

Defence and Parliament – July 2007

Government changes

The most significant event of recent days was, of course, the accession of Gordon Brown to the office of Prime Minister and the announcement of a new team of ministers.

For Defence there was a large element of *plus ça change* as Des Browne retained his position as Secretary of State. At the same time Mr. Browne has also become Secretary of State for Scotland. Since the success of the SNP in the recent Scottish elections, the political significance of this part of the Union has of course grown significantly. It is not surprising therefore that Brown has turned to one of his trusty lieutenants, Browne, to deal with the 'Salmond problem'.

The worry, however, is that if SoS for Defence is now deemed to be a part-time job then it is probable that it will be condemned to be and regarded as being a backwater of Government. It is difficult, therefore, not to agree with Dr Liam Fox's reaction to the news:

"I am astonished that Des Browne has taken on another department and I expect that our service men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan will be appalled and angry that Gordon Brown sees Defence as a part-time job."

On, perhaps, a more positive note, Admiral Sir Alan West (former First Sea Lord), has been appointed Minister of State for Security and will be raised to the Peerage. Interestingly the Conservative Party have shadowed Sir Alan with Dame Pauline Neville-Jones, a former head of the Joint Intelligence Committee. A common criticism of British politics is that politicians now know little (and care less) about British Defence/Security. At least we must hope that we have an experienced 'Defence (if not 'Security') Expert' inside the corridors of power, or at least the Home Office.

Gordon Brown has also proposed surrendering some of his royal prerogative powers to Parliament, including the right to declare war. Clearly this is designed as an attempt to placate a disaffected electorate (and Labour Party) but it could be very risky. While such a move would appear to be laudably democratic, in times of urgency and crises the Executive must give an immediate and clear lead. Mr. Blair won his vote over Iraq, so a change such as our new Prime Minister intends would not have prevented the UK's involvement in this war anyway. If the Executive is incompetent it can always be removed at the ballot box. This move could be recipe for delay and party-politicking at the expense of the national interest.

Finally, Mr. Brown has stated that he will set up a National Security Council. Clearly he sees "Security" in holistic terms and the Council will encompass the military, police, foreign policy and overseas aid to counter the 'terrorist threat'. Is this a Trojan horse? While it is logical that government strategy should consider all these relevant dimensions, there must be a lingering suspicion that focus on the terrorist threat (being closer to home and thus of greater public concern) might be at the expense of defence against more symmetrical threats, which of course, is even more costly to provide.

Defence questions 16th June

The two key areas of questioning on the 16th of June related to the Review of Naval Bases and co-operation with the French to (possibly) together build the proposed new class of aircraft carriers; two for us and one for them.

MPs with seats in the three main naval bases quizzed the SoS over the progress of the review. Mr Browne simply blustered and said the Review was "ongoing".

"This complex review is progressing well but further work is required before final conclusions can be reached."

The Naval Base Review has become a 'hot potato'. The SoS is probably boxed in, in terms of what can and can't be done politically. Commentators who have suggested that Browne may settle on a compromise of scaling down all three bases rather than closing one, will probably be close to the mark. Salami slicing – again! There is a limit as to how far one can constantly reduce the Nation's Defence infrastructure – and that point may now not just be close, but far behind us.

On the carriers Browne noted:

“Our co-operation on the carriers with the French is very productive.”

It seems odd that the proposed Anglo/French collaboration has been justified (by Lord Drayson) as a way of bearing down on costs as the gap between the (building) Alliance and the MoD's costings is so narrow. BAE Systems and their partners Vosper Thorneycroft are increasingly concerned that the possibility of sharing the build of the three carriers is delaying still further the final decision to 'go' with this project. They warn that unless they have real (!) work very soon they will lose their skilled workforce as they cannot pay them for doing nothing. We can only hope that the commitment (recently re-affirmed by Lord Drayson) to continue with the Carrier Project survives the autumnal Comprehensive Spending Review.

Overstretch

The Public Accounts Committee on the 3rd of July reported that the Armed Forces were overstretched. The relevant minister Stephen Twigg responded by saying that extra financial incentives had been offered to address the issue. He said that the MOD accepted that the Forces were “.... *stretched, but not over-stretched*”. When and where is the tipping point we wonder?

Conclusions

Perhaps the most worrying thing from our perspective is the increasing use of the word “*Security*”. If Mr. Brown harbours ambitions of continuing to run down Defence spending then he could mask his real intent by being tough on “*Security*” while being even more ‘tough’ on Defence spending. It is fashionable in some academic circles to state that a nation’s security can best be defended by increasing aid budgets, etc. and that security relates not only to military power but lighting, water supply, etc. Mr. Brown is not unaware of such arguments. On 13th Feb 2006 Mr Brown reiterated the mantra of most political parties that “*Defence is the first priority of any Government.*” Being an economic historian he may, however, already have calculated that the route to “*Security*” is via aid budgets and ‘soft’ power and that this emphasis on a visible counter-terrorist effort could insulate him from the charge of being soft on the Nation’s “*Defence*”. Let us hope he’s not that Machiavellian.