

Boris Johnson's move to bring back imperial units is pure piffle – and simply unfathomable

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Starting a fight between metric and imperial units of measurement seems, at first, like an

odd choice for Boris Johnson. From a political perspective. The move is obviously pure piffle: a dumbshow designed to placate (or at least entertain) the conservative base while distracting and antagonising rivals. But knowingly or not, by reigniting what 19th-century observers once called the “Battle of the Standards”, Johnson has tapped in to a long and wild history of anti-metric feeling that encompasses xenophobia, pseudoscience and fears over lost political sovereignty.

My own introduction to the subject came a few years ago when researching the history of measurement. I'd travelled to Paris to see the original metre and kilogram standards, kept under lock and key in France's national archives alongside the last letter of King Louis XVI and the original engraving of the declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen. There, I learned how the history of the metric system is entwined with the events captured in these documents: the end of the French monarchy and the beginning of French republicanism.

Prior to the introduction of metric units, France's system of measurement was in disarray. The right to define units of length, capacity and weight was a privilege of the nobility, which led to a profusion of units, often traded under different values while retaining the same name. “[T]he infinite perplexity of measures exceeds all comprehension,” the English agriculturist Arthur Young commented when visiting the country in 1789. “They differ not only in every province, but in every district and almost in every town.” This metrological excess not only stymied economic growth, but enabled widespread cheating and exploitation of the peasantry.

As a result, reforming weights and measures was high on the revolutionary agenda, and seen as a way to restore power to the ordinary woman and man. The French intellectual elite, the *savants*, decided that instead of using units of length like the *pied du Roi* (which literally means “the foot of King” and is traced back to the rule of Charlemagne), France would have the metre; a unit derived from the latest scientific research and defined as one ten-millionth of the distance from the equator to the North Pole. Here, the political intent of the metric system becomes clear: instead of trusting to the disembodied authority of a long-dead king, the revolutionaries chose to embrace rational knowledge and the shared inheritance of the Earth.

Naturally, this was the cause of a great deal of suspicion in the UK. And in the following century, as metric units spread across Europe and the debate over their adoption gained momentum in the UK, anti-metric campaigners marshalled all manner of bombastic arguments. They decried the metric system as overly complex, unnatural; the product of atheist revolutionaries, and – worst of all – *foreign*.

After a vote for metric conversion nearly passed through the House of Commons in 1863, an editorial in *The Times* warned that adoption of the metre and kilogram would fill every household in the land with “perplexity, confusion, and shame”. “It is of no use to urge that other countries have undergone this revolution, and survive,” thundered the author. “What are France, the Zollverein, and Portugal to us? They are accustomed to revolutions, earthquakes, and wars.” Sadly, such exceptionalism and xenophobia hardly sound out of place today.

Other arguments arrayed against metrication ranged from the obscure to the practical. One popular theory was that the inch was a divine unit of measurement bestowed upon humanity by God; its value encoded into the dimensions of the Great Pyramid at Giza to last all time. Others noted the practical benefits of units that divide easily into halves, thirds, and quarters (an undeniable advantage at a time when many consumer goods were not pre-packaged). Ultimately, though, the real reason the UK retained the imperial system is captured in the name itself: it was the economic weight and geographic span of the British empire that ensured that the threat posed by foreign measures could be safely ignored.

There are obvious reasons to cherish and respect imperial units of measure. They have a rich history; their origins date back hundreds of years before the empire ever existed. And their cultural significance remains undimmed in many areas of life. Very few of us would countenance the removal of pints from pubs, for example. But touting the “return” of imperial units to shops is just disastrously retrograde. The logistical burden it would place on supermarkets could lead to increased prices at a time when many household budgets are already stretched thin, while polls show that younger generations are increasingly happy with metric measures. By kindling this debate, Johnson and the Conservative party have certainly keyed in to an emotive and overlooked aspect of our history. But the return of imperial measures is simply unfathomable.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/31/boris-johnson-imperial-measures-unfathomable>

Read “Boris Johnson’s move to bring back imperial units is pure piffle – and simply unfathomable” and prepare an oral tutorial about it respecting the different steps:

1. Introduction of the issue// context => use elements you know about to highlight the context of publication
2. Presentation of the specificities of the document (date, source, type)
3. Summary
4. Transition sentence to show the link between the document and the issue you are going to deal with.
5. Commentary

1. Introduction of the issue// context

As Queen Elizabeth was getting ready to celebrate her platinum jubilee, Boris Johnson, the then prime minister decided to announce the return of imperial units to replace the metric measures that have been used in the UK since 2000 to respect a European directive.

2. Presentation of the specificities of the document (date, source, type)

This op-ed published on May 31, 2022 in *The Guardian*, an English quality paper, analyzes the reasons why the Prime Minister made such a decision and envisions/foresees some of its consequences.

3. Summary

According to the author, Bojo’s decision was a purely political move which aimed at pampering the conservative MPs who were already angry with the many failures of their leader, on the one hand, and at focusing the opponents’ attention on what could be seen as a trivial/secondary matter, on the other hand. The op-ed uses a critical tone from the headline as the author deems/judges/considers Bojo’s announcement as incomprehensible nonsense “*pure piffle and simply unfathomable*”.

His thesis relies on a historical perspective. In fact, the metric system developed in France with the revolutionary movement which led to the end of the French monarchy. The leaders of the French revolution imposed a national unit system based on the meter, which was defined as one ten-millionth of the distance from the equator to the North Pole, that is to say a rational unit which was meant to replace a confusing system whose definition was in the hands of the all-powerful nobility.

According to the author, this genesis explains why the metric system still has a scandalous reputation among UK anti-metric campaigners. None of their arguments, whether it is about the practical aspect of the imperial system or its divine inspiration convinces the author. Even though he acknowledges the cultural and emotional heritage of the imperial units, he concludes that the real motivation to keep the imperial system was political, in an attempt to preserve the influence of the British empire.

This argument seems to be totally obsolete today and cannot justify the decision to go back to the older system, which would lead to many additional costs for companies and thus, households and add confusion among the population who has become used to the metric system.

4. Transition sentence to show the link between the document and the issue you are going to deal with.

The author of the op-ed thus clearly criticizes the decision of UK’s former prime minister that is deemed irresponsible and retrograde as much as dangerous for the country’s economy. It looks as a desperate move to cover up the government’s many failures and cannot be accepted as a decent answer to the country’s ills. Boris Johnson is not the first leader to try and use this trick, particularly in a world where communication has become fast, saturated with images, which raises the question of the role played by symbolical actions in today’s society.

ISSUE: Are symbolical actions or iconic figures strong enough to gather citizens around governmental action? Can countries rely on soft power to impose their political choices? their cultural model? Are potent symbols a way to galvanize crowds into action or a pacifier to gag them?

5. Commentary.

A. Symbols are part of national identity construction

- National symbols (flag, motto, national anthem) are useful to help citizens identify to a group. Positive use in sports competition, **identification** on the international stage. Flags were originally used on battlefields to lead the soldiers. EX: Confederate Flag during Secession war
- Famous characters (athletes, actors, political figures, etc) are **role models** people can look up to => inspirational figures EX: Nichelle Nichols who played in Star Trek => MLK + NASA Well known events support the national narrative and **gather** citizens beyond partisan lines EX: US 4th July / Thanksgiving Cultural production shared on the global stage enables countries to broadcast their values EX: Hollywood as an ambassador of US way of life = soft power

B. Symbols lose their gathering function when misused

- Risk of **nationalist downward slide** when smaller groups monopolize some national symbols, which cancels the universality of their message EX: Right-wing parties in France tend to monopolize the use of the French Tricolour // EX: controversy in January 2022 when the EU flag replaced the French flag under the Arc de Triomphe to mark France taking over the six-month EU Council presidency EX: the confederate flag was largely visible during the January 6th 2021 attack on the Capitol as a rallying symbol for white supremacists
- **Populist temptation** to use these artefacts or popular references as pieces of evidence of some ancestral power to dupe people into believing that national splendor is inherent to their nation and that current failures are the consequence of a lack of recognition of this power rather than the outcome of flawed strategies or misconceived policies.

C. The myth of the providential man to overcome a rough reality

- QAnon American political conspiracy theory and political movement which claims the Trump administration was involved in a secret war against cabal members (mostly members of the democratic party and other progressive forces). Trump is thus presented as the savior of the nation, of the American democracy.
- The case of Queen Elizabeth who derived her authority from God and who is portrayed as the last cement of the British identity. Monarchy is thus accepted as necessary to maintain democracy.
 - ⇒ In both the American and British examples, the iconic figures of the President and the Queen become symbols of protection that are meant to reassure the citizens, but it seems clear that their image is not sufficient to solve the issues met by the country, such as political polarization in the US or economic instability in the UK. The promise of these iconic figures may placate/soothe protesters for a while, but they cannot be mistaken for relevant answers.