



AGAINST COMPULSORY METRICATION



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The somewhat nondescript environs of suburban Enfield are not readily associated with rebellion or anything particularly revolutionary. In the grand scheme of things, it is hard to think of anything for which Enfield can be considered truly famous, unless of course one remembers that the rifle which equipped the British infantry during two world wars was the Lee Enfield, named respectively after its inventor and the principal site of its manufacture.

But if Enfield supplied the firepower which kept the world safe for democracy, it is soon to supply the ammunition for another battle which, in its own way, will be every bit as important to the democracy of these sceptred isles.

PLANS AND DIRECTIVES

The precise site of this battle to come is a corner on the Great Cambridge Road, otherwise known as the A10, just at the turn-off to Enfield town. On this corner there is a small shop which goes by the name of 4th Avenue Blinds. Drivers will easily recognise it. The front is emblazoned with a Union Jack, but — more to the point — it also bears a clearly readable sign which advises prospective purchasers that all materials are sold in Imperial measurements.

In other, saner times, such a sign would be entirely unremarkable but, as many traders will already

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

know, on 1 January 2000, it will become a criminal offence — punishable by a fine of up to £5,000 — to sell goods to the public in Imperial measurements. Against this impost, the proprietor of 4th Avenue Blinds, a redoubtable woman called Jose O'Ware, has decided to make a stand. Come the dawn of the millennium, she will continue to sell her blinds and other wares in Imperial measurements, come what may.

Jose is not alone in her resistance to this impost. For some years now a group of concerned businessmen and others, under the banner of a group called the British Weights and Measures Association (BWMA), have been waging a losing battle against the government's plans to "bring us into line" with Europe by introducing compulsory metrication.

In fact, the "government plans" do not belong to our government at all, but arise from our real government in Brussels, the EU, which has issued edicts in its directive 89/617/EEC, amending directive 80/181/EEC, requiring us to go metric by the end of this year — with the exception of the pint of beer and the mile, which wait for another day.

Like Jose O'Ware, the BWMA — headed by an enthusiastic Scot, Vivian Linacre, has no objection in principle to the use of metric. In many areas of life, and particularly in the scientific field, this form of measurement has its own utility. What sticks in their craw is that its use is to be made compulsory, so that it will become a criminal offence for one UK citizen to sell to another a pound of apples.

METRICATION BY STEALTH

But even more galling is the sneaky way this government has foisted this EU diktat upon us. Rather than bite the bullet, and launch the new metric policy in a blaze of publicity — as it did when UK currency went decimal — it has chosen a low-key approach to the change. And to conceal what is, in fact, a major assault on our national identity, it has sought from Brussels a half-hearted fudge, which will allow traders to continue using Imperial measurements as supplementary indicators alongside the metric measures.

What this means is that, by the grace of our beneficent rules in Brussels, our traders may — but do not have to — show Imperial measures alongside the metric indicators, as long as they are subordinate to them. But this will only last until the year 2009, when it will become illegal to display Imperial measures at all. The BWMA regard this as metrication by stealth. Even more insanely, traders who are asked by their confused customers — say — for pounds of apples, are allowed to sell them.

But they are not allowed to measure them in Imperial. They have to weigh them on a metric scale, in kilometres or whatever, and sell the metric equivalent.

To add insult to injury, the law under which this insanity is promulgated in the UK is the Consumer Protection Act. Its sponsors, the Department of Trade, claim that action must be taken against "rogue" traders to prevent them gaining a commercial advantage over those who describe their goods only in metric. In other words, if traders give their customers what they want — which is the only way they can gain a commercial advantage — they are to be prosecuted! So much for consumer protection.

INVITING A TEST CASE

Watching Jose O'Ware's case with interest is UK Independence Party MEP, Jeffrey Titford, who represents the Eastern Counties, of which Enfield is part. He has written to Enfield Trading Standards Department, which will enforce the law in her area, asking the Department to confirm that it will take no action against her after 1 January, if she continues to sell goods in yards, feet and inches.

But, in a move closely watched closely by BWMA, Titford has also warned Enfield that the policy of enforcing metrication may be contrary to Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights. Preventing traders giving their customers information they wish, he maintains, is an unlawful curtailment of the right to free speech and free expression. Should Jose O'Ware be prosecuted, he has told Enfield, he will immediately refer the case to the Commission on Human Rights.

For their part, the BWMA want traders to hold off introducing full-scale metrication until the law has been tested. They should not spend any money or change their labelling systems until a case has been heard. And if Jose O'Ware is not at the forefront of any prosecution, a group of businessmen is planning to set up a trading company specifically to sell goods marked in Imperial measurements, inviting a test case which can then be referred to the Commission.

Anyone, however, who might be dismissive of Jose O'Ware or the BWMA's chances of resisting the mighty march of metric, and its EU sponsors, might pause to reflect that the Lee Enfield rifle, which was so famously produced in Enfield, had a barrel diameter of .303 inches. It was up against an enemy using weapons calibrated in millimetres — and we all know who won!