

Acc. No.		NARC
71	0016	114

Embargoed - 6 p.m., 24.9.71

Text of an address given by the Chairman of the Metrication Board, Mr. Baey Lian Peck, at a dinner of the Rotary Club of Singapore East on Friday, 24th September, 1971.

Gentlemen, I welcome the opportunity this evening of telling you something of what we at the Metrication Board are doing to wean Singapore from the imperial and customary units of the past, and introduce her to the metric system of weights and measures to which we are committed.

You are no doubt aware that there are three phases in the metrication programme for Singapore - the public sector, the private sector and the retail trade. I am pleased to say that most of the Government Departments have ~~already~~ submitted programmes, some of which have ~~already~~ been supported by the Board and implemented. Others are under study. But the results can already be seen and will help to press home upon Singaporeans that metrication is inevitable and that they must face up to that fact. The P.U.B. is already arranging to collect its bills by calculating in metric. Radio and television Singapura use metric terms on the air. Metric documentation for Singapore and the West Malaysia trade will be effected in metric from January 1st next

Government and statutory bodies will soon be buying such goods as paints and cables in metric quantities and strong support has come from some of our largest shipyards which will purchase certain products in metric - a decision which the Board highly appreciates. In the building industry, a Building Industry Metrication Programme Working Committee has been set up with the task of planning a programme to dovetail with metrication activities in supporting industries.

Another important factor for local industry to bear in mind is the announcement that America, in common with 90 per cent of the rest of the world now metric, has made decided progress in the direction of metrication. Two years or so ago, she appointed a group to inquire into the effects which metrication would have upon her economy, and as recently as July 29th last, it reported. On that date, Mr. Maurice H. Stans, American Secretary of Commerce presented to Congress a report from the National Bureau of Standards, urging the nation to go metric in ten years, "to improve the balance of trade".

In the case of Singapore, the matter carries great urgency. Singapore must metricate, or lose lucrative markets. She is at a critical stage of development from a colonial territory to an independent industrial nation, with her economy in the process of rapid expansion. Factories are being built and new investment to build other factories and workshops is flowing in. We can save years which might otherwise have been spent in adapting to the metric system by making it possible for such new development to start from scratch. The metric conversion now taking place, can be a determining factor in the choice of machinery and equipment. Metrication has come at a time when the countries of the South-east Asia region are demanding higher standards and are seeking reciprocal trade in the area. Like us, they are or will be producing in metric and they, like us, will want to buy in metric.

The functions of the Metrication Board are various, but they range over the one dominating aim - to achieve a smooth changeover with as little disruption of normal procedures as possible and generally to smooth the way ahead. The Board will see that conversion goes briskly and as easily as possible. It has been created to consult, advise and co-ordinate.

It can be a channel of information in reference not only to local matters, but to requirements in overseas markets. For instance, in many countries, including New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, there is legislation governing the packaging and labelling of goods, particularly consumer goods. These laws, designed for the protection of the consumer, control the

weight or volume by which the product must be packed and also the manner of labelling. Unless local manufacturers are made aware of such legislation which follows international standards and is mainly expressed in metric, their goods will in due course not be acceptable in these countries.

The Board is not an executive body, although it may find itself sooner or later, in the position of having to insist where persuasion has failed. For programmes of conversion, once laid down, must be adhered to as closely as possible if the related industries, waiting upon a defaulter, are not to be delayed in their own conversion. There must be no such waiting by one group upon metrication in a supporting industry. Within the control of the Metrication Board, industry is, generally speaking, quite free to make its own plans. It can choose its timing, decide for itself the metric SI Units, best suited to its needs. But, I repeat, all this is under supervision and control by the central co-ordinating body - The Metrication Board.

Local manufacturers must realise that it is better to plan ahead - to plan in advance instead of lagging behind. The overseas trend is towards inevitable metrication and there is therefore, no harm in preparing well before the anticipated changeover dates. Furthermore, smooth conversion depends very largely on the availability of materials and semi-finished products made to metric specifications on the planned movement of stocks, on re-calibration or changes in instruments and machinery and on the re-training of staff. Unless there is careful forward planning, there may be dislocation leading to unnecessary loss and wastage.

In order to tackle this enormous task, the Board is entering more and more into the picture of conversion as individual concerns make their plans. Officials of the Board make visits, discuss with businessmen and manufacturers the problems they face or believe they face. They help to dispel misconceptions of which there are a surprisingly large number.

The Board is beginning to hear of cases in which local manufacturers have completely misunderstood the intentions behind the general policy of metrication, but have not taken action of any kind. It does no good for them to discuss these matters among them-

selves without giving an opportunity to the Board to discharge one of its most important functions which is to inform. A letter of inquiry would receive immediate and, if necessary, personal attention from one of the executive officers who are now in constant contact with local industry. It would be a wise move for individual local manufacturers to appoint a metrication officer from among their staff with the sole responsibility of planning conversion within that particular enterprise. This matter, in fact, is one of some urgency if local firms are to retain their business in the face of pressures now building up. One of the duties of such an officer should be to seek guidance from the Metrication Board which can help considerably in easing his load ~~from~~ ^{for} him. Unfortunately, the Board's help is not yet asked when it ought to be. I have in mind the case of a small manufacturer whose problem was mentioned to me on a personal level. He was worried over the cost he expected to incur in replacing his machinery and equipment, and had not understood that, for the time being, the end product - the manufacture of goods in metric measures or weights - is the chief concern of the Board. Nobody is expected to discard machines to involve themselves in costs which can be avoided by following normal replacement procedure. The answer of course, is that these replacements, when obsolescence, makes replacement necessary, and not until then, must be in metric. In most cases, it is expected that by the time new equipment is required, the metric versions will be more readily obtainable than the former imperial product, and in any case, will certainly be cheaper. It is obvious that with the phasing out of outmoded equipment, its costs will increase and metric equipment will become cheaper as demand grows.

While the earlier work of the Board must be concerned with metrication in industry, the education of the general public is an aspect that we must keep constantly in mind. One of the slogans of the Board, "Think Metric", carries a message of great importance to a smooth changeover in the retail trade and in the general public attitude towards the change. In this matter, there are many ways in which the businessman, the executive and the manufacturer of Singapore can help the campaign along. As metrication begins to take hold in their own sector, aids to visualising metric quantities can be introduced. One firm in the United Kingdom, for instance, marked off

metre heights on walls in well-used passageways and on doors through which its workers passed. Shops can display pre-packed foodstuffs under labels giving the metric weight either in addition to or instead of the imperial weight. One shop in Singapore did in fact, do this with a consignment of tinned fish imported from a metric country. The Indian Chamber of Commerce has circularised its members proposing that textiles should be sold retail in both metric and non-metric quantities as from March next year as a preliminary to selling exclusively in metric by January of 1973. Posters will visually demonstrate the difference in quantity. The Chamber also proposed that garment manufacturers, both local and foreign, should be asked to mark their products in both systems until metric units are in general use. After that, imperial sizes will be discontinued. I am glad to say that these proposals have the support of the other chambers of commerce. Also of great value in educating the public will be the change in road markings, included in a programme for metrication of the roads under which milestones will be replaced by kilometre stones next year. A working committee is now studying metrication of speed limits and if the dual system of marking is decided upon as an interim measure, another visual aid to estimation of metric distance will have been established.

In conclusion, I would like to ask for YOUR support in this great metrication exercise. It could be of the greatest assistance even in these early stages, if the consuming public were to look around for metric packings and metric quantities when making day to day purchases. The successful implementation of metrication is not the responsibility of one section of the community alone. It will soon reach out to everybody, irrespective of class, and it is never too early to begin not only to think, but to demand metric.

METRICATION BOARD