

Metrication — who is responsible?

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The metrication debate continues in the USA after more than 200 years of discussion and bickering.

We have to ask why it has taken the American people so long to complete this simple change. After all, Americans are famous for their ability, and inclination, to adopt progressive ideas quickly.

Perhaps it's because it is difficult to determine exactly who is responsible for the upgrade to the metric system. When it comes to metrication — who is responsible?

Is it:

- ◇ you, as an individual;
- ◇ your family;
- ◇ schools;
- ◇ manufacturing industry;
- ◇ marketing; or
- ◇ government?

You, as an individual

As an individual you are responsible for your own metrication. You can find your body mass in kilograms; you can know your height in metres; and you can know the widths and lengths of your feet, fingers, thumbs, and hand spans in millimetres. You can take responsibility for your own metrication.

While these things are easy for you, it may be more difficult to deal with the moral persuasion of the people around you who generally face three issues:

- ◇ they have never used the metric system so they don't know how easy it is,
- ◇ they fear that they might lose power if they show how little they know, and
- ◇ there is safety in the mob

Your family

Family attitudes tend to be based on the choices made by the organisers of family activities. If your family swims — you swim in a metric pool. If your family is athletic — you run on a metric track. If any member of the family works in manufacturing they probably (in about 70 % of industry in the USA) use the metric system everyday.

However, some of your family activities have old-fashioned measures built in to their structure. For example, quilting almost always involves two-inch squares because these appear to take less sewing than the free form design possibilities you have when you choose to use millimetres.

Schools

Schools and teachers often get the blame for not making metrication happen. This responsibility is put upon teachers by the media as part of a constant litany of ideas that teachers and schools should address. In the past week, some of the other issues that I have heard media pundits suggest as schools' responsibilities included: AIDS, guns, health,

nutrition, military history, obesity, physical fitness, and sex. Metrication is only one of these.

Other than this flood of educational possibilities, schools also have the limitation that they don't operate in the real world of adults so they use centimetres because these fit on a student size page whereas most occupations (more than 80 % of crafts) use millimetres to gain precision without any need for fractions. It has been observed that using centimetres slows metrication remarkably.

Manufacturing industry

Manufacturing industry is the shining light on the metrication hill. As each individual, each work group, each division, each factory, and each industry discovers the ease and simplicity of metric units they simply change their operation to metric — and they very rarely change back.

Even when management, customers, or their own marketing department insist on old pre-metric measures the people in the factory often adopt a strategy called 'dumbing down at the door'. This involves ordering metric parts, designing in metric, making in metric, and then — when they have a final product — changing its measures to inches and ounces to give the illusion that they have not used metric units.

Marketing

Most primary school teachers can tell you that a split happens in groups of children somewhere about the fourth year of elementary schooling — students divide themselves into those who can 'do' mathematics and those who can 'do' reading and writing well. Individuals select which of these paths suit them best and then tend to avoid the other possibility whenever they can.

Often, 'word' people spend their lives avoiding anything to do with mathematics and even cover up their poor numerical knowledge and skills, which they can do very well because of their considerable 'word' skills. Many of these 'word' people find themselves in sales and marketing roles where they hope to confront few numerical or measuring matters.

Many companies still have this elementary school split within their companies; those that are 'good at words' are in sales and marketing and those who are 'good at mathematics' work in manufacturing. And they don't understand each other.

Government

'The government should make metrication compulsory' is the cry from those who have experienced the simplicity and ease of use of the metric system and they want it available to all others, and they want metrication — now.

These metric promoters know that metrication is inevitable; they also know that no-one who has ever used the metric system for a while ever goes back to using old pre-metric measures.

However, government is not necessarily done in reasonable ways that apply the best methods in fair, honest, and open ways. Many governments apply laws and regulations that are unfair, dishonest, and closed to public scrutiny for reasons best known only to the lobby groups and to themselves.

So what is the answer to our question?

Who is responsible for the change to the metric system?' Is it: you, as an individual; your family; schools; manufacturing industry; marketing; or is it the government?

The answer is: **'It is all of these'**, and when they all work together the job is soon done.