done so, please order your own copies of UKMA's publications, using the details above, or go to our website at <http://www.ukma.org.uk/books/index.htm>**

## Metric-only labelling outside the EU

As the 2009 deadline approaches there are already moves afoot to try to persuade the European Commission to extend the derogation whereby "supplementary indications" (i.e. imperial equivalents) can appear on packages and price labels. (See separate article "Grumpy old men etc" p.1).

Leaving aside the GOM, the principal advocates of extending the derogation (or even making it permanent) are trans-Atlantic exporters and importers who want to be able to use the same packaging in all world markets and who see the prospective need for separate packaging for the EU and the USA as a major business cost. Hitherto, the position of the Commission has been that the metric system is the *world* system, and no individual country (i.e. the USA) should be able in effect to impose its non-standard measurement system on the rest of the world. However, it is likely that representations from business interests will be listened to by governments of member states and indeed by their MEPs. The initiative will rest with the Commission, but they may come under considerable pressure to agree to propose a further derogation, which would then have to be considered by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament.

There is also the possibility that if the Commission does not agree, the USA Department of Commerce may appeal to the World Trade Organisation that the EU rules are a non-tariff barrier to trade and hence illegal.

What would be interesting to find out is whether any other country in the world insists on metric-only labelling. If so this would seriously dent the American case. A quick search has revealed that New Zealand requires metric-only packaging for all home-produced goods, but allows dual marking under the following conditions:

- "that the non metric unit is additional to the metric marking, and
- the figures the non metric unit is marked in are no larger than the metric marking, and
- the packages have been imported into New Zealand, or
- the packages are part of a production originally designated for export to a country requiring the non metric marking. "

The rationale for these rules is that New Zealand does not wish to unreasonably limit goods imported into New Zealand nor do they wish their regulations to be viewed as a Technical Barrier to Trade (TBT) under the World Trade Organization's TBT rules.

It is to be hoped that the Commission will resist pressure for dual marking, but if they are minded to propose a concession, the New Zealand rules could be the basis for a compromise (provided, of course, that the Americans will permit metric-only labelling in the USA - a big if!).

Does any UKMA member know of any other countries which prohibit or restrict dual marking of packages?

## "SI Metric-Matters"

*(The following book review originally appeared in "The International Educator" (February 2006). Philip Bladon has recently joined UKMA)*

Around the world you have probably seen road signs with the symbol 'Km'. Perhaps you've also seen packets of rice or sacks of potatoes or a market stall with a metric weight label 'Kg'. Both of these symbols are incorrect because the capital letter k is used. In Britain you might see 'Kgs' on the side of vehicles belonging to a national security company; 'Kgs' is also an incorrect symbol. The symbol 'kg' does not have a plural form. In fact a leading American Dictionary (Merriam-Webster) accepts the word 'incorrect' exists!

One person who likes to promote correct metric symbols is **Philip Bladon**. He has worked overseas as a science teacher and school administrator for many years. Philip is keen to ensure that students and colleagues write 'km' and 'kg' (not 'Km' and 'Kg'). He also points out that the correct symbol for 'kelvin' (the unit for thermodynamic temperature) is 'K' (not °K), the wrong symbol appears in some science textbooks.

SI Metric-Matters is promoting the use of International units with the correct names and symbols. Philip Bladon, from Worcestershire, in the United Kingdom, has compiled A Dictionary Of International Units. His book is filled with official SI units, 'Le Système International d' Unités', designated SI in all languages.

This book not only provides an excellent reference source for science students throughout their careers; it's also a fascinating book for trivia buffs and a delight for enthusiasts of the board game Scrabble®. When you buy a copy you will soon enrich your vocabulary and discover unusual prefixes. In addition to familiar prefixes like 'kilo' and 'milli' there are eighteen more that can be used for multiples and submultiples of SI units.

With this dictionary, teachers can help promote the correct metric names and symbols and give guidance on how to write numerical values correctly. And it's not just in High schools and Secondary schools where this book is being used; Primary, and Junior school teachers around the world are finding it useful.

For non-scientists it is full of interesting information, introducing them to a broader spectrum of words and concepts. Words like yoctobecquerel or zettasteradian provide a key into a new world of probing and discovery. A browse through this paperback or the ebook version can be extremely illuminating (unit: yottalux).

Symbologists and symbolists can ponder over character sizes, for example: 'Zs', 'zs', 'ZS', 'zS', and hundreds more!

Historians will discover the six nationalities of the 19 scientists whose surnames have been used for SI (metric) units. The first letter of these unit names is not capitalized. In schools these scientists can be presented on a timeline; this might be done as part of a student exercise during a country's national science week; an ideal way to help promote cross-curricular activities linking History, Mathematics, Languages, and Presentation skills.

Compared to the large, technical and expensive ISO, (International Standards Organisation), documents on SI units available from Geneva, Philip Bladon's Dictionary Of International Units is excellent value and it's fun.

**A Dictionary Of International Units Metric-Matters: Names and Symbols, by Philip Bladon.**

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Large discounts for big orders, contact the publisher:  
[book.orders@iuniverse.com](mailto:book.orders@iuniverse.com)

The author, Philip Bladon is a Fellow of the Institute of Science Technology, a life member of the Federation of Asian Chemical Societies, a member of the International Council of Associations for Science Education, and a member of Australian Mensa.

He has worked in Zambia, and in several different regions of Papua New Guinea.

The author's other interests include outdoor tropical gardening and the work of the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement.

*"Fascinating and unusual, it's more than just a handy science reference book".*

### **Membership matters**

In 2006, UKMA has welcomed these new members:  
Keith Atkin, John Best, Philip Bladon, Ka C Chu, John Frewen-Lord, W R Lynch, Jeffrey Mansfield, Stephen Pugh, Pontus Skepsta and Martin Ward.

## Final thought - Mail box or soap box?

(Derek Pollard, UKMA Secretary)

The publication of “Metric signs ahead” on 23 February produced an upsurge of e-mails in the UKMA mail box. As well as messages of support and requests for information about membership, there were some messages from those who were less than enthusiastic about the proposals in the report. Some quotes appear below:

“... to quote a Princess Ann-ism: ‘We want naff-all to do with to do with Bloody Europe’”. G Mountford

“The cost at the very least of changing the signs will be ... millions of pounds! I take it your fine association will be more than willing to pay for the change”.  
G M Sims

“You quote Ireland moving over to Kilometers (sic) on it’s (sic) road signs, well I’m Irish and I can assure you it’s a total shambles”. Andrew Brady

“Go and live in Europe and leave us alone”. D Cash

“May I suggest that road signs in the rest of Europe be changed over to “increasingly outmoded imperial units”. Maurice Turner

“Surely it is enough that shopkeepers who do not wish to display their goods in kilograms can be punished by archaic laws of this country that you no doubt had great input into”. Alexander Williams

“Why not change all to Imperial – seemed to work when half the globe was pink on the maps :)” W Fletcher

“If your brains are too pea sized to deal with both imperial and metric units, then I suggest you move to France ...” Islwyn Price

“Surely with the technologies available, it can not be that difficult to quote weights in both metric and imperial thereby keeping everyone happy.” Joe Black

“Why not be done with it and put the French flag over Westminster” Shinky

“Why not turn your energies to something worthwhile like reducing the number of road signs that litter the country.” Jos Haynes

But the last word should go to Daniel Gee,

“I think a campaign for conversion is long overdue and makes perfect sense.”

Please be reassured – each of the e-mails received a considered reply.