

What follows here in this new UKNDA section on the Royal Air Force is an independent and personal view by a very experienced retired senior officer. I leave readers to consider his views and send us any comments they may have - and/or to submit papers of their own.

Editor

Concerns of a retired Air Marshal

During this prolonged period of Labour rule over us, the Royal Air Force has been called upon to carry out more operations overseas than occurred during many years of the Cold War. Decisions made by politicians to conduct military operations should not only be based on sound advice from the heads of the three services, but closely scrutinised by an intelligent House of Commons. It seems to me that when Parliament is sidelined and the make up of the House of Commons is almost entirely without military experience, this process becomes devalued. My concern is that an increasingly 'civilian' House of Commons is not sufficiently well-informed to be able to debate such issues in the depth needed, and therefore the voice of the House of Lords becomes more relevant. Furthermore, the position of the heads of services in their advisory role assumes greater importance. Yet my impression is that their role has been diminished. Does each individual still have the right of access to No 10? I believe not.

It is incumbent on Government to rectify this situation.

There has been a campaign in the Civil Service to diminish the influence of the uniformed element within the Ministry of Defence. This campaign has been conducted over a long period; indeed I witnessed clear evidence of it during my time there in the mid-80s. To a large degree it has succeeded. The consequences are the pollution of the quality of decision-making within the Ministry; an increase in the influence of the Treasury and a consequent imbalance in the provision of support to all three services. This has led to a progressive dilution of the quality of equipment in service, of which the Nimrod is a case in point.

At a time when commitments and tasking are increasing the pressures on service personnel, who are called upon to risk their very lives, Government must take note of the military commanders' concerns and ensure not only the adequate provision of up-to-date equipment and spares, but satisfactory living conditions for servicemen and their families. The scandalous decision to close all military hospitals and throw injured personnel into the failing NHS demonstrates perfectly how successive Governments have failed to

take the advice of their military advisors. There has been dumbing down on a massive scale and a failure to recognise the principles on which success in defence depends. Service personnel are being taken advantage of and will vote with their feet. Government has failed in its duty.

The RAF wastes enormous amounts of time, money and energy on 'robbing'; that is removing parts from one aircraft to another. Though spares provision is an inexact science, over recent years the lack of funding for spares has led to an increasing burden on hard-pressed engineers and technicians to keep aircraft available for operations called for by politicians blissfully ignorant of how such personnel have to live and work. Nor do service personnel have the luxurious access to expenses and protection from Freedom of Information enjoyed by MPs.

Furthermore, apart from the air-defence organisation perhaps, these pressures on RAF units are being felt across the board. Per Ardua ad Infinitum!

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