

Foreword

In February 1942, facing a Japanese invasion, the New Zealand Prime Minister pleaded with Washington for arms. New Zealand, he pointed out, was virtually unarmed: “This, we feel, is not our fault.” It is hard to see who else’s it was; it is a mark of independent countries to take care of their own security.

The risk of invasion has since become very remote, but for almost two decades the effectiveness of the country’s Defence Force has been plagued by obsolescent equipment and seemingly interminable arguments over its replacement. Some of this is endemic in democracies unthreatened and at peace. In New Zealand’s case the problem was exacerbated by ‘block obsolescence’—the remarkably successful burst of procurement in the late 1960s meant that ships, aircraft and army transport all came up for replacement in the 1990s.

Overcoming this was not helped by a defence budget which fell steadily after 1989. From a post-war average of 1.8 per cent of GDP, spending on defence fell by almost half—to under 1 per cent of GDP. This sharpened the need to make choices, and it also sharpened the inter-Service and political lobbying for what was left.

This is the background against which the author analyses six acquisition decisions made since 1984. Importantly he studies the *politics* as well as the *processes* involved in the selection of these major acquisitions. On the whole the processes have worked well, with no evidence of corruption (always a risk given the huge sums at stake). Cost overruns, that other universal curse of defence procurement, have also been limited by the philosophy of wherever possible buying only established technology. Where this had to be stretched, as in integrating the separate systems in the Anzac frigate build, I can confess that at least one Secretary of Defence was gripped by some anxious moments.

New Zealand’s main difficulties, Dr Greener demonstrates, came in the politics of procurement. Buying ships, aircraft or armoured personnel carriers brings out in every democracy the armchair strategists and lobbyists for particular equipment and even brands. In this country the size of the sums involved brought political divisions. It was not that large items like frigates or combat aircraft cost more for New Zealand than for other countries—in many cases they cost less—but that in the recent international climate many New Zealanders could not see the *need* to buy them at all.

In this climate a broad bipartisanship in Parliament over defence policy broke down. In the course of the past three decades defence and its equipment became intensely politicised, reflecting the deeper divisions over New Zealand’s foreign policy and position in the world. Our inability as a nation to make up our minds on what we want the Defence Force to do has, as this analysis gently points out,

in some cases been costly, in some cases damaging to effectiveness, and in most confusing to those serving in the forces.

Deployments of aircraft and ships to the Middle East (and the equipment needed to support them) have been decried, withdrawn and reinstated. Lessons about the value of interoperable maritime patrol aircraft and the need for military sealift have been forgotten and expensively relearned. Political fashions come and go, but they are not the most desirable way of choosing major equipment which will be used by the Defence Force for thirty or more years.

An unsettled defence strategy has also intensified inter-Service rivalry. A healthy rivalry is a fact of life among the three Services, and the occasional effort, such as Canada's, to merge them into one organisation and uniform has only made matters worse. The competition for access to a falling budget, though, tempted some to go beyond the acceptable limits. It led to the rise of factions within the army with, as Dr Greener makes clear, some constitutionally improper behaviour—leaks and private briefings by some which an official enquiry identified as 'designed to advance the interests of the Army'.

This study is not a jeremiad. It accepts the thought and honest effort which went into time-consuming argument and sometimes compromised outcomes. Given the difficulties it may seem surprising that the Defence Force managed the important re-equipment that it did. Over the period a blue-water navy was maintained and repeatedly deployed in distant waters; the *Orion* were re-winged to give them a further twenty years of life; naval helicopters were bought; and much better armoured personnel carriers acquired for the two regular battalions.

Nonetheless, the analysis makes it clear that we could do better. Political fashions can be deterred or at least weakened by a better understanding of the long-term needs of defence; inter-Service rivalries can be contained by a more durable defence planning system. This well-researched and accurate look at the lessons of the past two decades does not suggest the answers—there are no easy ones—but it shines a clear light on the difficulties of defence procurement, a hitherto rather shadowy subject which is of major importance to both the finances and the standing of our country.

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