

INSIDE STORY INSIDE

Metrication – let's get on with it

We have been going metric – inch by painful millimetre – over the last 100 years or so. Things hotted up slightly when the government of the day, in 1965, announced its support for the adoption of the metric system, and when the 1972 White Paper on metrication was published. But every now and then, when the next step in the changeover is proposed, some people start asking questions like: shouldn't we forget the whole thing?

Whatever the intrinsic merits and comfortable familiarity of feet, yards, ounces, gallons, and other Imperial units, the inescapable facts are that:

- we are a trading nation, depending for our livelihood on trade with other countries
- the only countries in the world which aren't already metric (or going metric) are Brunei, Burma, Liberia, the Yemen Arab Republic, and

the People's Democratic Republic of the Yemen.

So, at *Which?*, our efforts have been directed less at commanding the metric tide to go back, more at ensuring that metrication happens in a way that causes as little confusion as possible.

It must be a bad thing, in our view, if for a long period we have to try to compare brisket at 85p a pound and at 182p a kg, or butter at 25p a $\frac{1}{2}$ lb and margarine at 17p for 250g. So it was more than five years ago when we first told the government that we wanted the change to be as swift and orderly as possible. Traders told us that this would not happen if the change was to be voluntary. Events have proved them and us right. Parts of the do-it-yourself trade are hopelessly confused, the carpet trade has reverted to Imperial measurements

after starting to go metric, even fabrics are still sold by the metre *and* by the yard. In Australia, they have come to the conclusion that final cut-off dates for sale of goods in Imperial quantities must be set.

Two years ago, we decided to get the views of members. We asked a random sample of members when they thought the process of changing over to metric would be completed. We analysed 800 replies: more than half said 'between 1976 and 1980'; of these, half thought this was 'about right',

a quarter 'too late'. Of those who thought the conversion would spill over into the eighties, nearly half believed that this would be too late. Three-quarters did not think it would be good to have the two systems running side by side.

This was the background to our decision to tell the government publicly, in April, that we supported the proposal to give statutory backing to an agreed timetable for phasing out the Imperial system – including its use in the sale of fresh foods – by the end of 1981.

Car parking: a monopoly?

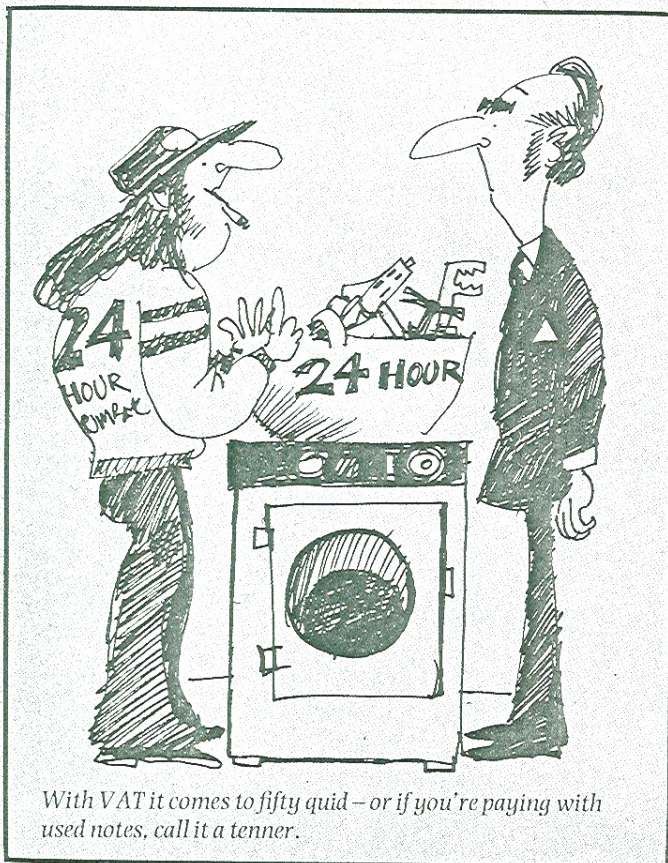
If you use public car parks often, the chances are that you will have parked in one operated by *National Car Parks Ltd* (NCP). Car parking and NCP is the subject of our latest investigation by Consumers' Association's Public Affairs Office.

NCP is by far the largest firm in the car parking business – running around 800 car parks in this country, as well as some abroad. We have looked at car parks in 8 towns and cities and in 2 London areas to see how strong NCP's influence really is. We have also looked at how NCP has established its strong position; it not only runs many of its own car parks but also manages many owned by public bodies – local authorities and British Rail, for example.

Under the Fair Trading Act 1973, the Monopolies and Mergers Commission is able to investigate any industry where the supply of goods or

services seems to be predominantly in the hands of one firm. A 'monopoly situation' is said to exist where one firm supplies 25 per cent or more of the market, either nationally or in a particular part of the country.

Our research has shown that in many areas NCP appears to be in such a 'monopoly situation'. There is, however, some doubt as to whether car park operators are, in the terms of the Act, offering a service at all – or whether they're merely renting out space for motorists to park their cars in. If the latter is true, the Monopolies and Mergers Commission couldn't look at the case. We hope that the Commission *would* consider the operation of a car park a service – and therefore feel able to investigate it.



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