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BWMA gratefully records the Patronage of the late The Hon. Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, MP, Lord Shore, Vice-Admiral Sir Louis Le Bailly, KBE, CB, and Lord Monson, and the Honorary Membership of the late John Aspinall, Nirad C Chaudhuri CBE, Jennifer Paterson, CBE, Leo McKern AO, Norris McWhirter CBE, Fred Dibnah MBE, Sir Julian Hodge, KStG, KStJ, Bernard Levin, CBE, Dr Charles H Sisson, CH, DLitt, Fritz Spiegl, F S Trueman, OBE, Sir Rowland Whitehead, Bt, George MacDonald Fraser, OBE, Beryl Cook, OBE, John Michell, David Shepherd, MBE, Keith Waterhouse, CBE, Dick Francis, CBE, Prof. Anthony Flew, Trevor Bailey, CBE

“No research has been conducted”

As we are going to press, we have received a reply from David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science, to our letter of 4 January 2011 (see inside front page). The letter will be published in *Yardstick* 45. For now, however, we can report our request for evidence justifying the government’s concerns of “potential market failure” (in the event of allowing choice between imperial and metric) has received the following response: “The potential for market failure is based on economic theory ... No research has been conducted by the Government specifically into this area”.

Royal Wedding

Berkshire butcher Martin Fidler, who came to national attention in 2004 for defying Berkshire County Council’s enforcement of metric measures by using imperial scales, has been invited to the Royal Wedding by William and Kate. Martin’s Bladebone Butchery has served Kate’s family and the village of Bucklebury for 30 years.

Lord Monson

Lord Monson, BWMA Patron since 1995, has died aged 78 after a fall at his home. He was one of the ninety hereditary peers who were chosen to remain in the Lords after 1999. BWMA’s Chairman Mike Plumbe remembers him, inside.

Annual General Meeting & Conference

The date and place: Saturday 28 May 2011, to be held at the Victory Services Club, 63 Seymour Street, London W2 2HF, near Marble Arch. Please note, there will be a change to the schedule this year: AGM at 2.0pm and conference at 3.0pm. We are delighted that **Neil Hamilton**, former Trade Minister, will be our Guest speaker; details to follow in *Yardstick* 45.

John Gardner, Director

BWMA is a non-profit body that exists to promote parity in law between British and metric units. It enjoys support from across Britain’s political spectrum, from all manner of businesses and the general public. BWMA is financed by member subscriptions and donations.

Membership is £12 per year. Cheques or postal orders payable to “BWMA”, 44 Greensleeves Avenue, Broadstone, Dorset BH18 8BJ

BWMA questions to David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science, 16 July 2010 (reproduced from Yardstick 42)

1. The Conservative Party's decision to oppose criminalisation of imperial units was taken at Shadow Cabinet level in 1998, and reaffirmed since then. Please explain the process by which that decision was overturned.
2. You state, "... the scope of Directive 80/181/EC (as amended) is very wide and is not restricted to cross border trade". The Directive states: "... *the laws which regulate the use of units of measurement in the Member States differ from one Member State to another and as a result hinder trade; in these circumstances, it is necessary to harmonize laws, regulations and administrative provisions in order to overcome such obstacles*". Could you please explain your interpretation of the above extract, with particular reference to the words, "in these circumstances".
3. With regards to your assertion that allowing imperial units will cause "potential market failure", please provide the evidence that led you to this view.

Reply from National Measurement Office, on Mr Willetts' behalf, 14 September 2010

Thank you for your letter of 16 July in response to David Willetts' letter of 6 July about units of measurement in use for trade. I am replying in view of this section's responsibility for weights and measures policy issues.

This Government's approach to the use of imperial and metric units of measurement is a pragmatic one. It takes account of the need of the UK business and scientific communities to compete on a level basis with global competitors while also recognising the continuing preference of many in the UK for imperial units. The use of metric units is necessary to ensure that the UK is not disadvantaged in international trade or science. However, this does not preclude the optional use of imperial units alongside metric units of measurement where, for example, there exists customer preference for imperial units.

Directive 80/181/EEC harmonises the laws which regulate units of measurement for use in trade in the various Member States of the European Community. Whilst the Directive aims at facilitating cross border trade, its application is broader in the sense that, in order to achieve that objective, it requires the amendment of domestic rules governing units of measurement which would otherwise impact on cross-border transactions.

As you know, a market failure occurs where resources cannot be allocated efficiently due to the breakdown of the price mechanism. In this case the potential for market failure would exist were consumers not able to make accurate price comparisons because the units of measurement used were not consistent.

You will recall that we have been in touch to offer a meeting and we look forward to hearing from you so that we can agree on a mutually convenient date and time.

BWMA reply to David Willetts, 4 January 2011

Dear Mr Willetts

Thank you for the letter from Paul Cole of the National Measurement Office, dated 14 September 2010.

Regarding the National Measurement Office's answers to our three questions:

1) We do not believe that the National Measurement Office is the appropriate body to answer our question on the Conservative Party's change in policy on decriminalising imperial units, since this is a Party matter. Please could you explain the process surrounding the Conservative Party's change in policy, including when it took place, and by whom. We would be grateful for a copy of the minutes relating to the meeting at which the policy reversal was made.

2) The National Measurement Office acknowledges that the EC metrication Directive is aimed at "*facilitating cross border trade*". You may also be aware of David Cameron's statement that, "*Since the goods sold are for domestic sale only, there should be no difficulty in allowing the use of pounds and ounces for loose goods to continue*" (letter 20 Dec 2002, copy attached). What we seek from you, as Minister of State for Universities and Science, is a free and full acknowledgement that the EC Directive does not apply to domestic trade.

3) We are grateful for the further explanation of "potential market failure"; however, what we would like to know is the government's *evidence* that supports this theory. For example, has the government undertaken field surveys, case studies or other research that takes its concerns of "potential market failure" beyond the merely theoretical stage?

Enclosed with letter to David Willetts:

Letter from David Cameron to Neil Herron, 20 December 2002 (with BWMA emphasis)

Thank you for writing to me regarding the issue of weights and measures.

To answer your question directly, I do not think the metric martyrs should be prosecuted. I, together with Conservative colleagues, believe that local authorities should use their resources more efficiently than persecuting traders who are providing their customers with a service they want in the units of measurement they prefer. **Since the goods sold are for domestic sale only, there should be no difficulty in**

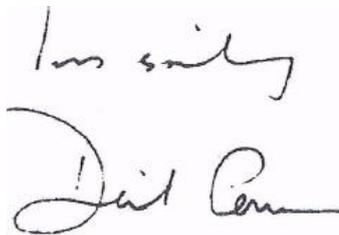
allowing the use of pounds and ounces for loose goods to continue. Whether traders choose to sell in imperial or metric units should be a matter between them and their consumers.

It is still permitted under EU rules to show the equivalent imperial measures as a 'supplement' under the metric. This is referred to as 'supplementary indications' or 'dual marking'. The Weights and Measures (Metrication Amendments) Regulations 2001, which Labour introduced, will end this practice after 31 December 2009.

Thus, the dual marking with imperial measures and metric is not banned, so at present the weight in pounds can still be shown on a label but the metric measure has to come first or be more prominent. The decision to use supplementary indications in the UK is entirely voluntary, depending on the users' perception of the advantages of using them in the UK.

Significantly, research by a leading market research agency found that 70% of UK consumers would prefer a system of dual labelling, which would allow the consumer to choose the system which suited him or her the best.

The Conservative Party is on the side of consumer choice and small business, pursuing costly court cases is of help to no one. Thank you again for writing to me about this issue.



David Willetts' reply will be in Yardstick 45

European Parliament alert

On 11 November 2010, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for the United States to abandon dual imperial-metric labelling, in favour of requiring metric. Its press release, released on the same date, entitled "Parliament signals its priorities for EU-US summit", stated:

Ahead of the EU-US summit on 20 November, MEPs agreed their recommendations on positions the Council should take regarding key transatlantic issues such as economic co-operation, personal data protection, the introduction of a US travel fee and recent leaks of US classified military documents on Iraq.

The state of EU-US trade relations amid the economic crisis is a key issue for MEPs with a view to the next meeting of the Transatlantic Economic Council. Parliament restates its support for a bar-

rier-free transatlantic market by 2015 but voices concern about differing rules on novel foods, genetically modified products and animal cloning, and stresses the need for US authorities to accept metric-only labelling of EU products

... Parliament also lists its priorities on EU-US international relations, including the fight against global terrorism, the latest Middle East negotiations and the threat of nuclear weapons.

Two-thirds of a pint, *not* a schooner

BWMA sent the following question to the National Measurement Office on 9 January 2011: "The press are saying this week that the new two-thirds pint measure is a 400ml 'schooner'. Please could you clarify: is it two-thirds pint (i.e. 378ml) or is it 400ml (0.7 pint)?"

Lynnette Falk replied: "The new measure will be 2/3 pint (i.e. equivalent to 378 ml). Hope this clarifies things".

Metric downsizing: strawberries

Our colleague Stuart Delvin brought to our attention the following Daily Telegraph article, 3 July 2010:

Millions of strawberries are eaten each week during June, as consumers enjoy one of the quintessential treats of a British summer. However, some supermarkets have been accused of changing the size of their punnets, by scrapping the 1lb (454g size) for a slightly smaller 400g box ... Asda, for instance last year sold a 454g box for £1.98. This year this large size is not on sale, but a 400g box is offered at £1.98. Sainsbury's last year offered Taste the Difference strawberries in 400g boxes for £3.99. This year Taste the Difference fruits are being sold in 300g boxes, but at the same price. Tesco has ditched all their 454g boxes in favour of 400g boxes, though because the varieties they stock are different it is not clear if the prices have changed ...

The trade body that represents British fruit growers and packers admitted that the punnet sizes were falling in size. Laurance Olins, the chairman of British Summer Fruits, said: "The number of punnets that are being sold each week this year has gone up slightly, by about 10 per cent. But we are probably selling slightly less weight of strawberries than a year ago in total" ... He insisted customers were not being short-changed by the smaller punnet sizes. "This is all about standardising pack sizes. Many retailers found last year that the 454g and 425g punnets were just too big and the strawberries got crushed".

* * *

The 11th Baron Monson

Lord Monson, who died on 12 February, was a champion of lost causes. I knew him first, and mainly, through the Society for Individual Freedom, where he was President for many years. When I became Chairman, he was always a tower of strength and could be relied on for wise counsel.

Soon after BWMA was re-activated by Vivian Linacre in 1995, we invited Lord Monson to become a Patron. He willingly undertook this role and, in the background, provided much valuable support, mainly at a personal level. Every now and then, for example, an "anonymous" cheque for our funds would arrive on my doormat. Then the telephone would ring: "It's Ivan Monson here", and off he would go telling me of the latest threat to freedom. He was as incensed as anyone when Steve Thoburn was made a criminal for selling a pound of bananas.

Lord Monson had one slightly contrary vice. He much enjoyed an occasional hand-rolled cigarette, which he would rather impishly puff away at in an out-of-the-way corner. He did not approve of blanket "No Smoking" rules.

We had the benefit of his wisdom laced with humour at several of our Conferences. We have lost a doughty campaigner in the fight for freedom of the individual, and for the right to choose the system of measurement which suits us best.

Michael Plumbe

London Underground; reply to Geoff Lumley, 1 September 2010

During our conversation you stated that you feel distances on signs and posters at Underground stations should be given in yards or miles rather than metres. However, the regulations you refer to cover traffic signs, with posters and leaflets at stations not falling under this category. Our Communication and Group Marketing teams are responsible for this area and I have forwarded your comments to them ...

James Clouting, Customer Service Advisor,
Transport for London

Cheshire West & Chester Council: letter to Roger Croston, 1 December 2008

Thank you for your Letter regarding the temporary signs located on the A51 at Vicars Cross traffic

signals. You are correct as the signs should be in yards and not meters; thank you for bringing this to our attention.

I have therefore arranged for these signs to be taken down and not reused; I believe this was a mistake by our contractors.

Adam McKinney, Technician, District Chester Traffic

Fahrenheit 1977 - the BBC and Met Office's true colours

Stuart Delvin located the following correspondence in the National Archives.

Letter from BBC Chairman Michael Swann, 4 May 1977, to Dr John Mason, Director General, Meteorological Office

Dear John,

My tiresome Governors, or at any rate, the less scientifically-minded of them, have been objecting to the fact that we are slowly but surely phasing out Fahrenheit in the weather maps. I endeavoured to persuade them of the wisdom of this, but am meeting with some resistance. All this will be painfully familiar ground to you, but I wondered whether you have some splendidly persuasive statement for the non-scientifically minded which I might wave at them?

Yours ever, Michael

Reply from Dr John Mason, 16 May 1977

Dear Michael,

Thank you for your letter of 4th May. The gradual phasing out of the Fahrenheit scale is consistent with the gradual introduction of the metric system and the coming into line with the rest of Europe. Fahrenheit is unknown to the younger generation which is now taught only Centigrade in school and the millions of holiday-makers travelling abroad are becoming increasingly familiar with Centigrade in the weather forecasts.

The Meteorological Office now receives only about one complaint per month concerning the phasing out of Fahrenheit and this number is diminishing all the time.

I hope this information will help convince your governors that the tide has turned irrevocably against Fahrenheit and that it is a matter of time before it disappears completely.

Yours, B. J, MASON

BWMA responds to Nominet (internet registry for .uk website domain names) regarding its policy on domain names used in criminal activity

Nominet discussion notice:

Title: Dealing with domain names used in connection with criminal activity

Issue Champion: Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA)

Description: Nominet does not currently have any clear obligation in its registrant Terms and Conditions that a domain name should not be used in connection with any activity that would constitute an offence under UK Criminal law. The group will discuss whether proposals should be put forward to change Nominet's Terms and Conditions to give a contractual basis to suspend domains where Nominet has reasonable grounds to believe they are being used to commit a crime (e.g. a request from an identified UK Law Enforcement Agency)

If you have any comments on this issue please email policy@nominet.org.uk, and include the title, "Dealing with domain names used in connection with criminal activity" in the subject line. Please note: your comments will be fed into the Issue Group and may be referenced.

BWMA submission, 14 December 2010

Dear Sirs

Dealing with domain names used in connection with criminal activity

The British Weights and Measures Association would like to comment on this issue. By way of background, our Association campaigns in the UK against UK and EC laws criminalising the use of imperial measurement (feet and inches, pounds and ounces, etc).

The discussion concerns the closure of websites at the request of Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs), presumably due to alleged breaking of laws.

In our work, we have become aware of the following:

- i) Legislation is not always safe; it can be *ultra vires*
- ii) It is not always clear what criminal law applies to
- iii) The law is confused by the interfacing of UK law and European law
- iv) The breaking of even an unambiguous law does not necessarily mean criminality in the sense of causing harm and avoiding detection; the law can be broken *openly*, and therefore subject to the law, as a form of public disobedience.

These factors create a grey area between criminal activity and legitimate political protest.

Nominet's issue brief indicates that Nominet wishes to formalise its policy and procedure for closing websites where illegality has been *alleged* by LEAs. This necessarily implies the closing of websites outside of the court process.

A website can be as important to an organisation as its premises, newsletter or bank account. Authorities could bring pressure to bear on organisations, not via the courts, but via the 'back door' by closing websites. This implies a risk to our own Association website. For example, if our Association supported a trader using pounds and ounces, a law enforcement agency (such as Trading Standards, cited on your list of interested parties) could move to have our website removed, on grounds that we are inciting criminality. Naturally, we would dispute these grounds for such a move.

Therefore, we believe there should be stringent procedures and standards in place at Nominet for closing websites. We do not believe that a mere LEA request constitutes 'reasonable grounds'. Law Enforcement Agencies are, as their name indicates, enforcement agencies for governments that make the law; as such, they are agents of the government. They are not impartial.

Nevertheless, we recognise that there are fraud websites, etc where, if action is to be taken, it must be taken quickly. We suggest the following ideas for a procedure:

On receiving a law enforcement request to close a website, Nominet should seek from the website owner an initial response (e.g. within 7 days) before any action is taken by Nominet. This is to prevent baseless requests by LEAs.

If the website owner's initial representation is successful, the LEA must resort to the courts. If the website owner does not respond, or if their initial representation is unsuccessful, a temporary suspension is imposed on the website, such as three months or whatever is sufficient to provide the LEA with time to obtain a court order to enforce a permanent closure. This enables the LEA to stop the website's activities in immediate term, while ensuring it does not act above the law in the long term. If the LEA is not successful in obtaining a court order, or does not seek one, the website is restored at the end of the three-month period.

At any time during the temporary suspension period, the suspension itself is subject to an appeals process within Nominet, where the website owner may make a detailed submission; they must be informed of the case against them, or at least the charge. The outcome is superseded by the court's decision, either way.

Nominet must make adequate arrangements to ensure that the appeals committee is impartial.

We hope these comments assist the Nominet Issue Group. Feel free to email should you require clarification on any point.

Trouble with the Metric System - Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Radio National, 2 August 1998

The following is a transcript of a 1998 talk by Australian Arthur Marcel on Australia's Radio National on the advantages of the Imperial method of measurement compared with the metric method.

Introduction by host Robyn Williams: Time for a confession: I have had two direct involvements (to put it gently) in Australia's move to metric units. I was part of the Decimal Currency Board which brought you Dollar Bill on the 14th February, 1966, and said that the new money would in no way fuel inflation. Ho, ho. Then in 1972 (February again I think) on joining the ABC Science Unit, my first job was to produce a series of desperately cheerful and unrelentingly positive promos for metric conversion. Now 26 years on, we are used to the new units. Or are we? Here's Arthur Marcel from the University of Queensland.

Arthur Marcel: On Sunday morning, a couple of Decembers ago, while indulging in my usual Sunday privilege of lying in until 9am and listening to the wireless, I heard a well-meaning academic bemoaning the fact that the metric system of measurement had been introduced into Australia in a haphazard manner and consequently had not been universally accepted. Only a year or so prior to hearing this complaint, I had been painfully contemplating the same issue. These contemplations had taken place in a small paved courtyard in Brisbane's western suburbs, where I stood on a bare concrete slab under a blazing sun amidst a stack of red cedar beams and rough sawn planks.

The contemplations were painful because I had just realised the mistake I'd made in paving the yard before I'd built the shed. The reflected radiation from the flat uniform surface and surrounding brickwork increased my sweat-soaked discomfort to the point of making it difficult to keep my eyes unblurred by the effects of wetness and glare. Still I pressed on. I had meticulously drafted my own plans and now they were open and tacked to a board alongside my carpenter's horse. The task at hand seemed simple enough. I had to mark and cut the wood, then nail, screw and glue it all together in the right order. Moreover, each plank needed to be cut perfectly square and to an exact length. I was as much a perfectionist then as now, and this shed was to be the manifestation of an inner yearning for aesthetic purity.

As usual that day, I was engaged more in art than craft. My shed would be more than just a shed, it would be a monument and I would be its creator. It would stand as a testament to my ability as a modern human, with the aid of my newly bought and still shiny modern tools, to transform nature's rough sawn resource into an exact three-dimensional copy of the drawings. Every seam had to be parallel, every cut had to be accurately measured and precisely executed.

Now, even though I had been brought up on the Imperial method of measurement, I had calculated all the shed's measurements in millimetres and neatly labeled each dimension with a three or four digit number. This was not an *instinctive* process but I had used my new metric measuring tape to get an idea of each dimension and then relate these dimensions to the picture of the shed I had in my head. I was quite proud of this measuring tape. Each centimetric division

was neatly subdivided into two sections of five millimetres each. However when I had bought this tape, I was a little annoyed to find that it was a hybrid, with the old Imperial system of feet and inches marked along the opposite edge. I had not been able to find a purely metric one. I had, in fact, spoken to the store person about this deficiency. I distinctly remember my dismay upon being told that his customers still wanted both systems. I had scoffed at the idea of a lot of old fuddy duddies being unable to cope with the new and obviously better, metric system.

So away I went, enthusiasm only surpassed by my ignorance, measuring, cutting, nailing, gluing, pausing only briefly to take a swig from my jerry or to sharpen my pencil. The sawdust started to pile at my feet. Unfortunately, so did numerous badly measured and wasted offcuts.

Suffice to say that by half way through the day, faced with the distinct possibility of having to buy more wood if I continued using the metric side of the tape, I went inside and using a calculator, converted all my *beloved* millimetres to feet and inches. That moment was a turning point. By the end of the week, when the shed was almost finished, I had wasted far less wood in four-and-a-half-days than I had done on that first morning. Why?

Yes, why? I didn't actually know why at the time. It took weeks of thinking about it before I even began to form an opinion. The conclusions I came to were twofold: firstly, there is the matter of short-term memory recall. Metric measurements are in the form of four digit numbers. These four-part 'packages' are quite complex in that they don't have a reserved slot in a simple human mind like mine. I mean, I have pigeon-holes for all of the ten digits by themselves, and even up to every possible combination of two of them. However, there are 10,000 possible four-digit numbers, and for me they are just not quickly graspable. So either they had to be learnt by heart, a process which was slow and unreliable given the way an operation was continuously repeated throughout the day, or they had to be repeated over and over like a mantra while each measuring and cutting operation was performed, an equally unreliable process given the distraction factor. Writing the measurement down on an intermediate piece of paper was partly successful; however, it was also slow, and I often got out of sequence. Fatigue and uncertainty was compounded by an increasing lack of confidence and the need to constantly re-check the number before putting steel to wood.

Secondly, there is the matter of the metric distance scale. The standard metric tape that a prospective genius like myself buys in a hardware shop is not very well designed. As I said earlier, each centimetric division on my tape was subdivided into two half centimetric divisions which were in turn divided into five millimetric divisions. Now that meant that there were four millimetre graduations of equal height between each centimetre graduation (these being the tallest) and each half centimetre graduation (these being the next tallest).



When trying to make an exact measurement with this kind of tape, the eye, which is after all the final arbiter of all human measuring techniques, no matter what the intermediate machine might be, has to make a logarithmic judgement as to where on this scale of up to four equally tall graduations the pencil must fall. Now with time to spare, a comfortable desk,

and just one or two operations to perform, this is not such a difficult task. However, on a hot, gusty day, with a face full of perspiration, dust, hair and glare, it becomes truly eye-boggling. The most difficult measurements are those ending in either a two or a three, or a seven or an eight. These two graduations just blurred into one after an hour or so. Now I fully admit that it was my desire for exactness that led me to such fine measurement, however I feel it is a poor compromise to round everything off to the nearest five millimetres, something that I wasn't prepared to do.

With the Imperial system I didn't have these problems. Firstly, the Imperial numbers were easier to remember. This was because each Imperial measurement is separated into two packets of easily graspable, one digit numbers [feet and inches], plus a packet of 15 possible fractions. There were 15 fractions because I was working to the nearest 1/16th of an inch, this being the thickness of my saw blade and as precise as I cared to go. Although I don't recall now, the only two digit number I could ever have encountered that week would have been eleven inches. What I do recall though was that not only could I consistently remember the current number but I could remember a lot of the previous ones as well, to the point of not having to refer to the plan for subsequent cuts of the same type.



Secondly, the Imperial measurement scale is eminently readable. The inches are wide enough not to be crowded out by their indicating digit and the fraction scale is totally binary, meaning that there is only one subgraduation between higher order graduations, each of these being of correspondingly shorter height. There is no counting of graduations required at all. I believe that my preference for the Imperial system was not merely a case of having gotten used to it as a child, though I may have had an advantage from my spanner days when it came to remembering those 15 fractions. I no longer believe that the continued use of Imperial by many people can be compared to, say, the survival of the QWERTY keyboard or the VHS video cassette where an inferior system prevailed simply due to earlier establishment. Of course it must be remembered that I am only talking about analogue measurement of distance. Metric scales not only have an obvious advantage for most forms of digitally read measurement, but the system as a whole is superior when it comes to calculation, concise notation, range of application, transfer and transposition. Even so, I couldn't help asking myself why the need to introduce metric across the board, especially where, as I have argued, it seems *inferior*.

Indeed, the question becomes a broader one: What is wrong with a hybrid system, especially when there is little need for interaction between the separate parts? We already have the example of the aviation industry sticking with feet for altitude measurement, and nautical miles for navigation. They have done this because not only was the system up and working well with an untold number of expensive altimeters, distance gauges and charts, not to mention many expensively trained brains already ticking away in feet and miles, but also because of superior application suitability. The thousand-foot measurement is near enough to the ideal vertical traffic separation unit (it's a close as you want to go, yet gives thirty or forty easily graspable, two-digit packets of information); and the nautical mile fits precisely into the latitude/longitude

positioning system of which it was born. In the air, naturally, the wrong number can mean more than a few wasted planks of wood, so the superior system is retained.

The Imperial system of measurement is an evolved system, as against the metric system which can be best described as revolutionary. The Imperial units were derived from commonly experienced physical objects, such as the human foot and the length of an English King's arm. Appropriate subdivisions kept unit length and number within easy human range, making them so suitable for the measurement of such common objects. The metric units, however, are reductions of astronomical size quantities, using a constant subdivision factor of ten. The length of the metre, a dimension which underpins the whole metric system, was originally (and quite erroneously, as it turned out) calculated as a fraction of the Earth's diameter. Given their respective origins, it would be a very strange coincidence indeed if metric units were superior to Imperial ones for everyday domestic measurement applications. Perhaps though, the *revolutionary* origins of the metric system have something to do with the *wishes* of those who want it introduced across the board.

Perhaps an analogy with the computer industry might be illuminating. In the '80s there was a trend for big, totally integrated information systems. Many of these either failed or never got going. It is now recognised that a network of smaller, localised sub-systems, each handling their own particular area in their own particular way, is superior. Not only are they easier to implement and maintain, but each sub-system evolves to best meet the needs of its particular service sector.

Also let us not forget the aesthetic argument. Some systems have an appeal which transcends their utility. For instance, take the world's surviving languages. I have heard various estimates, but 6,000 seems to be a popular number. It is forecast that in the next 100 years only half of them will have survived the interactions of the global village. From a utilitarian point of view isn't that great! Better communication all round, less misunderstandings between people and nations, etc. Yet why are there so many language preservation societies, academic institutions and even national governments bemoaning such linguistic attrition and doing their best to preserve their respective native tongues, and why, closer to home, are Australians resisting the Americanisation of our spelling? Why do so many of us think it worth the effort to keep the 'u' in 'neighbour'?

Whenever humans attempt to interpret and manipulate reality, there will always be conflict between our need for specificity and our difficulty in sustaining complexity. I believe that not only is there nothing inherently wrong with hybrid systems, but that it is only hybrid systems which can best optimise this relationship. Hybridisation is an inalienable part of the process of natural selection, as are indeed, man's futile attempts to circumvent it. Hybridisation brings together the best and the worst traits, and time, all 24 hours per 7 days per 52 weeks per year of it, does the rest. The metric system is a wonderful invention, and will probably always have a place in this technological and increasingly computerised world. However, it isn't the universally superior measuring system it's often touted to be, especially when it comes to getting simple things like, for instance, building garden sheds, done efficiently and expeditiously. The capacity of human beings to know and use many systems simultaneously shouldn't be under-rated, for given an opportunity they will always tend to use what best fits their purpose.

Forty Years since £.s.d was cut down to £.p

Vivian Linacre

The BBC and some newspapers have commemorated the 40th anniversary this month of what they always call the “decimalisation of the currency”. But it isn't. The monetary currency of the UK was and remains the pound sterling. All that was decimalised in February 1971 was the *coinage* -- reducing shillings and pence to “new pence”.

It was only the change out of a pound that changed! Nevertheless, what in financial terms looks like small change did in fact represent a major change. For it represented the first departure, in the entire British system of measurement, from the duodecimal principle. Just as the clock measures time in 60 seconds, 60 minutes and 24 hours; just as the compass measures direction within a circle of 360 degrees, and the calendar measures the year in 12 months, so our pound was divided into 240 pence, comprising 20 shillings each of 12 pence. But this fundamental link between our coinage and the other three c's (clock, compass, calendar) could not penetrate the ignorance of politicians or the media-crazy.

Yet, it was so important, because of the ease of calculations, since 240 or 360 is divisible by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 8. So, all children were taught to use fractions and how to multiply or divide in their heads by factorising, which was a huge educational advantage. The collapse in national numeracy inevitably followed abandonment of mental arithmetic. Decimalising meant dumbing down -- relying on pocket calculators for the simplest of sums. For what use is a system based on 10, which cannot even be divided by 3? Everything in nature is based on twos and threes. They can't metricate music!

What our masters also fail to mention, in their celebration of what they call monetary reform, was that it had no democratic legitimacy but was imposed on a grovelling Heath government by the EEC as a pre-condition of a fresh application for membership, following rejection of the two previous applications by Macmillan in 1963 and Wilson in 1967. So it paved the way for compulsory metrication of weights and measures, much to the joy of the supermarket groups, who could not be bothered with shillings and pence ... and prices ending in “99p” sound a lot less than nineteen shillings and nine pence ha'penny!

The Post Office: Decimalisation and hidden price rises

On Decimalisation Day, 15 February 1971, first class postage stamps went from 5d to 3p, and second class from 4d to 2½p. Since one new penny was the equivalent of 2.4 old pennies, the new prices of first and second class stamps were the equivalent of 7.2d and 6d, representing *real* price increases of 44% and 50%, respectively.

Decimal accidents:

Excerpt from *Paediatric and Perinatal Drug Therapy, 2002: “Medication Errors in Children, an Eight Year Review Using Press Reports”*

A review of both local and national press in the UK in relation to medication errors occurring in children has been undertaken ... At present there is no national database in the UK to record medication errors that occur in children or adults. One of the authors (DC) has collected articles concerning medication errors published in the lay press. We have undertaken an examination of these articles to see if there are any important lessons to be learnt from the public reporting of paediatric medication errors and related adverse experiences ... Over the eight years [1993 to 2000] there were a total of 81 medication errors ... There were at least 29 deaths ... The most frequent type of medication error reported in the press involved an incorrect dose (32 incidents) and this was also the type of error most likely to be associated with a fatality (13 deaths) ... There were nine medication errors which involved a decimal point error in the dose of the drug ... There were five fatalities involving these decimal

point errors, one each with morphine, diamorphine, digoxin, tacrolimus and adrenaline ... The lack of data in the National Health Service (NHS) has led us to use the lay press as a proxy database. There are major limitations in the use of the lay press as a reference source for medication errors. The vast majority of medication errors that occur in children will be of no interest to the media and, as a consequence, will remain unreported.

Doctor's letter to the U.S. Anesthesia Patient Safety Foundation Newsletter, Winter 2009-2010 issue

We have recently been made aware of a clinical situation in which an excessive volume of local anesthetic was delivered via an epidural infusion pump. The programmed volume was inadvertently set incorrectly (off by a factor of 10 because of a misplaced decimal point). This resulted in permanent paralysis of an otherwise healthy individual ... Alan David Kaye, MD, PhD, Department of Anesthesiology, LSU School of Medicine, New Orleans.

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