By Robin Ashby, Publishing Editor, Great North News Services

The Farnborough Air Show of 2008 marks a number of milestones, but perhaps one significant moment.

Typhoon has been declared to have full operational capability. The first A400M is expected to fly shortly. The deal to re-equip the RAF air tanker fleet has finally been concluded. The Hawk order for India may grow. Daily, unmanned air vehicles are in operation over Iraq and Afghanistan, operated by the RAF and the Army. Is this cause for celebration or a funeral march? Are Mitchell, Camm, Barnes Wallis at rest or turning in their graves? Will they be remembering The Sporting Times of 1882? (In Affectionate Remembrance of ENGLISH CRICKET, which died at the Oval on 29th AUGUST, 1882. Deeply lamented by a large circle of sorrowing friends and acquaintances. R.I.P. N.B.—The body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia.)

Those who see the glass as half full will be rejoicing. Second best fighter aircraft in the world in squadron strength. Logistics at last being tackled after so long in Cinderella's weeds. Next generation air power brought into service in record time under the impetus of operational need. Buoyant defence exports.

The half-empty brigade will say, yes, fine, but hang on, what of next year? Where is the intellectual property being created? Increasingly in Seattle, Fort Worth, Toulouse, Hamburg, where final assembly takes place too. And how long before Hawk manufacture – and potential development – moves to low-cost but well-educated India? And even ownership of civil wings has crossed the Channel. The Harrier, the icon of British engineering, is within sight of the end of the runway, to be replaced by the US designed and built Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter. Combat UAVs are bought off the American shelf, recce ones from elsewhere.

In this commentator's view, stand-alone British defence aerospace is past the point of no return. Our higher education in engineering is beset by problems of quantity and quality, and a cult of celebrity rewards foul-mouthed bird brains rather than intellectual endeavour and substantive wealth creation. Hats may be tipped to our "gallant lads" (and lasses) but support for R&D continues to erode. The successors to British Aerospace still hold a Union Jack in one hand but the Stars and Stripes is aloft in the other. Others speak Greek in Roman accents.

Welcome Ian King, not to your kingdom, but to a multi-national federation whose centre of gravity could be anywhere. Are you a Mike Brearley or a Michael Vaughan, or a Michael Atherton or a Mike Denness?