



Personal reflections on a life in standards

Well, it started a little over 50 years ago when I was given a project by my boss to work with the Fire Research Station at Borehamwood to see how two of the reaction-to-fire tests from the BS 476 series could be improved in terms of calibration, accuracy and repeatability. With him, I attended my first panel meeting at BSI Green Street to discuss our findings and suggestions. This, for me, as I'm sure could be similar for many others, was the start of some years of fairly routine standards work in BSI, and eventually CEN and ISO committees – all rather nice and low key.

The 1980s brought a new wave of activity to CEN committees – and their respective national mirror committees – with the proposed opening up of the European free market, scheduled for 1992, and the removal of technical barriers to trade to meet the objectives of the Single European Act (the first major revision of the 1957 Treaty of Rome).

For the field of thermal insulation (CEN/TC 88 and TC 89) there were more than 50 working groups created, addressing everything from terminology and test methods for products, to the thermal performance, energy and environment for buildings and building components. Ambitious 1988 work programmes, originally challenged by the UK as too complex, still rumble on today, reinforced by the EU's Construction Products' Regulation. But still we lack a truly level playing field in Europe as some countries continue with national requirements including more onerous and expensive systems for certification and conformity control, some issues even ending up in the Courts.

My first role as a CEN convener was with a rather small Terminology WG writing a tri-lingual standard. Within the group I had 3 German speaking delegates; one was very "old school" German who found it very difficult to drop the rigid formality of addressing fellow colleagues by full names and professional titles and using more informal first name terms in such a small group, another an Austrian German who proposed "high German" translations of terms, and a retired German Cavalry Colonel who not only insisted that he was the "official" German delegate but rejected the opinion of Austrian German as being rather insignificant compared to "his" German, but he also claimed to have been taught English by the British Army at Sandhurst and was therefore also quite accurate in that language too. Sometimes he quite alarmingly leapt to his feet to strongly object at any perceived transgressions or slights, leaving others quite bemused. A group that needed careful handling!

Despite huge progress in the adoption of English as the working language in European meetings, it occasionally led to confusion. When discussing Attestation of Conformity, we had a stalemate between the UK opinion that the CPD only required the "least onerous system consistent with safety", Part of our responsibility was to ensure that UK objectives were met, key concerns addressed, and that the proposed standards were actually needed, were proportionate, technically robust and fully validated.

Whereas French and German experts frequently demanded full third-party factory production control, even for non-critical applications. It took many meetings and heated debate before the root of the problem emerged – but unfortunately not the solution. In the French version of the CPD they had translated the original English text “onerous” to French “onéreux”, the former meaning “burdensome” whilst the latter means “expensive”, the two words conveying different approaches and outcomes.

Despite most committees eventually adopting English as their working language, being native English speakers brought additional responsibilities to ensure that texts were unambiguous as well as grammatically correct. As UK delegate to plenary meetings (or as Head of Delegation) we often became responsible for drafting Resolutions (or Decisions), an important role, but one which added to the overall responsibilities of participating fully in all proceedings to ensure UK issues were addressed and, of course, at the same time, drafting notes of the meetings.

One significant area of work for me was being invited to chair BSI's Technical Committee B/557, responsible for the UK's input to CEN/TC 351 to address the emission of dangerous substances from construction products to indoor air or to soil and groundwater. This new field of work, in response to an EC mandate under the CPD, impacted a very wide range of construction materials, from paints and varnishes to masonry and precast concrete. This required a steep learning curve not just for myself but for all trade associations and experts who sought to participate in the committee, and an onerous responsibility on me and the 2 other UK delegates at the CEN plenary meetings and for the experts in the CEN Working Groups. Seeking agreement or compromise at the European level required cooperation from industry experts, regulators, and laboratories across Europe to develop new harmonised procedures.

There was a parallel political debate at the EC level where we sought to ensure the scope of the work was limited to the CPD (now the CPR) and the approximation of laws and technical standards and not an excuse to expand cross-border requirements – and work for European testing labs – and there was a real danger that UK manufacturers might be penalised by a process that was originally intended to make EU cross border trade easier.

On a technical level, in the field of thermal insulation, I was tasked with leading a joint CEN/ISO WG to examine a rather novel thermal insulation product that was initially claimed to be so good that it defied the laws of physics and could not be assessed by established methods used for decades for conventional insulation materials. The seemingly impossible performance levels and accompanying proposals for assessment procedures were backed up by volumous test reports and somewhat forceful argument. Being the convenor required considerable fortitude and skill to develop, through cooperation and teamwork, step-by-step, technically valid arguments and consensus on each and every clause, despite some strongly polarised and vocal opinions and lots of smoke and mirrors!

I learned something new with every project, the work was far from routine and, at times, was extremely challenging, requiring a broad range of skills and a vision and determination to achieve technically and ethically sustainable standards that helped to protect the environment and the consumer. Throughout, but especially during difficult times, I knew that I had the back-up and support of BSI's project managers and the International policy Board – a great reassurance for anyone involved in such work. Although frequent travel to meetings in faraway places might be someone's dream, it can also be a strain on personal and family relations. Apart from personal satisfaction of a job well done, the bonus was the opportunity to occasionally visit some lovely places and to make quite a few good friends along the way.