

Marking Time on Metrication

IT is hard to understand how the British Government has allowed itself to get into difficulties over the plan to adopt the metric system in Britain. Until a month ago, everything seemed to be going smoothly—the Board of Trade had announced approval for the change, and had defined a broad timetable; the British Standards Institution, charged with the detailed task of organizing the change, seemed well on top of its job. Within the government departments, the Standing Joint Committee on Metrication made little secret of its plans, and they seemed sensible enough. Industry, while not welcoming change any more enthusiastically than usual, was broadly in approval. In any case, the timetables prepared by the BSI deliberately left some scope for individual companies to set their own pace. Given the complexities of the problem, and the Government's knack for making simple things sound difficult, all seemed well.

Difficulties started to arise when the Confederation of British Industry submitted a report to the Joint Committee on Metrication which suggested the formation of a Metrication Board, similar in status and function to the Decimal Currency Board. The CBI evidently wanted to do two things—help those industries which still had doubts about the wisdom of the change, and help to organize the change in the retail sector. Unlike most countries, Britain had decided that the change to metric units in the shops should follow rather than precede the change in industry. There was some danger, the CBI felt, that the change in the retail sector would be left until too late, and that the best way of avoiding this was to set up a strong Metrication Board. The Standing Joint Committee on Metrication accepted the logic of this recommendation, and a month ago had prepared a report which embodied the CBI's idea as its principal recommendation. Nobody questioned the urgency of the report.

But this was a month ago. Since then, nothing seems to have happened—the Standing Joint Committee's report has not been published, and no statement of Government intentions has been made. A frustrated president of the CBI, Mr Gerry Norman, has now felt obliged to protest in strong terms about the delay. The need for the metrication Board was becoming more and more urgent as time passed, he said, as industry proceeded with its plans for metrication. Publication of the report had become an urgent priority.

There are two possible explanations for this strange breakdown in communications. The first, and least likely, is that the Government has now had cold feet about the whole thing, and wants to postpone the change for a year or so. (It is inconceivable that the Government would want to cancel it altogether.) There has, it is true, been some opposition to the change in some sectors of industry, principally in the building industry, which thinks that the change in standards will permanently increase its costs. Because buildings last very much longer than other manufactured products, the building industry will have to live with dual

standards for longer than other industries. The thought of having to fit metric baths into non-metric bathrooms for the next 60 years is admittedly sobering, but hardly overwhelming.

It is in fact far more likely that the delay is simply further evidence of the inability of government in Britain to move quickly, even when all are agreed that speed is essential. No doubt the report of the Standing Joint Committee has been cheerfully circulating around government departments, gathering initials and amendments at every turn. The only explanation offered this week was that the problems of planning machinery and the costs of the change were causing delay—although it is fair to add that a month in Whitehall passes as quickly as a week elsewhere. The best estimate was that "clarification" could certainly be expected by the end of July, when Parliament rises for the summer recess. This is a dismal performance—and the Fulton Commission, which next week publishes its judgment of the British Civil Service, could hardly have picked a better time.

Good Cheer for Fusion

PLASMA physicists working on the problem of turning thermonuclear fusion into a source of power continue to express a guarded optimism. It is true that controlled fusion is a very long term prospect, but people still think it will be able to compete with other sources of power. One of these is Professor D. J. Rose from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has just published the results of work carried out at Oak Ridge National Laboratory during a sabbatical year (report ORNL-TM-2204). Professor Rose, who is spending the rest of his sabbatical at Culham Laboratory, produces hopeful results by proposing very large fusion power stations, of 10,000 electrical megawatts or so. As he points out, power stations this big are unlikely to be needed by most utilities until the twenty-first century, which is another reason for taking the long view.

Given power stations this size, some of the major difficulties appear to become distinctly more tractable. Professor Rose suggests that plasma containment times only a few times greater than those already achieved in the laboratory would be enough to make a very large fusion reactor economical. Another reason for going to big sizes is that the business part of the fusion reactor is free—it is simply a large evacuated volume in which the fusion reactions between atoms of deuterium and tritium would take place.

Professor Rose's calculations do not apply to only one type of system, and it seems that he is not entirely sure which system will turn out best. Thus the calculations apply equally to open or closed, pulsed or steady state reactors. He assumes that direct conversion is unlikely to be feasible, and has therefore proposed a system in which the fusion reactor is used to provide heat for electricity generation. One of the advantages of the sort of system visualized is that it would have a very short tritium doubling time, because the fast neutrons generated in the reactor would breed further tritium in the "blanket" which surrounds the reactor