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Adoption of the Metric System

The time has come to face squarely the question of whether the U.S. will switch from the yardstick to the meter stick and from the pound and quart to the kilogram and liter. In 1866 Congress made the metric system legal in the U.S. It is generally used in scientific work and has become standard practice in some branches of industry; its advantages over the inch/pound system are widely recognized. Pressure for general adoption is increased by the fact that India, China, Japan, the U.S.S.R., and other countries have converted or are in the process of converting, and now the United Kingdom has decided to make the same move.

The British action follows on a series of studies of the costs and advantages of conversion, of which one of the major ones was a joint report by the British Association for the Advancement of Science and the Association of British Chambers of Commerce. More recently, recommendations of the British Standards Institution (following consultations with industry), the Federation of British Industries, and the Minister of Technology led the British Government, on 25 May, to announce plans for conversion to the metric system over the next 10 years. Most press and industry reactions have been favorable. Some have been enthusiastic and some reluctant, but the prevailing attitude seems to be that a changeover is both desirable and inevitable, and that the sooner the job gets started the lower will be the cost and the better it will be for all concerned.

The advantages and disadvantages of a change to metric units are essentially the same in the U.S. as in the U.K. That it is easier to learn and use metric units is generally accepted. Foreign trade would be facilitated. Some branches of industry have already gone over to metric standards. World-wide agreement is obviously desirable.

On the other hand, those who prefer to continue with inch/pound units can muster some strong arguments for their position. The cost of conversion would be substantial. Machines, replacement parts, and machine tools cannot suddenly be scrapped and replaced with new ones built to a different set of measures. Conversion costs would fall more heavily on some branches of industry than on others. Complete conversion is probably unattainable; land titles in feet or acres might remain unchanged for generations, and some generally used international units are based on the inch. Although foreign trade would probably be helped, foreign purchases are more dependent upon quality and cost than upon the units in which goods are measured.

A precipitate change would lead to much confusion and probably to unnecessary cost. A decision not to change would leave us, in the words of the London *Times*, as "odd man out among the [world's] major producers." The immediate step to take is a detailed analysis and evaluation by the Department of Commerce of the costs of conversion, the methods that might be used by government in a free-market economy, the incentives that might be necessary to aid some branches of industry, the alternative routes that could be followed in accomplishing the change, and the consequences of not changing. Hearings will soon be held on bills, authorizing such a study, that have been introduced by Senator Claiborne Pell and Congressman George Miller. These bills have been endorsed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Department of Commerce. They should be passed so that the Department of Commerce can get started.—DAEL WOLFLE