

Metric signs ahead

The case for converting road signs to metric units

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Foreword by Lord Kinnock of Bedwellty

40 years after Britain first started to go officially metric, there is one important area in which we are still living in the imperial past. We see this in the muddle of measurement units in use in the United Kingdom. Our road signs are a perhaps the most obvious example and they contradict the image - and the reality – of our country as a modern, multicultural, dynamic place

where the past is valued and respected and the future is approached with creativity and confidence.

Of course, it is not just a question of Britain's image. The persistence of miles, yards, feet and inches on road signs is a continuing obstacle to people being able to "think metric" in other areas of life - from shopping to health and safety, from DIY to calculating their petrol consumption or understanding the weather forecast.

It is obvious that every country needs a single system of weights and measures which people of all ages, backgrounds and origins, can understand and use and it is equally clear that nobody needs two systems. For the younger generations who have full command of metric measurement as a result of their schooling, the continuation of the imperial system is confusing as well as quaint. For older people like me, a reasonable transition period would minimise the difficulties of change.

It is widely believed – largely because of distortive press coverage - that weights and measures policy is primarily a European issue. It is not. In the ten years that I was a European Commissioner (including five years with the Transport portfolio), I know that there was no pressure from the Commission on any British Government to convert UK road signs. Indeed, the EU agreed many years ago that the United Kingdom and Ireland should set their own timetables for phasing out the remaining imperial measures. The issue is therefore entirely a matter for the British Government and Parliament.

Sadly, the truth is that, although most senior politicians are well aware that the current dual system has serious practical disadvantages, successive British Governments have been reluctant to take responsibility for bringing the excruciatingly slow metric changeover to a decisive conclusion. It was originally intended to convert British road signs in 1973, but the change was postponed and then never re-instated. A third of a century later this booklet argues convincingly that the time has come to get up to date and complete the conversion process. It briefly traces the history of how we got into the present condition and why it is in the national interests of the United Kingdom to sort it out as soon as possible – and the booklet also demonstrates the fact that the changeover can be made economically and safely if a practical recommended timetable is followed.

I therefore endorse this publication as a valuable source of rational information for Government, industry, the professions that will need to carry out its recommendations, and the general public. If the arguments are understood and accepted, Britain can join the modern metric World – and do it by the time that the all-metric Olympic Games open in London in 2012.

Neil Kinnoch

Executive Summary

- The purpose of this report by the UK Metric Association (UKMA) is to demonstrate to the key players in Britain's road system that **it is in the national interest to fix a date for the adoption of metric road signage, and that this date should be as soon as practicable** (paragraphs 1.1 - 1.4).
- **Britain's road signage is a special case of the confusing muddle of measurement units which we have described elsewhere (UKMA, 2004) as "a very British mess"**. This muddle has resulted from the failure of successive British Governments to carry through the policy, announced in 1965, of converting to the metric system as the primary and eventually the only measurement system to be used in the UK (2.1 - 2.4).
- **Britain is unique amongst advanced countries in not permitting metric units (metres and kilometres) on almost any traffic signs.** Although it was planned to convert signage in 1973, this plan was postponed and has never been reinstated (3.1 - 3.11).
- The primary and overriding reason for extending the process of metric conversion to road signage is that **it will enable the UK at last to enjoy a single system of measurement which is understood and used by everyone for all purposes** - thus making it unnecessary for British people to be fluent with two very different and incompatible systems of measurement (4.1 - 4.6).
- A second reason is that **it would provide drivers with consistent information** in one single, easy system of units (4.7 - 4.20)
- Thirdly, a single set of units would be efficient for **mapmakers, surveyors, engineers, motor manufacturers and contractors** who build and maintain the UK's road infrastructure (4.21 - 4.24).
- Furthermore, there are **many other reasons** why it would be beneficial to complete the changeover as soon as possible, including:
 - It would possible easily to calculate fuel consumption and engine efficiency (4.26 -4.27)
 - Speed limits could be reviewed and adjusted more sensitively according to local road conditions (4.28 - 4.29)
 - Drivers visiting the UK could drive more safely (4.30 - 4.34)
 - Signposting would be compatible with Ordnance Survey maps (4.35 - 4.38)
 - Britain could fulfil its obligation under European law (4.39 - 4.40)

- The **DfT's main argument** for delaying the changeover - that it would be "confusing" for older drivers - **is shown to be invalid** (5.2 - 5.9). **The changeover could be carried out economically and safely within three to five years**, observing the following principles:
 - There should, as far as possible, be a "clean break" with imperial measures. There should be no question of dual unit signage (5.10 - 5.14)
 - Speed limit signage will need to be changed very rapidly (5.15 - 5.19)
 - Distance signage could, for reasons of economy, be spread over a longer period (5.20 - 5.21)
 - The precise method of conversion and the design of signage will need to be determined based on the experience of other countries such as Australia, Canada and the Irish Republic, but there will be no need to change "heritage" signage (5.22 - 5.35).
- **The costs of conversion are not a serious obstacle to change. We estimate that, if spread over a five year implementation period, the annual average costs would represent 0.27% of annual roads expenditure** - made up as follows (6.2 - 6.3):
 - Our "most probable" estimate of the cost of converting **speed limit signage** is **£20 million**, which would need to be met within a 12 month period (but possibly split between two financial years) (6.4 - 6.16 and Table 2)
 - The cost of converting **distance signage** will depend on the extent to which it can be spread over a longer period and absorbed within annual maintenance/replacement costs. Assuming a five year changeover period, the "most probable" estimate is **£60 million** (6.17 - 6.24)

This total "most probable" one-off cost of ca. **£80 million** (spread over several years) can be compared with annual UK roads expenditure of £6 billion (6.25 - 6.29 and Table 3)
- The experience of Ireland in 2005 (and of Australia and Canada in the 1970s) has shown that **the changeover can be carried out safely**. Any anticipated problems with speed limit signage can be dealt with by an intensive campaign of driver education. The change also gives an opportunity to review local speed limits - with additional benefits for road safety (6.30 - 6.45)
- **A practical, costed five-year plan** is proposed (7.1 - 7.21 and Table 4)
- UKMA believes that, **given full and rapid commitment from the Government, the confusing anomaly of imperial road signage could be ended within three to five years**. This would thus at last remove what is arguably the biggest obstacle to Britain enjoying the benefit of a single, rational and easy system of measurement which is understood and used by everybody for all purposes (8.1 - 8.4)