

Trying to change the way we think

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The metric system – love it or loathe it, this is the strange story of how it was imposed on Britain over several decades, by stealth, deception and downright lies.

In recent days, as television news has brought us non-stop reporting on the terrible floods, we have yet again seen evidence of one of the odder things to have happened to Britain in our lifetime. An official of the Environment Agency tells us that some river has burst its banks because it has risen by '5.2 metres', only for a shocked local to tell us that it is '17 feet higher than normal'.

Some hapless BBC reporter interviewing a flood victim outside his house solemnly informs us that the water is '300 millimetres deep'. But only when the homeowner tells us 'it's a foot deep in our living room' do most of us have an idea of what they are talking about.

What this illustrates us how we now have side by side two quite different systems of weights and measures in this country – one invariably used by government officials and the BBC, the other still used by millions of people because, for most everyday purposes, it seems to be much more sensible and easily comprehensible.

And part of the reason why so many of us now live in two different worlds like this, on something which touches almost

every aspect of our lives, lies in a strange saga which has never been properly told.

In the year just ending, anniversaries of glorious events in our island story have come thick and fast – Magna Carta 1215, Agincourt 1415, Waterloo 1815, victory in the Second World War 1945.

But 2015 has also marked two anniversaries from a much less glorious story – one I have been following for 50 years as one of the murkiest episodes in the history of our supposed parliamentary democracy.

This is the story of how politicians worked to replace our old system of weights and measures with the ‘much more sensible’ and ‘rational’ metric system.

I am not here concerned with the pros and cons of the two systems – although I shall touch on that later – but with the peculiarly dishonest tactics our politicians devised to bring about such a huge change in our British way of life without ever needing to consult our wishes. Precisely because the politicians knew that such a far-reaching move would be highly controversial, they wanted to introduce it without ever allowing it to be debated or voted on by Parliament.

They sought instead to impose it on us, at every stage, by stealth, deception and downright lies. The story began 50 years ago when, in 1965, a Labour government used a Written Answer buried at the back of Hansard to announce its intention to replace the weights and measures used in Britain since the time of the Roman empire (it was after this, not the British empire, that it was known as the ‘imperial system’).

The first lie was a pretence that the switch to metric was to be made in response to the wishes of British ‘industry’. When years later I managed to unearth the relevant documents, it turned out that ‘industry’ had said nothing of the kind. Under

pressure from a small group of shadowy bureaucrats, the chief trade body representing businesses had certainly expressed interest in the possibility of such a change, since it would affect all its members. But it merely said that many were 'concerned' by its implications.

In 1968 came the second lie when, as the then technology minister Tony Benn gabbled to MPs a list of his plans for the future, he slipped in his wish to see Britain 'fully metric' by 1975.

But this change, he insisted, would be entirely voluntary. 'Compulsion', he twice promised, 'is not part of the process' (hence no need for parliamentary debate). Within months this was given the lie when his government issued a statutory diktat – the first of many – making it a criminal offence to sell drugs except in metric.

In 1969 it set up a 'Metrication Board' to 'co-ordinate the process' and ruled that, after 1975, It would become illegal for anything but the metric system to be taught in schools. During the 1970 election campaign, when I first revealed all this in a magazine article, one reader was so incensed that she badgered her would-be Tory MP into promising that Parliament would, for the first time, debate the subject.

It was only a short debate (which I attended). But when other Tory backbenchers heard of what was going on, they were furious that such an immense change to British life was being smuggled in by stealth,

In 1972, when Edward Heath was taking us into the European Common Market, he learned that Brussels planned a directive to ensure that all its members must use the metric system. He pleaded that this be kept under wraps until Britain was safely in.

But in 1973, after we had entered, Heath issued a Metrication White Paper, based on the wholly fictitious claim that Britain

was only adopting the metric system in response to 'two polls' of industry. No such polls had ever taken place.

By 1978, under Margaret Thatcher, the Tories were pledged to have no more of it. No sooner was she elected in 1979 than she scrapped the Metrication Board. In 1980 Brussels hit back by at last issuing its long-planned directive requiring all members of the 'European Community' to use the metric system (all except Britain and Ireland already did).

In 1985 the Thatcher government responded with a new Weights and Measures Act, confirming that the 'imperial' system would continue to be legal. In 1989, Brussels issued a new directive designed to whip Britain into line – although, to soften the pill, this still allowed us to continue for a time using miles on road signs and pints (but only for beer, cider and milk).

It was this directive which 20 years ago in 1995 – our second anniversary – led to the Major government issuing a swathe of new statutory instruments making it a criminal offence to sell goods of any kind, including fruit and veg, except in metric.

Indeed the government went much further than the directive envisaged, by requiring the metrication of every aspect of British life, from evidence given in courtrooms to speed limits on our canals, along with thousands of local bylaws. When some of us pointed out that this all resulted from Brussels directives, the minister who signed most of these diktats into British law, Michael Heseltine, insisted that they had 'nothing to do with Europe'. This had been British policy, he said, 'since the Sixties'. But the very documents he signed were being put into law under the 1972 European Communities Act – again without Parliament being given the chance to discuss them.

When I was interviewed by a young BBC presenter at this time, he scornfully suggested that no one under the age of 40 had any idea what feet and inches were. When I asked him how tall

he was, he replied 'five feet, 10 inches'. That bit of the interview hit the cutting room floor.

Nothing angered many British people more than when, in 2000, these laws made it illegal for market traders to sell fruit and veg by the old weights which most of their customers preferred – and this came to a head when a Sunderland stallholder Steve Thoburn was charged with the criminal offence of selling a 'pound of bananas'.

He and four other 'Metric Martyrs' took their case to the Court of Appeal, arguing that since, under the ancient rule that no Act of Parliament can be overruled by one passed previously, the 1985 Weights and Measures Act could not be negated by an edict issued under the European Communities Act of 1972.

To get round this argument, Lord Justice Laws craftily devised a wholly new legal principle. He ruled that the European Communities Act was a 'constitutional statute', so important that it could not be overturned by anything which came after it. Many larger businesses, such as those making tinned foods, welcomed the confusion created by the new laws, as they reduced the contents of their old '1lb' tins (454 grams) to 400 grams, hoping customers charged the same price would not notice.

Many other manufacturers, such as those making sweets and chocolate, played the same trick – even though the only reason why weights and measure legislation was backed by the criminal law was that this was to prevent customers being sold 'short measure'.

At least it still remained legal for shopkeepers forced to sell in metric to print the 'imperial' equivalent next to it. But in 2002 Brussels issued a new directive designed to make even this illegal, and again the UK dutifully complied. It would become a crime for retailers to make any mention of the

old weights and measures at all.

The new laws continued to throw up ever more anomalies until, in 2007, many giant US corporations, such as IBM and Hewlett-Packard, were warned by a clever pressure group, the British Weights and Measures Association, that this new EU law would make it illegal for them to export anything to the EU unless its packaging, sales literature and much else was given only in metric. It would even become illegal for them to refer to a '42-inch' television screen.

The US firms protested so loudly – estimating that it could cost them billions of dollars – that Brussels at last backed down. Not only did it scrap its demand relating to US goods, it also withdrew its law banning any mention of non-metric measures within the EU itself.

So embarrassed was Brussels by the anger its metrication laws had aroused in Britain that its trade commissioner issued a remarkable statement. He wanted the British to know that 'imperial measures', such as the mile and the pint, were 'the very essence of the Britishness that Europeans know and love'. The British could continue using imperial equivalents alongside metric weights and measures as long as they wished.

On this last, carefully phrased fudge, 40 years of deceit and chicanery more or less came to an end. Never again, it seemed, would a greengrocer be charged with a criminal offence for shouting 'lovely toms, a pound a pound' to customers who hadn't a clue what was meant by 'half a kilo'.

But one legacy of this bid to impose metrication on the British people without ever consulting their wishes is that we are left with a strange hybrid system which is sometimes one thing and sometimes another. Fervent supporters of metric scornfully insist that it is so much more 'rational' than that ridiculously antiquated system rightly consigned to the dustbin of history.

They try to overlook that the most modern and successful economy in the world, the USA, which landed a man on the moon in feet and inches, still somehow manages to survive with the imperial system.

And how many realise that the official EU definition of a metre is that it is 'the length equal to 1,650,763 wavelengths in vacuum of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the levels 2p(10) and 5d(5) of the krypton atom' You can't get more 'rational' than that.

In truth the only way metric is more user-friendly than imperial is simply that it divides and multiplies by 10, But one thing I have learned from 50 years of observing all this is how, for everyday practical purposes, such as cooking or carpentry or measuring out a carpet, imperial wins every time.

We see this, as I said at the start, whenever reporters from the rigorously-metricated BBC come up against members of the public, as when they interview flood victims. The reporter may dutifully tell us that the floodwater in someone's house has reached a depth of '300 millimetres'. But only when the victim tells us 'it's a foot deep' do we really have a picture of what is meant – just as when we are told that some new-born royal baby weighs '6 pounds, 8 ounces', rather than '2.72 kilograms' or even '2720 grams'.

Despite half a century of trying to change the way we think, I suspect that, for practical purposes, those dear old pounds, feet and inches will be with us for a long time yet.

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