

Metric Conversion

Canadians are not being asked—they are being forced—to abandon a lifetime of tradition, education, knowledge and experience in one measurement field, without any real proof that the new system will be of even marginal benefit. The study our research office did hits the bottom line of concern to many of us on this side of the House. There has been no estimate of how much the switch to metric is costing Canada, but estimates of the cost of going totally metric in the United States are as high as \$100 billion—that is with a “B”.

There is no question that conversion is very costly for a country which is struggling to keep inflation below the double-digit level. What is happening, in my view, is that a non-elected body has proceeded with plans to convert the country to the metric system, so far without any curbs by the House of Commons. It is costing governments, private companies, corporations, stores, service stations, mechanics and others millions of dollars to convert to a new measurement, all at a very difficult time in Canada's economic life.

If the metric momentum has grown to the point where we cannot throw the process into reverse—and I do not suggest for a moment that we do—then Parliament must have a chance to examine the implications of going totally metric and, at the very least, I believe this government must listen to the people's real concerns, their complaints and confusion about metrication, before the scheduled completion of the timetable in 1982.

One area of metrication which officially concerns me as opposition critic on consumer affairs is the impact the changeover is having on shoppers across this country. My colleague, the hon. member for Peterborough (Mr. Domm), has eloquently set out his community's woes as one of the three metric testing centres in Canada. I assume that the strong feelings of Peterborough's consumers and the business community would be echoed in Sherbrooke and Kamloops, the other two test centres. I certainly know how the vast majority of my people regard metric shopping in Hamilton-Wentworth.

It is not just the inconvenience of mentally trying to convert in the supermarkets that concerns me. It is what more and more consumers are beginning to realize is a substantial rip-off by manufacturers of many products as we Canadians pay through the nose for metric labelling, packaging and handling, and the changeover certainly can dramatically be demonstrated with fluid milk. That has not been a happy changeover. Housewives and the consumers are constantly facing ever higher prices for fluid milk. With the switch to smaller litres which require 12 per cent more cartons and 12 per cent greater handling than pint and quart cartons, consumers in each province found the smaller cartons actually costing about as much as the former larger standard ones.

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Every province has the problem and each one has had to find some way to ease the blow of this completely unnecessary new cost, at least for the moment. The cost increase, however, goes on forever and people will pay it. The dairy activities generally come under provincial jurisdiction. The fact is that

processors have been involved in the federal metrication sector and they encourage this metric overview board in its report to see if something could be done in Ontario.

As Ontario represents one third of the nation's population, that alone justified the action. Only the one and two litre cartons, which account for 30 per cent of Ontario's purchase of milk, are involved this year. The three quart plastic jugs are scheduled to be changed to four litre jugs in about two years. Nevertheless, the initial change is calculated to cost the people of Ontario about 6 cents to 7 cents a quart in the first full year, or about \$25 million in additional expense. It is estimated that this will rise from \$55 million to \$65 million once the three quart jug is changed. From the processors' point of view, there is nothing but very sizeable costs for new filling and handling equipment, without any offsetting benefits.

I should like to interject here one fundamental point. I think we have to make this very clear to consumers, particularly to parents across this country. Arguing as I am against this headlong plunge into the metric system, I would also like hon. members to understand that I do not wish in any way to interfere with our younger generation's total acceptance of metrication. They are growing up in a metric world, but they have a freedom of choice to operate either in the world of metric or with standard imperial measures—a freedom of choice which is denied to many millions of other Canadians who have not had the luxury of metric teaching. Actually, the parents themselves are often being converted by their kids enthusiasm for the system. One fellow I know in my riding has three children aged 6, 15 and 17, and they think he is an old fogey because he still has to convert to metric.

While I have sympathy for those who come a cropper over metric, these minor irritants over conversion are not, in my view, reason enough to hold it up, or even to stop and re-examine it, although you do run into some interesting situations. I can think of one of my constituents who works at the Flamborough Downs racetrack in my riding who broke people up one morning complaining it was 18 kilometres below zero. I also know of an unfortunate lady in Ancaster who was recently bereaved and had neglected to pay her hydro bill. When Ontario Hydro sent her a reminder of payment, the lady returned the money forthwith, unaware that Ontario Hydro's billing system had gone metric last September. The lady dutifully paid the date—the thirteenth day of the ninth month—\$13.09. Hydro still came back at her to forward the remaining \$5, which she did, but by now the episode left everyone scratching their heads.

My thanks to Ottawa *Citizen* columnist Dave Brown for this gem. It happened here in Ottawa recently to Mr. John Shouldice of Crescent Drive. I am not sure if it is in your riding, Mr. Speaker. He was frustrated by a bit of metrication. He was trying to translate a litre into an American quart. He went to the source, the Metric Commission. As happens every time when you go to the Metric Commission with a specific request of this kind, you will get hesitation, and then the answer that nobody knows the answer. So he called *The Citizen*, and they brought out their handy little pocket calculator. It said that an American gallon equals 3.7854 litres. Our friend went back to