

Metric Conversion

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Guilbault): The point raised by the Hon. Member for Vegreville is well taken.

Mr. Berger: Mr. Speaker, if I misrepresented the presence of the Hon. Member in the House I did not presume to suggest that he was not here. If I could refer to the times when Hon. Members opposite argue that some of our Ministers are not in the House, this might just even things up a little bit.

It was precisely for safety considerations that the chemical and chemical products industry sector insisted that labels should have one system of units and recommended against the use of dual units. It was clear that the farming community would have to be sufficiently familiar with metric units to be able to apply agricultural chemicals and pesticides effectively and safely. Such concerns were identified to both the federal and provincial Departments of Agriculture, which agreed to share the responsibility of ensuring that the user, the Canadian farmer, would be sufficiently conversant with metric units. I understand that many courses were conducted by provincial Departments of Agriculture in order to familiarize agricultural producers with the changes.

On the first item the Hon. Member said that what recommends his motion is that the labelling is to be voluntary, and then he argued that his suggestion is realistic. I have just proven that on grounds of safety it is not realistic at all.

I should like to deal with the other aspect of the matter, whether we can consider this motion to be realistic by some economic standard. That is the consideration that I find the most compelling. What are we concerned about day in and day out in this House if not with exporting products and creating jobs for the many thousands of Canadians who unfortunately cannot work because of some of the impediments in the economy?

I do not understand how the Hon. Member for Vegreville can come into the House and ignore the overwhelming economic considerations. I do not think he could have considered all of the issues. I do not think he has attended any information meetings on the subject before having made the arguments he presented today. I have had limited experience in this area, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Mazankowski: You are certainly showing it now.

Mr. Berger: I have had enough, however, to understand the importance of the economic arguments.

Last April I attended a conference in Washington of the American National Metric Council. I should like to relate to the House some things that I learned at the conference. A letter was addressed to the conference by the President of the United States, who is not exactly known as a fanatic about things un-American. He wrote as follows:

In the past year, the issue of metric transition has become increasingly important in the area of international trade and productivity. The National Productivity Advisory Committee has recommended that the Federal Government continue to support conversion to metric measurement to enhance U.S. international competitiveness and hence productivity in several industries.

I do not think anything could be clearer. The President of the United States is talking about international competitiveness and about productivity. These things are certainly of concern to the United States because, as we are all aware, it has a tremendous trade deficit. Perhaps we are one step ahead of the Americans in this area. I think it is incorrect to say, as the official Opposition always does, that we have to follow the Americans. When it comes to trade and international trade I do not think that we have any lessons to learn from them.

[*Translation*]

At that congress, the Under Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce stated that "the Reagan Administration favours conversion to the metric system for the same reasons that aroused the opposition of John Quincy Adams in 1821: international trade. In 1821, all international trade was between the United States and England, and both countries used inches and pounds. Today, 95 per cent of the world is metric". Someday, the conclusion will have to be that if we want to export products, we have to do so according to the metric system.

[*English*]

There is one thing about that conference that the Hon. Member might understand. A speaker who was arguing very persuasively in favour of conversion on the grounds of competitiveness and productivity told the story of a Japanese businessman and an American businessman. They were walking down the street and all of a sudden were confronted by a great, big grizzly bear coming at them at tremendous speed. The Japanese businessman, who happened to be a health nut, had his jogging shoes with him. He got down on his hands and knees and started to put his shoes on. The American businessmen asked, "What are you doing, my friend? You don't honestly think you can outrun that grizzly bear, do you?" The Japanese businessman stood up and said, "You perceive the question incorrectly, my friend. All I have to do is outrun you".

That is what this is all about—international competitiveness, exports and productivity. These are the factors that Hon. Members opposite are always crying about, yet these are the factors they are not willing to face. As the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) has said on many occasions in this House, they are the coalition of the antis—they are the people who are always "against". They are always saying that now is not the right time, let us wait 20 years, whether that applies to the Constitution, the Crow rate or the metric system. I suggest that the Hon. Member for Vegreville wake up one of these days and start to consider some of these things.