

It was just 201 years ago—my ISR Editorial 19/2 of June 1994 had missed the actual bicentennial by one year—when the French National Convention in 1793 introduced the Metric System with the wish: *A TOUS LES TEMPS—A TOUS LES PEUPLES*. Two centuries later, their wish had almost come true, only Britain and the USA had, on Planet Earth, (not on the Moon!) remained faithful to the antiquated Imperial Measures with their non-decimal sub-divisions.

As a scientist, I had for decades regretted this fact, which was such an obstacle to truly international exchange, and on 11 February 1971, four days before Britain's coinage became decimal, I published an article in the *New Scientist* on the history of the decimal point and the great advantages this simple dot had brought to all scientific endeavours. (Incidentally, all American Maps of the Moon were published in metric notation in the early 1960s, when the Apollo Program started. All Russian Moon maps were of course metric).

The use of the metric system, with its decimal subdivisions, has a long history beginning with the invention of the zero by an unknown Indian mathematician in 595 AD. This notation travelled to the West through Arabian scholars, and the Dutch engineer Simon Stevinus (1548-1620) was the first to use it extensively for weights, measures and coinage. John Napier (1550-1617), who invented logarithms, also employed the decimal separatrix in the beginning of the 17th century, but it was not until 1793 that the Commission on Weights and Measures of the French National Convention officially legalised it.

Had the British Government of 1790 accepted the French Government's invitation, jointly to prepare the universal standard for the meter—the ten-millionth part of the Meridian quadrant—and also for the kilogram, Britain would have been metric long ago and America would have followed immediately. But even in France, progress was slow. After 1799 Napoleon allowed both systems to be used side by side, creating universal confusion, until in 1840 the superiority of the metric system was generally accepted in France. Other European Countries, with the exception of Britain, followed in due course.

In the 1990s Britain had reached what one may call the half-way stage, with petrol being sold by the liter, but the price of crude petroleum still was quoted in barrels, following American practice. Progressive stores, like Marks and Spencer, had almost completed their metrication with 100 % textile merchandise, and food items 95 %. In America temperature is still, and now uniquely, measured in Fahrenheit. In 1994 the US General Accounting Office issued a report on *Metric Conversion*, found little progress in Industry and concluded that only public support would ever change this.