

By Tony Purton

The sudden departure of Lord Drayson as MoD's defence procurement mastermind has almost certainly dealt a crippling blow to the creation of a coherent policy in this area. Since the announcement of the SMART procurement initiative in 1997 I have been looking for a new 'Albert Speer' to create that miracle - or to make a silk purse out of a perennial sow's ear. My money was on Sir Peter Spencer, then on Lord Drayson. Both have now left MoD.

Sir Robert Walmsley, Chief of Defence Procurement for a record seven years, created under the SMART procurement banner what his successor Sir Peter Spencer, and the NAO, described as a virtual 'black hole' - the worst major project outcome since the start of the NAO's record keeping in 1985. Sir Peter's solution was a radical re-think to replace MoD's traditional optimism with a heavy dose of realism. His approach was endorsed by Lord Drayson who, as a scientist and engineer himself, brought added value to the post of minister of defence procurement.

Lord Drayson's robust approach to Britain's defence industries in his Defence Industrial Strategy set the scene for resolving the ancient conflict of whether the primary purpose of the defence equipment budget is to support Britain's defence industry or to equip the UK armed forces. His successor Baroness Taylor of Bolton has stopped all that while she 'reviews the situation'. The current Chief of Materiel is a military officer who will also leave shortly.

Professional knowledge, political determination and continuity in MoD has been lost. Politico/industrial interests survive unabated. I am beginning to think that Albert Speer was a 'one'off' and we will never see his like again - certainly not in the UK!

At a recent reunion of ex-MoD air-armaments experts at the RAF Club in London, an elderly (86 years old) former colleague confided to me that in the 1970s when West Indian type calypsos were used, as 'rap' is today, to publicise satirical messages he penned the following ditty:

"Cost plus contract
Very very nice,
If you make a balls of it
You get paid twice!" ANON

More than 30 years on, this little truism applies to modern defence projects such as Nimrod MRA4 and Astute where constant 'renegotiation of the contracts' to increase time and cost has even turned fixed priced contracts into cost plus deals [see the NAO Major Project Report 2007]. 'Cost plus contracting' is fast becoming the norm again in MoD under the Defence Industrial Strategy's 'partnership' arrangements to boost the UK defence industry and protect UK jobs.

Some things never change!

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