

Westminster Miscellany



The Officer's new man at Westminster introduces himself and gives us his own impression of what's currently happening – or not, as the case may be – on the defence scene.

Tony Purton is a defence procurement consultant who retired from MoD as a Director of Contracts in 1993 after a 32 year career in defence procurement. He was engaged in the procurement of air systems including TSR2, Anglo/French helicopters, Tornado and air-launched guided missiles. In 1970 he attended the RAF Staff College at Bracknell as a civilian student. He spent three years 1974-77 in Munich as a member of the international bureau NAMMA for managing the Tornado aircraft project. And from March 1979 to August 1982 he served on secondment to the FCO as First Secretary (Defence Supply) in the British Embassy in Bonn as diplomatic liaison with the German MoD on collaborative projects, and in support of UK arms sales to Germany (Lynx helicopter and Sea Skua anti-ship missile). He is fluent in French and German. His principal retirement hobby is flying light aircraft; he holds a UK private pilot's licence with 400+ hours experience.



by Tony Purton

'The MoD, it seems, is over a barrel on these projects and can do very little other than wait, hope and pay!'

When I learned early this year of the untimely death of Francis Ponsonby, at the relatively young age of 71, I was much saddened. I had missed the news of his death last year. His was a regular and welcome presence in the Palace of Westminster and I had assumed his absence from the scene this parliamentary session meant he had retired. I admired the power of his regular column, his objectivity, his humour and his ability to convey between the lines what he really thought of what 'the great and the good' serve up by way of explanation of their policies and actions.

It was only later that I asked Editor, Colonel Mike Dewar, if I might try to fill Francis' shoes – a difficult act to follow.

First I append my biography. I have long held the view that rather than read about somebody after their death, I'd prefer to have that knowledge while they are still alive, the better to judge their work. Had I known more about Francis' background I would have been better able to appreciate the subtlety of his journalism. My background is nothing like as colourful as his, but it will at least tell readers where I am coming from and perhaps why.

During my Bracknell RAF staff college year I was fond of winding up my military colleagues by declaring that in a democracy wars are started by politicians, not by the military, and that the conduct of operations has to be kept under firm political control to ensure that the political aims of the use of force are met. Originally said to provoke, I have increasingly realised how true this is. Unfortunately, today we have a bunch of politicians who, having talked us into wars, are not very good at fighting them and do not know how to end them. This is known in management circles as the failure, or absence, of an exit strategy. As a result, as CDS recently told the House of Commons Defence Committee, our forces are so tightly stretched that the UK would be unable to undertake any further large scale operation before 2008/09 unless we drop some of our existing commitments.

Defence debate

The annual defence debate in the Commons on 23 October was on Defence Procurement, during which Government and Opposition expressed support for the maintenance of a viable and dynamic UK defence industry and the jobs it supports. A debate on export controls (arms exports) on 6 November affirmed government and opposition support for maintaining Britain's arms exports to underpin the viability of the UK defence industry and jobs.

In February, the Public Accounts Committee, which seeks to examine the MoD on the efficiency and effectiveness with which it uses the Defence Budget, examined MoD witnesses on the NAO's latest Major Project Report MPR2003. And the Defence Committee which seeks to influence, if not control, ministerial policy in defence has conducted numerous hearings and published several reports.

Against this background, allow me to reflect on the defence scene at Westminster as I see it.

Defence policy

The Government's Defence Policy is set out in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR), added to in July 2002 by a 'new chapter'. The implications of the new chapter are such that Defence Committee Chairman Bruce George MP thought it amounted to a re-write of Defence Policy rather than an addendum to it.

Our Armed Forces need lighter and more mobile tactical equipment to meet the threats and challenges we now face, which suggests new equipment purchases and less emphasis on conventional heavy weapons such as tanks, air defence aircraft, submarines and maritime patrol aircraft. Above all, the Armed Forces need to be 'well connected' by a sophisticated network centric capability.

These changes imply more money for new purchases and some cutbacks in existing equipment programmes – rumours suggest scrapping main battle tanks, buying fewer Eurofighter aircraft and even cancelling

Nimrod MRA4. On 22 March, Chancellor Gordon Brown announced in his pre-budget statement an 'increase in real terms' in the Defence Budget. But when CDS appeared before the Defence Committee on 24 March he was quite unable to confirm to the chairman whether the chancellor's statement, which had come as quite a surprise to him, meant he was going to get more cash to spend or more 'virtual money' which by Treasury accounting magic would leave him less cash to spend.

If that's the policy, what is actually happening on the ground? There appear to be two main themes – equipment decisions and Armed Forces' structure.

To take Armed Forces' structure first, about which I know little, Defence Committee Chairman Bruce George tried unsuccessfully to persuade Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon on 31 March, during his appearance before the



Geoff Hoon gave evidence in front of the Defence Committee in March

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Defence Committee, to give the committee an assurance that whatever happened he would not tinker any further with the Army's regimental structure in favour of the fighting unit models of the Navy and RAF. Mr Hoon replied that although he had no immediate plans to do so, neither he, nor any defence secretary, could give such an assurance. This will be a space worth watching!

Nearly all other discussion seems to centre around equipment issues, about which I know a great deal. There is first of all the lack of it, either at all or in the right place or at the right time. Then there is the relevance of it to the threat. Then, and this seems to be a dominant theme at present, there is the question of who should supply it.

The lack of equipment was dealt with in February at two hearings of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) on 23 and 25 February. The NAO annual report on defence Major Projects MPR2003 published in January presented an increasingly gloomy picture about the timescale, capability and cost of four capital projects (Nimrod MPR4, Astute Submarine, Brimstone and

Eurofighter) and concluded that a number of more recent 'smart procurement' projects were showing signs of going the same way, having used up too much of their risk contingency too early in their project lives to be certain of success.

The MoD classes the four named projects as 'heritage' projects (they used to be called 'legacy' projects) which signals that they were committed before New Labour came to power in 1997. For the MoD that means that the projects were not forged under the 'smart procurement initiative' to be 'faster, cheaper, better' and so suffer from the ills of the earlier 'dumb procurement' regime of which I was an integral and hard-working part. For Defence Ministers, it means that these are projects for which they cannot be held accountable.

MoD and BAE Systems

The PAC dealt with the 'heritage' projects on Monday 23 February. MoD witnesses were PUS Sir Kevin Tebbit, CDP Sir Peter Spencer, DCDS(EC) Lt-Gen Robert Fulton and, because the problems with these projects lay mainly with the industry, BAE Systems' Chief Executive Mike Turner. The committee was naturally critical of both MoD and industry for the delays and cost increases in these four programmes.

However, in a robust defence of his company Mike Turner asserted, several times, that however much the projects eventually cost and however long they took to deliver, they would certainly be less costly and more capable than any equivalent equipment bought from the USA. Mr Turner roundly criticised the MoD for the way it had placed the contracts for these projects, forcing the industry to accept unrealistic timescales and prices.

When asked by members how BAE Systems would approach the contract for the two new aircraft carriers, Mr Turner suggested that he would take that order on his own terms or not at all. The MoD, it seems, is over a barrel on these projects and short of cancelling them and starting again can do very little other than wait, hope and pay!

Two days later on 25 February the committee dealt with the more modern 'smart' projects with MoD witnesses CDP and DCDS(EC). The committee was anxious to hear from Sir Peter Spencer whether 'smart procurement' is all it was cracked up to be because although most of the projects reported on were at an early stage, there were worrying signs of possible significant future slippages in that many projects had already consumed

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