

Assembly

MINUTES OF MEETING - COMMERCE COMMITTEE - 56TH SESSION
JANUARY 27, 1971

Present: Lingenfelter, Capurro, Poggione, Branch,
Dini, Hilbrecht, Ashworth

Others Present: Tom Kean

Absent: McKissick, Hafen

Vice Chairman Lingenfelter called the meeting to order at 11:05 A.M. for the purpose of discussing and acting upon A.J.R. 1, Memorializes Congress to enact legislation adopting the metric system.

Lingenfelter asked Mr. Kean to explain this resolution and he stated the following. Mr. Kean said the United States is the only country in the world who does not have this system for weights and measurements. We do have this system for monies. He stated this system has been under study by the Bureau of Standards for some 10 years and it is only a matter of time before it will become adopted. He suggested that Nevada be one of the first states to request this legislation. Mr. Kean further explained that England, Canada and Australia are now in the process of adopting the system and have reported it takes about 30 days for the common metric measurements as for liquids, gasoline, etc. to be accepted by the public. He further stated that foreign imports of automobiles, parts for automobiles, etc. are in the metric measurements so it now requires special tools in the United States for them.

Ashworth pointed out that optometrists now use the metric system in the manufacture of eye glasses. It was also pointed out that various things such as ammunition, etc. are also on the metric system. Ashworth noted that we are gradually going into the metric system because of the many foreign imports into the United States. It was also pointed out that scientists use the metric system in their work and they have even had to institute a study on conversion into the metric system.

Capurro moved a do pass on A.J.R. 1, Ashworth seconded and motion carried.

There being no further business to come before the Commerce Committee, the meeting adjourned at 11:20 A.M.

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NOVEMBER 19, 1970

Metric Cause Gains Mileage—Er, Meters— Faster Than Expected

U.S. Study Seen Urging Shift;
Target Dates Are Debated;
Is Cold-Turkey Switch Best?

By ARLEN J. LARGO

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—"I don't believe it's inevitable," says Thomas Hannigan. "I don't even believe it's possible."

But it seems to be both. The matter in question is a planned, coordinated U.S. switch to the metric system of measurement. Mr. Hannigan, research director for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, is one of 42 members of the Commerce Department's advisory panel monitoring the current three-year Government study of metric conversion problems. And he is lonely.

For Mr. Hannigan believes that a big majority of his advisory-panel colleagues are to see the nation go metric and that next August the Secretary of Commerce will strongly recommend it to Congress. Says Mr. Hannigan with a resigned smile, "I will be labeled a modern-day apostle of reaction."

August's report almost certainly will urge more metric usage, but there's hot debate about whether to set legislative goals for near-total conversion in, say, 10 years. Whatever the recommendation, the Commerce Department study is showing that the metric cause in the U.S. has gathered more momentum than many people remotely suspect.

At First, Astonishment

Now two-thirds finished, the official study itself appears to be generating support for metric conversion among industry groups surprised to have become involved. What's more, the whole exercise offers a fascinating case study of the way people and institutions respond to the threat of change.

Amazement at the advanced state of metric thinking was shown at conferences held this year by the National Bureau of Standards, the Commerce Department agency running the study. The meetings, which conclude here this week, have had almost no publicity. After getting an invitation, industry groups generally consulted their member companies on what their position should be—and the first response often was shock that such a change even was being considered.

Mildred Ryan, vice president of McCall Pat Co. of New York, told fellow conference-goers what happened when she checked with her colleagues in the sew-it-yourself business: "It didn't matter who was asked. There seemed to be this astonishment about the United States even thinking of going on the metric system."

But once they checked into it, many people discovered just how much momentum there already was. "I hadn't been following it," admits Fred Greiner, executive vice president of the Evaporated Milk Association, after attending a conference. "I found this thing is further along now than I had anticipated."

A Nonmetric Island

Douglas Whitlock, a Washington lawyer on the advisory panel, describes the response of typical conference-goers: "Your first reaction is why the hell go through all that trouble of converting to metric. Then you listen to the discussion, and you decide it's inevitable."

Congress authorized the study in 1968, spurred by Britain's decision to abandon its old-pounds-pints system of measurement and switch to meters, kilograms and liters by 1973. Australia and South Africa have followed, and Canada intends to do so. That would leave the U.S. a nonmetric island in a world where 90% of the population measures by the meter.

The study itself has undergone change. Officials originally hoped to give Congress a sort of giant balance sheet, totaling up the costs of conversion alongside the dollar benefits, principally higher exports. That, says Daniel De Simone, the study director, proved to be "a most outlandish expectation," since companies can't precisely estimate the impact. "We'll report our data to Congress," he says, "but it will have to be explained that it's based on very subjective judgments."

Also changed are theories on how the giant U.S. economy should make the switch. At first many metric proponents favored starting almost invisibly in the bowels of heavy industry, with engineers shaping new metric dimensions for machine tools, screws and bolts. But Mr. De Simone and others now question this.

"The British made the mistake of starting off with a whisper, focusing on industry," says the U.S. study director. "The British public didn't even realize they were going metric, and they're halfway through their transition period." He thinks that's why a recent Gallup Poll showed 57% of Britons oppose the switch. If a transition is to be made here, he says, "we should start in the retail sector as soon as possible."

British experience has shed other light on the transition technique. In an article for Scientific American magazine, the chairman of the board coordinating the British switch said it is best in some cases to start using metric units cold-turkey, without confusing the public with dual measurements. Radio and television announcers, said Lord Ritchie-Calder, have been giving temperature forecasts in both centigrade and Fahrenheit, and "the result is that everyone still waits for the Fahrenheit figure."

Among Americans, there's sharp controversy about whether a change should be merely evolutionary as each industry sees

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profit in a switch or whether Congress should set a time goal; sometimes mentioned is a transition span ending in 1985.

The Automobile Manufacturers Association believes there's no need for a nationally coordinated conversion, and it is urging that each industry be allowed to switch when it wants to, if ever. "We needn't be all inch-based or all metric, but should use whatever is needed to get a good economic return," says William Burton, Ford Motor Co.'s metric systems development manager.

An optional engine in Ford's new Pinto has metric measurements. To avoid assembly-line and repair-shop mixups, screws and other components in the engine are dyed blue. This underscores a key point about metric conversion: The difference between a part measured in millimeters and its seeming twin measured in inches is more than just language; the parts are almost always physically incompatible.

One reason is that people like to work with round numbers. A four-inch bolt is 101.6 millimeters long; for a fabricator, the temptation is strong to shave the length to an even 100 millimeters. Thus changing the system of measurement tends to lead to a physical change in the things measured. During a transition, companies would have to keep costly dual inventories of spare parts.

It would be "a foolish thing," says Ford's Mr. Burton, to require a company to go to this expense if it felt no need to convert. It would be better, he argues, if Congress just proclaimed the general advisability of more metric usage.

But proponents of a coordinated switch contend such a proclamation wouldn't be enough to trigger a real national conversion. The scale industry, says Arthur Sanders, executive secretary of the Scale Manufacturers Association, "doesn't believe that anything's going to happen until it's made mandatory." Scale makers stand to profit from a switch if many businessmen buy brand-new metric scales instead of just converting the weight indicator numbers.