

There is a general proposition promulgated recently that all UK defence procurement is bad.

One example is the Landing Ship Dock (the Bay Class, one of which is to be laid up under current Government defence cuts proposals)

But on at least two occasions, in public (though under the Chatham House rule) a senior responsible person at the National Audit Office has been heard to say that even so, they represented value for money.

The solution was innovative - to buy a Dutch design and build to MoD requirements. The low cost tender-winning solution - Swan Hunter - was low cost because it had reduced its technical and management capabilities to compete on price in global markets. SO when the MoD started changing the specification, the strategy started to unravel and all the other bad things started to happen.

So there are lessons here. Bespoke costs more than off-the-peg (ask any suit buyer. And the alterations cost.) The best is the enemy of the good. if we want manufacturing and operational sovereignty, we have to pay for it.

If we buy foreign, they can still exercise control, usually through the software. (c.f. Chinook Mk 3, another oft-sited failure) Or in the case of Belgium during the Gulf War, by declining to supply what we need to make systems work in combat (in that case, ammunition)

As my father used to say, if it were easy, any fool would be able to do it.

So good luck in your new post as Chief of Defence Materiel, Mr Gray. On tip for free however. take another look at the basic suggestions behind the Smart Procurement initiative of the late nineties. And if you can't get the military out of the mechanics of procurement (as opposed to the specification of capability requirements) make sure they can get promotion in place while working for you. then make them stick at their posts until that capability is delivered. Clear lines of control and senior management with whom the buck stops would be a logical, effective and cheap fix.