

By Syd Barrett

The dire straits the Prime Minister is in, as he starts his seaside summer holiday, will no doubt turn his thoughts to a reshuffle to show he's still in charge.

Here at Defence Viewpoints, we care little about whether Margaret Beckett will make a dramatic return to the Cabinet as "Minister for the Today Programme" (for our overseas readers, an influential morning current affairs radio show, much listened to by those in the "Westminster Village"). Foreign Secretary David Miliband, who we see from time to time on the train from Newcastle to London, may well be the Leader-in-waiting, but is not relevant to our thoughts. And as to the various young guns whose names are bandied around, we think more about the Turks of the ATK than the young Turks of the Labour Party.

No, we concentrate on the inhabitants of the top floor of the old Air Ministry on Whitehall – now known as the MoD's Main Building (mind you, it was fun when they were decamped to the old War Office while a major PFI-funded refurb was undertaken).

Reshuffle talk makes us think about what we've got and what we could get. Des Browne was the only Cabinet Minister left in post when Gordon Brown stepped up from COO to Executive Chairman of UK Plc. He'd had his big break as Chief Secretary to the Treasury when Big Gord was Chancellor. Many thought he'd have a fast track to the national wallet for extra money. That was soon disabused, although no doubt he continues to fight esoteric fights over the ground rules for long term treatment of kit secured as Urgent Operational Requirements and paid for from central reserves.

His total abdication of responsibility for defence procurement to the late lamented Paul Drayson (is he winning motor races anywhere, does anyone know?) was a sensible administrative tactic but a disastrous political strategy. But where Sec Des gets all our plaudits is his total commitment to the troops fighting on two fronts. This is best evidenced by his frequent trips to both fronts - has anyone in his position ever done anything comparable? This means he understands better than most what's going on in these theatres, and equally importantly he meets the fighting commanders from whom the toppest brass will come in future.

He's well aware of the "butcher's bill" too, and although he's been frequently criticised over Selly Oak Hospital and Headley Court rehabilitation centre, he's putting in the time and, increasingly, winning some extra finance. And at a personal level too, he attends all the Welcome Homes organised in Parliament by its Army Group for troops returning from operations to personally thank them for their efforts and, in the case of the wounded, their sacrifice. There are no cameras and no voters, so this is perfectly real.

The man has experience, which the regime of Defence Secretary Hoon has shown to be invaluable. There's talk of John Hutton, the Business Minister, coming on over, but our

message to the Supreme Leader is similar to that of Pink Floyd.

The second success we'd like to see reinforced is Baroness (Ann) Taylor, Minister for Defence Equipment and Support. She's a serious political player who stepped in to help Party and Premier when Paul Drayson quit under "interesting" circumstances. A former Cabinet Minister who had been chairing the Intelligence and Security Committee, she took a big step backwards to the most junior Ministerial grade. She deserves an improvement in status to Minister of State with orders to "carry on". She's getting to grips with the mare's nest that is defence procurement, and "no change" is the right policy here too.

As to the other two Ministers, we are agnostic. Derek Twigg the Veterans Minister seems to be perfectly competent and a decent human being, but his career path may well lie elsewhere, and we wish him luck. The same can be said about Minister for the Armed Forces Bob Ainsworth. A former Whip and Trade Unionist, we're not convinced he wasn't parachuted into his job as anything other than an administrative convenience last time around. Whispers are he gets on better with Other Ranks than with officers, which, while no sin, is unhelpful in a structured environment like the Armed Forces. So hail and farewell might not be an unreasonable outcome.

Of course, there is one issue that needs tackling, namely Des Browne's twin hatting as Secretary of State for Scotland. A recent Parliamentary Question showed he's been visiting a large number of defence establishments in Scotland. Of itself, no bad thing, but surely it's trying to show that he's doing both his jobs. The dire straits referred to in the opening paragraph are in large measure the result of the thrashing Labour took in the recent Glasgow by-election, so it's not really working, and certainly Des Browne's "part time" job is used as a political stick to beat him with, rather than proper criticism of politics and procedure within the Defence Ministry for which he is more properly responsible. We need his attention focussed on the implications of politics in Iraq and Afghanistan, not Scotland!