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Nearly two weeks ago, the MOD announced that Project Belvedere, the military's scheme to consolidate helicopter basing and command and control facilities, was finally being scrapped. This truly flabbergasting event comes in spite of how patently hale and hearty the plans were.

Apologies for the brief segue into sarcasm ♦ after all, the eventual death of Project Belvedere falls under the "OK, we've got to finally fess up that this is going nowhere" approach to project management. The MOD Press Release was slipped out amidst the ongoing expenses scandal, (good day to bury bad news anyone? The old ones are the good ones...)

guaranteeing that it wouldn't even make page 10, and was so bland and to the point that it almost seems sheepish. One can easily imagine the MOD apparatchik who first presented the idea for this little bureaucratic disaster to his superiors to be sitting in a corner and crossing his fingers that no-one picks up on just what a spectacular waste of time and money the whole exercise has been.

Project Belvedere has been in trouble for a while. Its demise has been slow, painful, and entirely inevitable; almost from the start, anyone with half an ounce of common sense could see the holes in the plan. But here's the kicker ♦ despite spending so much time and money on looking into the proposals, the MOD have finally admitted that going through with the scheme would not be cost-effective. Amidst the current climate of every paper clip on the desk of every MP in Westminster needing to be accounted for and justifiable, this humble blogger is wondering whether the Telegraph would be interested in asking the MOD for its financial records on Project Belvedere to date.

To backtrack for a moment, let me offer a bit of background. The review was initiated in back in 2005, when the MOD proposed to merge the helicopter fleet into a single Joint Helicopter Command (JHC) Battlefield Helicopter Estate. This raised the always unwelcome spectre of base closures ♦ Odiham, Benson, Wattisham, Dishforth, and Yeovilton were all put under the spotlight, and have stayed there since. Lyneham too, set to be deprived of its C-130s, was highlighted, seemingly in the laudable quest to grant it some kind of future role. Which was to be the MOD's new golden boy? Which were to be scrapped?

For four years, trying to get any solid information about where it was leading, if anywhere, has seemed more difficult than getting blood from a stone. James Arbuthnot MP and James Gray MP both recently used Parliamentary Questions to have a go at getting the MOD to say something about the Project, to be met with the usual genus of non-descriptive answer. Yes, both represent constituencies containing major helicopter bases, but the questions they asked were very good ones ♦ the key query in both cases being easily summed up as, "when in the name of all that is holy will you tell us something and let our chaps on the ground get on with planning for the future?"

Of course, there were a lot of questions to be answered in looking at the Project Belvedere proposals, all of which the MOD no doubt took into account, even if they weren't directly mentioned in the Press Release. Here are a few that jump out :

- What would be the cost of transferring the choppers, their flight crews and their support crews to new bases?
- What would be the cost of building new command, control and maintenance infrastructure?
- What would be the cost of dismantling old facilities?
- What would be the resale value of the decommissioned sites?

Now, I may not be on the MOD staff, but it does seem blindly obvious that the response to many of those questions would be "rather a lot of your English pounds". Or, in the case if the last question, "not remotely enough of your English pounds these days". It seems obvious that any efficiency savings that might be up for grabs would take years, perhaps a decade or two, to hit the 'break even' mark. This isn't rocket science ♦ surely someone must have spotted that Project Belvedere looked like a waste of time

from the start?

Then there's the politics of it all. One thing that the MOD Press Release does mention is the "environmental issues" of a consolidated base ♦ in other words, just how logarithmic would the increase in noise pollution and airspace congestion be when you have a whole lot of different formations vying for training time over one bit of the country? Or, to put it another way, just how many local folks would say "oh, you've got to be joking" and start making placards? From the other side of the equation, you have the kind of factors that worried Messrs Arbuthnot and Gray ♦ what about the impact on already struggling local communities and economies when a major employer, and a major source of revenue for local shops, disappears?

And how much longer would it take to deploy our helicopters to where they are needed from a consolidated base? If the future of the British military is supposed to lie in rapid response to international incidents which develop suddenly and progress quickly, does this extend our effective supply chain? After all, getting heavy equipment to the front line is as much of a supply chain issue as getting guns and butter to the front line, with plenty of subsidiary costs, most obviously in fuel.

In the wake of this, the online rumour mill is still grinding away. We are still waiting for confirmation of where the MOD will base the upcoming Future Lynx fleet (assuming that too doesn't end up under the axe), and we will no doubt hear plenty about that in days to come. And all of this at a time when budgets are tight, costs are on the rise overall, and the British military has much more pressing demands to make of the public purse, including warships, jetfighters, armoured fighting vehicles, and yes a few more actual helicopters.

One thing that can be said about Project Belvedere, though, is that reading about it has something of the amusement factor of a good Greek tragedy.</p>