

Metric System

disruption which is going to be very great in any case. We suggested that both systems be used for a limited time in order to ease farmers gradually into the use of the metric system. We suggested a three-year conversion period of dual usage, during which farmers would become familiar with the new measurements. This is not an unfair or unreasonable suggestion, but it is certainly very unfair and dictatorial just to impose the metric system on the farmer, to tell him he must use it and that the old system is no longer valid and cannot be used, as this bill does.

However, the government has now decided that it will consult with the farmers before metrication is introduced into farming and then reserve the option of not proclaiming those clauses of this bill which have to do with agriculture. While I suppose that consultation with farmers is some sort of progress for this government, this latest twist of reserving proclamation of certain parts of this legislation is certainly not acceptable to us. Metrication is either introduced, or it is not introduced. There is no way we are going to accept having a metric law on the statute books and have this government hold it over the heads of the western farmer like a club, threatening to bring it in at any time, or alternately suggesting or implying that it may not be brought in at all. This is blackmail and it is completely unacceptable.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Masniuk: For the Canadian consumer, metric conversion will be neither easy nor painless, as I have said. Familiar goods packaged and sold by unfamiliar measurements will almost inevitably create confusion at first. Housewives will not easily adjust to buying milk by the litre, vegetables and meat by the kilo, and dress fabric by the metre. Motorists will not easily become accustomed to travelling kilometres to work, putting litres of gasoline in the tank and kilopascals of pressure in the tires. More serious than this initial confusion, however, will be the great danger metrication will pose for price gouging when the consumer does not know how much he is actually buying.

An example of this confusion occurred a few years ago in Toronto when a service station began selling gasoline by the litre but marked the price on an outdoor sign as a fraction of a gallon. To a casual observer it appeared at first as if the station had discounted the price to an unbelievable extent and was selling gas at less than 15 cents a gallon. There was nothing dishonest going on in this particular instance, as far as I know. It was an example of genuine confusion. But it does demonstrate very well the opportunity that will be afforded to some unscrupulous businesses to raise their prices unnecessarily.

● (1650)

It will happen, as was shown by what occurred in Britain when she converted her currency to the decimal system. Included in the new decimal prices was an unjustified price increase in many cases, but even after the British consumer had begun to understand the decimal money system a little

[Mr. Masniuk.]

better and realized that there had been a price increase, the increase stayed. There was no reduction. I am afraid that we are going to experience similar situations here in Canada when metrication is fully under way. This is why the Progressive Conservative party proposed a system of dual labelling of both metric and Imperial measurements, not as a crutch, as some government spokesmen have said, but so that conversion takes place fairly and the consumer is treated fairly and can see that he is being treated fairly.

I feel that the cost of metric conversion will fall heaviest on the Canadian consumer. I do not see how this can be otherwise, since the governing principle regarding metric conversion as far as the government is concerned is to let the costs lie where they fall. Since it is only good business to minimize costs and maximize profits, it seems inevitable that retailers will pass on the increased costs in the form of higher prices to the consumer. There really does not seem to be anything that one can suggest as a solution to this. If we are really committed to metrication for Canada, we will just have to realize in all honesty that it will cost money.

Unjustified price increases, however, price gouging under the guise of conversion costs, might be controlled perhaps to a certain extent by a price surveillance program. The Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs or, more appropriately, the metric commission, would conduct this program. Since the commission already exists and is, we are given to understand, experiencing morale problems arising out of some confusion as to its role and purpose, this might be an ideal function for it. There are many details which would have to be worked out, of course, but I think that this idea should be considered. Canadians might then feel that metrication is doing something for them, rather than to them, as many do now.

I would like to conclude my remarks on this very important subject, Mr. Speaker, by stating, as I did earlier, that I believe in the inevitability of metrication in Canada and, in the long-term, the desirability of it. However, I do not think that we should fool ourselves that this change will not be costly and disruptive. It will be. But I do not take that attitude, either, which I have heard expressed by some, that we should not convert, that we should ignore the rest of the world and content ourselves with the old system. This is a very provincial and insular attitude, not befitting an outward-looking, progressive country like Canada. For us in Canada the metric system may not be absolutely necessary but we, least of any nation which lives by trading, cannot be an island unto ourselves. In an interdependent world it is necessary that Canada be in step with her trading and business partners who are, after all, in today's global village, her neighbours.

I believe that most Canadians are astute enough and responsible enough to recognize this. But we must also be responsible in our approach to metrication and realistic about what it is going to cost both in economic and social terms, because I do not think that the government's approach to bringing the metric system to Canada is either responsible or realistic; and,