



UK metric association

Campaigning for a **single** *rational* system of measurement

Morelaggan House
Arrochar
Dunbartonshire
G83 7AH

Tel/fax: 01301 702317
Mobile: 07745 89 49 26
e-mail: robin.paice@ufcnet.net

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BBC Charter Review Consultation
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
London
SW1Y 5DH

Dear Sirs

BBC Charter Review Consultation

I am writing on behalf of the UK Metric association in response to the invitation, in the Green Paper of March 2005, to give our views on the review of the BBC's Royal Charter.

UKMA

The UK Metric Association (UKMA) is an independent, non-party political, single issue organisation which advocates the full adoption of the international metric system ("Système International" - SI) for all official, trade, legal, contractual and other purposes in the United Kingdom as soon as practicable. UKMA is financed entirely by membership subscriptions and personal donations.

Summary

The central thrust of our representations is that the BBC Charter should include an objective of supporting and promoting the use of the UK's official system of weights and measures as the primary or only units of measurement to be used in BBC broadcasts and publications. We explain and justify this contention below.



Reasoned justification

UKMA agrees with the statements at paragraph 1.11 of the Green Paper that "the new Charter should explain more clearly how we expect that mission ['inform, educate, entertain'] to be achieved. It should set out a coherent set of public purposes." The list of such core purposes set out at paragraph 1.17 is a useful starting point, but we feel that it requires to be supplemented in one important respect. This is the issue of units of measurement.

Government policy for 40 years has been to promote the use of the metric system (SI) for an increasing range of purposes. Indeed, as a result of the Units of Measurement Regulations 1986 (SI 1986, No. 1082) as amended, the metric system is now the primary system of units of measurement permitted to be used for most official and legal purposes in the UK (subject to certain derogations contained in Directive 89/617/EEC (as amended) regarding the temporary retention of the pint for beer and milk and imperial units for road signage). Thus, the metric system has been taught in schools for 30 years, all building plans since 1970 have been metric, and prices of goods in shops must be displayed per kg, metre or litre.

The reasons for the Government's policy of promoting the metric system as the primary (and eventually the only) system of weights and measures have been set out repeatedly over many years in official reports and White Papers such as those listed in Appendix D. We will not rehearse these reasons here except to re-iterate that a single system of measurement units is essential to clear communication, consumer protection, children's education, health and safety, and the British export trade. The continued and indefinite retention of two incompatible systems of measurement is contrary to the national interest.

However, the objective of persuading the general public to convert or adapt to the primary or exclusive use of the metric system has been largely frustrated by the continuing use by the media of obsolete units of measurement, including even some which are no longer legal for any trade or official purpose (e.g. gallons). The BBC in particular, despite its mission to inform and educate, has signally failed to give a lead in this respect, and indeed in correspondence has attempted to justify its failure as though it were a deliberate policy - or, rather, a deliberate decision not to have a policy. By attempting to appear neutral as between metric and imperial units the BBC is helping to perpetuate the muddle which we have described elsewhere in our publication, "A very British mess", of which we attach a copy.

These failings on the part of the BBC are illustrated in the Appendices which we have attached to this letter - including an extract from the BBC's Style Guide for journalists and a letter from the Director General.



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This abdication of its responsibility by the BBC may be contrasted with the positive and responsible approach in the 1970s by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), which adopted a policy of giving metric values only and thus greatly reinforced the programme of metric conversion - rather than undermining it, as the BBC continues to do. It is believed that the ABC thereby made a major contribution to the success of the Australian metrication programme.

We are conscious that a policy on measurement units might be considered by some to be a level of detail into which the new Charter should not go - but we disagree. The attached correspondence demonstrates that there is an entrenched view within the BBC that their policy of providing "something for everyone" (Green Paper, paragraph 8.31 and Annex A) means that broadcasters are expected to use the measurement units with which they believe (rightly or wrongly) their viewers and listeners are already most familiar. They thus acknowledge no responsibility to assist in the education of viewers and listeners to adapt to metric units. We therefore believe that, without a specific requirement to promote the general use of the metric system, the management of the BBC will continue to ignore the national interest in standardising on a single system of weights and measures which everybody understands and uses. We believe that this entrenched attitude within the BBC can only be overcome by imposing a specific obligation within the Charter.

Finally, I would comment that, although the new Charter will not come into effect until 1 January 2007, there is no reason why the BBC should not be asked to improve its performance immediately. We would suggest that you should request the BBC to act as though the obligation to support and promote the UK's official system of weights and measures were already in force.

Yours faithfully

Robin Paice
Chairman



Appendix A: Extract from the BBC's and other Style Guides

The extract below demonstrates how the BBC's style guide contains no policy or advice for its journalists on the use of measurement units. The section on "Numbers and measures" gives useful and unexceptionable advice on how to handle numbers and percentages. Yet despite the heading of the section ("numbers and measures"), it contains no advice whatsoever on the use of measurement units.

This may be contrasted with the style guides of the Times and the Economist newspapers, both of which give some sensible advice to their journalists.

BBC version

Here is the BBC version:

Numbers & measures

Lucidity is the soul of style - Hilaire Belloc

Television has it comparatively easy with unemployment figures, mortgage rate trends, election results, and any stories involving statistics. A good graphic can get across the information clearly and intelligently. Newspaper readers can study tables and charts, re-read articles and take their time about it. Radio's strengths are immediacy and story-telling. It is a poor medium for dealing with numbers.

The brain struggles to take in millions and thousands. They are difficult to visualise. Even smaller numbers are a problem if there are too many of them:

Unions representing the 1,497 clerical and maintenance workers at Oxbridge University have rejected a plan to freeze wages. University officials wanted the unions to delay their agreed three-point-two-five per cent pay rise to help the college deal with an estimated deficit of two-point-seven-three million pounds. Although there have been warnings of job cuts if the wage freeze is not accepted, staff voted against the proposal by 1,049 to 109, with 339 failing to vote.

A story with too many figures numbs the listener.



Simplify wherever you can, round up or down, and try to tell the story without getting bogged down in numbers:

Unions representing fifteen hundred clerical and maintenance workers at Oxbridge University have rejected a plan to freeze wages. University officials wanted the unions to delay an agreed pay rise to help the college deal with an estimated deficit of more than two and a half million pounds. Although there have been warnings of job cuts if the wage freeze is not accepted, staff voted overwhelmingly against the proposal.

If you are dealing with a numbers story on radio, such as the latest employment figures, it is a good idea to write an opening sentence without any detail. Select a trend or a reaction to the figures as a way of signalling to the listener that big numbers are coming up. If the listener is prepared, there's a better chance of achieving comprehension rather than confusion. There is no obvious reason for it, but among journalists the innumerate are numerous. Figures can cause problems. Percentages are frequently misused and misunderstood:

The Chancellor has shocked industry by raising corporation tax by 10 per cent, from 20 per cent to 30 per cent.

That is not an increase of 10 per cent. It is an increase of 50 per cent, or a half if you prefer. It is, though, an increase of ten percentage points, which is not the same thing at all.

- Try not to add percentages to each other. It is much better to deal in real values.
- Make sure you translate terms such as doubling, tripling and quadrupling properly. A doubling is an increase of 100 per cent. If something triples in value, it goes up by 200 per cent (not 300), and if your house quadruples in value, that's an increase of 300 per cent (not 400).
- *Three times greater than* is the same as *four times as great as*.
- Comparisons only make easy sense if they are expressed in the same format. When we wrote in 2003 that teachers were angry at being offered a pay rise of 2.9 per cent when the Lord Chancellor was getting an increase of £22,700, we were not making it easy. The comparison works only if we give the Lord



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Chancellor's increase as 12.6 per cent as well as the real money figure.

- Do not mix decimals, fractions and percentages in one story. Listeners and viewers by and large do not listen to your output with a handy calculator.

Times version

By contrast, the Times advice is as follows:

"**metric** *The Times* should keep abreast of the trend in the UK to move gradually towards all-metric use, but given the wide age range of our readers, some continuing use of imperial measurements is still necessary. The main aim is to avoid confusing the reader, so try not to mix the two systems in a single article. In general, we should **prefer the metric, with imperial conversions in brackets at first mention**. This should now apply particularly to **temperatures**, eg, the temperature on the South Coast hit the low 30s [no longer nineties]; but where specific, eg, 16C (61F). Similarly, for **areas** prefer hectares and square metres to acres and square yards, but do not use square kilometres in the UK and the US where distances are measured in miles."

Economist version

And the Economist recommends the following:

"In most non-American contexts, prefer **hectares** to **acres**, **kilometres** (or **km**) to **miles**, **metres** to **yards**, **litres** to **gallons**, **kilos** to **lb**, **tonnes** to **tons**, **Celsius** to **Fahrenheit**, etc. In the United States section, you may use the more familiar measurements (though remember that American pints, quarts, gallons, etc, are smaller than imperial ones). Regardless of which you choose, you should give an equivalent, on first use, in the other units: **It was hoped that after improvements to the engine the car would give 20km to the litre (47 miles per American gallon), compared with its present average of 15km per litre.**

Remember that in few countries do you now buy petrol in imperial gallons. In America it is sold in American gallons; in most other places it is sold in litres. "

Although these last two style guides are themselves open to criticism (e.g. in the Economist's example, the accepted SI measure of petrol consumption should be 5 litres per 100 km; and the proper symbol "kg" should be preferred to "kilos"), they show awareness of the problem and give some useful guidance rather than ignoring it.

Thus the BBC is not only failing its "public service" and educational role: it is actually falling behind the best journalistic standards of its printed rivals.



Appendix B: Correspondence from the Director General of the BBC

We give below the full text of a letter dated 20 July 2004 signed by the Director General of the BBC, Mr Mark Thompson, in reply to a request from the Chairman of UKMA to support the aim of completing the metric changeover. At the end of the letter, we analyse and comment on Mr Thompson's remarks.

Here is the letter:

Letter from Mr Mark Thompson, Director-General of the BBC:

“Dear Mr Paice

Thank you for your letter of 8 July, inviting the BBC to support your organisation’s campaign for complete metrication.

I must tell you that the BBC has no view on metric measurement and cannot give support of the kind you seek – we are a communicator, not a campaigning organisation. Our programme makers are therefore likely to use both metric and imperial measures in their efforts to be as clear and universal as possible when giving data. Choice of the appropriate units of measurement depends on the nature of the programme, relevant custom and practice and the target audience. Programme-makers also bear in mind the changes introduced in the UK since metrication began in 1971 and current school teaching which is conducted predominantly in metric units.

Taking weather forecasting as an example, you will be aware that for over 20 years the Celsius scale has been the international standard for temperature measurement. However, when extremes of temperature are forecast, weather presenters will invariably give a Fahrenheit comparison for absolute clarity: during last summer’s peaks of temperature, they reported “...*38 degrees Celsius – that’s 100 degrees Fahrenheit*”. Throughout the world, meteorologists measure rainfall in millimetres, which is why forecasters use these units. Again, though, an extreme will be highlighted by converting into imperial units – for example “...*25 millimetres of rain – that’s an inch of rainfall*”. But because the UK measurement of distance and speed is in miles, wind speed is generally given in miles per hour.

In drama programmes, for example *EastEnders*, units of measurement relevant to the storyline are likely to be used – because producers are aware that audiences will be familiar with both metric and imperial measures. However, as you would expect, science and technology programmes and those following the school curriculum are most likely to use metric units of measurement.



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I hope you understand why the BBC cannot play an active role in your campaigning activities. That said, it is open to you to approach any BBC programme for coverage of any initiative you may arrange.

Yours sincerely

(signed)

Mark Thompson”

Comments and analysis

- Mr Thompson's statement that "the BBC has no view on metric measurement" implies that the BBC is neutral as between imperial and metric measures and regards each as equally valid. It is thereby helping to perpetuate the continuing use of both measures - and hence prolonging the current confusion. We believe that this is contrary to the public interest, which requires standardising one single system.
- While we understand that the BBC as an organisation wishes, quite properly, to be seen as politically independent, we do not think that to support and promote the UK's official system of weights and measures should be perceived as "campaigning". Metric usage should be seen as the mainstream norm.
- We do not accept Mr Thompson's attempt to justify the chaotic and indiscriminate way in which broadcasters mix and muddle metric and imperial units in the same programme - often even in the same sentence. If necessary, we can supply you with extensive examples of this muddle. Even in children's programmes, although children are taught exclusively in metric units, adult presenters occasionally lapse into the obsolete imperial measures with which they themselves may be familiar. This disproves the claim that programme makers carefully target their audiences and use the units with which their audience will be familiar. Rather, it demonstrates a lack of discipline on the part of the presenters, which in turn emanates from the failure of the BBC to have a policy.
- We are particularly concerned and astonished by Mr Thompson's attempt to justify the continuing use of the obsolete Fahrenheit temperature scale in weather reports and forecasts. It beggars belief that an intelligent person could seriously argue that to use Fahrenheit when temperatures are extreme (but Celsius when temperatures are normal) results in "absolute clarity". What this really shows is that the BBC is attempting to compete with tabloid newspapers for sensational headlines. Furthermore, we can see no legitimate purpose in giving the occasional token Fahrenheit temperature in the midst of a range of Celsius values, and we suspect that this is simply an attempt to placate persons who feign an inability to understand Celsius.



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- Above all, Mr Thompson's letter demonstrates a lamentable failure to support the public service and educational role of the BBC which is contained in its mission statement "inform, educate, entertain". Instead, the BBC is helping to undermine one of the basic requirements of a healthy, modern society - namely, a single system of weights and measures which everybody understands and uses for all purposes.



Appendix C: BBC Online's statement of policy

The quotation below is taken from a recent "Newswatch" discussion on the BBC Online website. We have added our comments at the end.

BBC POLICY

"There is no BBC policy enforcing absolute usage of either the metric or the imperial system.

"We aim to reflect common usage in this country today and to aid understanding for different audiences.

"The metric system is becoming increasingly widespread, and has been taught in schools for many years now, but many people, for example, usually refer to their own height in feet and inches, or their own weight in stone.

"Programme makers, producers and presenters are allowed to use their own judgement to use what different audiences will find easiest to understand."

The BBC weighs up the audience for each programme before deciding

As in the Director General's letter (Appendix B), this "policy statement" illustrates that the BBC has no policy - other than allowing programme makers to do what they think best.

We believe that the stated aim of "reflecting common usage" is misconceived - for various reasons:

- It ignores the fact that the media do not simply reflect common usage. They have major influence on and actually create common usage. The BBC in particular is enormously influential.
- Rather than reflecting the current muddle of incompatible units, a responsible broadcaster should try to set a good example by consistent use of the official system of weights and measures.
- It denies the BBC's public service and educational roles.

In any case, we do not believe that the BBC actually follows or attempts to enforce even the "policy" which it claims. The measurement units used in programmes manifestly are not tailored to particular audiences. Rather they reflect the undisciplined custom and practice of the presenters and disregard the needs of their audiences - let alone the national interest in having a single, consistent set of weights and measures.



Appendix D: Official reports and White Papers advocating the primary or exclusive use of the metric system in the UK

Select Committee appointed to consider the practicality of adopting a simple and uniform system of weights and measures (1862) *Report* Parliamentary Paper

Select Committee appointed to enquire into whether any and what changes in the present system of weights and measures should be adopted (1895) *Report* Parliamentary Paper

Committee on Weights and Measures Legislation (Hodgson Committee) (1951) *Report* Cmd 8219 HMSO

Committee on Consumer Protection (1962) *Final Report* Board of Trade

Standing Joint Committee on Metrication (1968) *Change to the metric system in the United Kingdom* HMSO

Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (1972) *Metrication* Cmnd 4880 HMSO

Department of Prices and Consumer Protection (1977) *Metrication* HMSO

Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (1995) *Guidance Note on the use of Metric Units of Measurement by the Public Sector* DTI

Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (1999) *The adoption of the International System of Units as the primary system of measurement in the United Kingdom* DTI