

Debate: The Search and Rescue Helicopter

Sir Jeremy Blackham questions, on several grounds, the decision to appoint a consortium offering a Sikorsky helicopter as the preferred bidder for the UK's search and rescue helicopter. Is there a strong rationale for the decision?

A Somewhat Strange Outcome

From: Sir Jeremy Blackham

Sir Jeremy Blackham is an independent defence commentator, having previously been Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Equipment Capability) and then UK President of EADS. He examines the MoD UK approach to buying a new search and rescue helicopter, and points to a significant flaw in government acquisition policy and process.

In March of this year the Government announced that the preferred bidder for the search and rescue helicopter (SAR(H)) contract – a new construction to be jointly operated by the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Transport – was Sorteria, a consortium of Thales UK, CHC Helicopters, the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) and Sikorsky, offering the Sikorsky S92 helicopter. Thus a third helicopter manufacturer was introduced into the small and crowded UK government rotary-wing market despite a number of statements, from the MoD at least, that they saw great economies in reducing the number of helicopter types in service, and planned to do so.

A Somewhat Strange Outcome?

A first thought is that this was a somewhat strange outcome. Strange, if arguably virtuous, that after their own rather dubious behaviour had pushed AgustaWestland (AW) off the US Presidential Helicopter contract, Sikorsky have been allowed to penetrate a UK market, where they have no employment footprint and no plans to establish one, over the heads of two companies (AW and Eurocopter) which actually provide UK employment. This appears to be yet another case of UK accepting US protectionism whilst still allowing US companies free access to our own defence market, in this case the more remarkable given the importance accorded to helicopter manufacturing capability in the Defence Industrial Strategy (DIS).

But there are deeper and more important reasons for raising an eyebrow at this outcome and this article raises two in particular, both of which appear to have been ignored. The first is the DIS, already mentioned. Ever since it was first published, there has been a lack of clarity about how it is interpreted and what its relationship is to the MoD's apparent default position, since there is clearly a tension between the demands of partnering and competition. This lack of clarity has made it difficult at least for some companies to assess whether or not an investment in the UK is a sensible option. In the longer term this is very likely to lead to a shift in employment from UK to offshore.

The second is the whole issue of through-life capability management (TLCM) involving careful consideration not

simply of the initial manufacture of equipment, but rather of the much greater cost of through-life manning, training, maintenance and support of that equipment, and of the infrastructure that those things demand. This suggests that the greater commonality you can achieve with equipment, the greater the efficiencies and economies you should be able to achieve. So, on the face of it, a decision to go for a new manufacturer and aircraft type is a strange one.

Any Sign of Joined-up Government?

It will doubtless be argued that this was not a 'standard' MoD purchase, rather it was a joint acquisition with the Department for Transport, and that it was anyway not a purchase of an aircraft, but rather of a complex service, where the provider must be given the maximum flexibility. This seems to me to open up a larger argument about government rotary-wing fleets as a whole. For surely the much vaunted 'joined-up government' principle demands that all government requirements should be examined holistically and not in a fragmented, departmentally specific way. *A fortiori* should this not be so when considering a venture such as SAR(H) where one partner already has a huge body of experience in operating rotary-wing machines?

It is not unknown, of course, for government departments to wish to distance themselves from the cultures, procedures and influence of other departments. From the taxpayer's point of view this is hardly satisfactory. Modern government tends to be one and indivisible, in the view of the 'man on the bus', who is always interested in shared services, benefits and efficiencies even if he might not characterise them in precisely that way.

In this particular, it would be interesting to know what steps the Senior Responsible Owner of the SAR(H) capability took to look at the benefits of exploiting existing arrangements, not just of infrastructure but of the whole breadth of the required capability for both partners. The principle of Defence Lines of Development (DLODs), whatever they might be called in other circumstances, seems in logic to spread far wider than the MoD, and to need particular attention where an acquisition is intended either jointly by more than one department, or by a department with less experience in the acquisition of large and costly capabilities. And what role did the Office of Government Commerce play? And how might other programmes involving rotary aircraft for other public services, such as the police, the fire services or the NHS take account of the synergies I am suggesting exist?

Eliminating a Flaw in Government Process

My proposition is that this particular programme may have fallen foul of a common flaw in government process and that

others could follow. This flaw is the tendency for departments to address each new problem with a new headline initiative – competition, DIS, TLMC, SROs, LODs etc. – and fail to examine where one initiative may conflict with another, surely an examination and implementation of the conclusions which should have primacy in any particular acquisition. This sets industry an almost impossible conundrum and has them wandering in a maze without a map. There is, I suggest, a need to bring government acquisition policy and practice together in a single place, whether it be the OGC or, given their much greater and longer direct practical experience, the former

Defence Procurement Agency (DPA) (now part of Defence Equipment and Support (DE&S)). It would probably need re-naming as it would need to examine the various policy initiatives and importantly their inter-relationships, decide what the guiding principles are and follow them through, see all government acquisition and its processes in a truly joined-up way, and ensure that industry understands exactly what the policies are.

Perhaps the most important thing of all is to remember that ‘man on the bus’. ■

Debate: Is Digitisation Dead?

Dr Jim Storr's paper in last October's edition on the factors that have caused digitisation to fall far short of the vision, has sparked much interest and debate. The author takes stock of what has been said and answers two points in detail. He says that those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them.

Mandy Rice-Davies and Digitisation

From: Dr Jim Storr

Jim Storr is an independent defence analyst. His paper, The Failure of Digital Command and Information Systems, was published in the October 2010 edition of RUSI Defence Systems and has provoked considerable interest and comment. Here he responds to some of the comment.

Showgirls and prostitutes sometimes display a deeply incisive knowledge of human nature; typically based on close, first-hand experience. When told that Lord Astor denied having had an affair with her, Mandy Rice-Davies (a key player in the Profumo Affair) famously said, “Well, he would, wouldn't he?”

In a previous article, I contended that the Army's battlefield digitisation programme has failed and that the reasons were largely human. We have now had seven responses, totalling over 10,000 words. It is interesting to see what they say. Before doing so, however, we should clear up a misconception. Bowman *is* Digitisation. Digitisation required a common battlefield infrastructure, provided at tactical levels by Bowman. Bowman is critical. Digitisation could not, and can not, succeed unless Bowman succeeds.

In his reply, the former Deputy IPT Leader for Bowman pointed out several current problems with digitisation. Among other things he considers that we are “doomed to suffer the same issues again”; unless we put the soldier at the heart of all relevant decisions. A very experienced operations research analyst said that almost all of the evidence about the effectiveness of Digitisation was negative. It was, however, all ‘written up’ due to a bad case of groupthink. Two professors (a psychologist and a sociologist) discussed some deeply problematic aspects of complex human and technical systems. A very senior CIS strategist pointed out some very telling issues relating to IT-led change

management. Many of his points relate to human behaviour: risk management; relationships with the user; and so on.

There were two dissenting replies. Both were from brigadiers who have, or had, a large influence on delivering the Digitisation programme. Both suggested that Digitisation has not failed. Well, they would, wouldn't they? Let's take two of their points in detail:

- Firstly, Project GP3 outgrew the infrastructure. Why did that happen? How did a software-only project outgrow stated hardware limitations? Is there something about software that does that? In practice that was a major failure of management. It was a real failure of several human institutions to impose control and discipline on a problematic project.
- Secondly, we were told that “the issues were all those of technology and finance”. We have just discussed a typical technical issue. As for finance, in practice we did not fit the programme to the available money. That is a very real, human, management issue. The basic requirement for digitisation was very simple. We could have procured that very cheaply.

Has digitisation failed? Well, if Bowman has failed to deliver, digitisation has failed. Are the real issues all human? Well, almost all of the key problems boil down to human issues.

The whole purpose of a review such as this is to generate hindsight. We once ran a study day which looked at the problems of digitisation. We heard, for example, from a weapons staff officer who had worked on the Wavell project 20 years before. In summing up, the chairman pointed out that almost all of the important lessons were, fundamentally, human. **That conference took place in 1999.** Unfortunately, none of today's senior decision-makers were present. It is well said that those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. ■