

THE GREAT DEBATE – A CALL TO ARMS

The fighter debate, which started quietly seven years ago, has reached a critical decision point. If some senior Department of Defence officials succeed in their intention to commit the government, and Australian taxpayers, to acquiring the Joint Strike Fighter, Australia will be irrevocably committed for the next three to four decades to a solution that is based on a business case with major financial, technical, strategic, and capability flaws.

For most Australians this rolling debate has been, in most respects, entertaining theatre, with admirals, generals and air marshals - serving and retired, bureaucrats, politicians and analysts firing arguments back and forth in the press, on the internet, on television, and in parliamentary hearings.

To closer observers, the debate has been much more than mere theatre. The Defence bureaucratic machine has been challenged in public forum, maybe for the first time ever, by private, independent experts in Defence Industry who have dared to question senior Defence officials on a range of technical, strategic, budgetary and risk management issues. So far, the Defence bureaucracy has not distinguished itself in this debate, where it has deigned to join it, having managed to decisively lose every single engagement with their critics.

This debate has essentially distilled down to two positions. Defence officials advocate a radical 'one shot quick fix' solution for the future Air Force. This plan expends well over 12 billion dollars of taxpayer's funds, not even accounting for F/A-18 life extension costs or 'personnel costs'; limits current and future Air Force capability; weakens the national strategic position in the region; and, ignores prudent risk management; aiming to acquire the yet to be proven Joint Strike Fighter to, firstly, replace the F-111 and, ultimately, the F/A-18 fleets.

They have ignored, with some prejudice, the alternate position. That is an incremental and optimised compromise strategy put up by Industry in 2001, in which current and future Air Force capability is maximised; over 4.5 billion dollars of taxpayers funds are saved; the national strategic position in the region is bolstered; and, risks are prudently managed. This strategy calls for acquisition of around 50 new F-22A Raptor fighters to replace the F/A-18s before costly life extension, and evolving the proven F-111 capability through progressive technology insertion programs, the latter emulating the US Air Force model applied to many types, such as the B-52, B-1, Chinook and the A-10.

Most in the defence community, and the wider Australian community, have opted not to take positions in this debate. Arguments for such apparent equivocation are many, but most frequently is heard the view that the Defence bureaucracy's rationale for their position in the debate is yet to be clearly articulated.

The reality is that this rationale has been articulated since 2002 in a wide range of public documents, including several parliamentary submissions, an ASPI strategic insight paper, and numerous interviews and public statements. While these documents may lack intellectual rigour, analytical and technical depth, coherency of argument or strategic consistency, they do present a good insight and understanding of the sophistic and dissembled reasoning used by the Defence bureaucracy's advocates to justify their position in the debate.

Observers who wish to wait until these advocates in senior Defence positions more properly articulate their position, before taking sides in this debate, will be waiting a very long time indeed. Why?

After taking heavy damage in public debate during late 2003 and early 2004, Defence officials shifted their strategy in the debate to play a systematic avoidance game. Avoid hard debate on hard facts, numbers and issues. Obfuscate, confuse and muddle as many issues as possible, throw up red herrings where opportunities arise, and avoid any situations where their position might be exposed to informed scrutiny. Create as many opportunities as possible to delay, postpone or otherwise avoid debate and public or parliamentary questions.

The only play senior officials have yet to deploy is the game of 'in this brown paper envelope we have the data that proves us right but, sadly, the envelope is marked "Classified", so we can't possibly tell you what it is'. That classified technical details have little bearing on big picture issues such as program funding, risks, and regional capability rankings is, of course, irrelevant in a game of smoke and mirrors, where inconvenient facts are regarded as toxic and reality an anathema to be avoided wherever and whenever possible.

Where does this leave the undecided in this debate? Remain undecided and you grant this small group of senior Defence officials their most fervent wish in this debate - a community which allows itself to be paralysed by a well crafted game plan aimed at inducing inaction through confusion. Meanwhile, intensive effort is being quietly invested by these officials into committing the nation to a plan from which there is no backing out.

If you are an undecided observer, and you care about the future of Australia's strategic position, and how our taxpayer's funds are invested, now is the time to take a position and be heard.

Our collective future is in your hands.

It is time to get off the fence and help fix Defence.