

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. In a statement on speed limit policy in the House on 5th March 1969, Mr Richard Marsh announced that speed limits would be metricated in 1973. This was in the context of the former administration's intention to metricate the economy by 1975. Following this announcement, consultation and planning took place with local authorities. The intention was that new speed limit signs erected before 1973 should be metric, covered with plates or stickers showing imperial values, but as far as the Department is aware none have yet gone up. The metrication of other road signs was only discussed within the Department and a change to metric measurements would not necessarily involve any alterations to vehicles. (The majority of speedometers now being fitted to new vehicles give readings in km/h as well as mph).

2. There has been some opposition to metrication in the present session from Conservative members. They are particularly concerned that the units of measurement which are in common use by the general public ("the pint in the pub and the mile on the road") should not be compulsorily metricated. This point of view was put strongly in the adjournment debate on 27th October and later when laying Orders, Mr Ridley (Under Secretary of State Department of Trade and Industry) said that the Government would produce a White Paper before proceeding to any legislation requiring metrication. The present administration will continue to encourage voluntary moves towards metrication but are reluctant to introduce any legislation which would require compulsion. Speed limits could not be metricated voluntarily.

Confidential 3. [Before the adjournment debate on 27th October the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry had suggested that the intention to metricate speed limits in 1973 should be abandoned. After the debate the Chief Whip minuted the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the same lines. Following this the Minister for Transport Industries discussed the point with the Secretary of State for the Environment and they decided that it would be undesirable to stick on this question. The Secretary of State then minuted the Chief Whip who welcomed the decision. Once 1973 is abandoned local authorities should be told that the question will not be revived for several years.]

4. Metric measurements are already used in a good number of the Departments regulations. Speed limit signs for example are prescribed in metric sizes. This is the kind of voluntary move towards metrication which may be said to fall within the aim of the present Administration's policy.

5. The cost of metricating speed limit signs would have been of the order of 1½ to £2m. This was announced by the previous administration. No estimate was made of the cost of metricating other road signs. The cost of converting speedometers on existing vehicles compulsorily to show km/h could have been high but the Department thought that this would probably have been unnecessary anyway.

6. A changeover to metric units in the next few years would be particularly unpopular given that many local authorities were anxious to introduce metric distances as part of the new Worboys signs but were prevented from doing so by the Department. With the expectation of metricating speed limits in 1973, local authorities' interest was revived but with the abandonment of that date also, it has flagged again and will be very difficult to re-generate, still less to put through on a tight timetable. There is also likely to be a hostile public reaction to the cost and inconvenience of the change on the grounds that it would involve considerable expenditure merely to alter the system without obvious benefits. Metric traffic signs will not help exports, nor do they relate to a tangible commodity where new measurements would rapidly become familiar by individual experience. It can be argued that conversion of directional and other signs should be delayed in order to allow the public to get more experience of the metric system first, since the signs depend on rapid recognition, and until there has been more opportunity for the introduction of dual calibration instruments on road vehicles. In abandoning the date of 1973 for speed limits, Minister (TI) had these factors very much in mind. It is for this reason that the White Paper on metrication (February 1972) said the present system was 'unlikely to be changed for a long time to come'.

7. A commitment to introduce metric distances on new signs before 1979 would not be an embarrassment. A programme of conversion beginning in the late 1970s and running for 7-10 years would enable a reasonable life to be obtained from the present generation of new signs, provide room for careful planning of the conversion with minimum difficulty with the local authorities and give time to prepare public opinion for the change. On these grounds 'special consideration' should be sought for the continuation of miles and if possible other measurements on old signs after 1979 at least until 1983.

B. Speed Limits

8. Legislation will be necessary to convert all speed limits expressed in Imperial terms in legislation to the nearest equivalent metric levels and to enable signs with the new numerals to be prescribed. After this operation the normal powers to vary limits will continue to be used as at present.

9. Many of the arguments advanced for the retention of Imperial Units after 1979 for direction signs also apply to speed limits and speed limit signs. There are estimated to be about 200,000 of these signs, all of which would have to be replaced, at a cost that was estimated in 1970 to lie between £1½-£2 million. The major part of this cost will again fall on local authorities.

10. Unlike direction signs, speed limit signs could not be altered gradually, but would all have to be converted together, preferably after the majority of the other traffic signs had been metricated. This would give drivers a period of education in metric measures on other road signs before they were faced with legally restricting ones.

Yours sincerely

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