

By Great North News Services staff reporter

The campaign by Harwich MP Douglas Carswell against the UK defence industry has been carried to the House of Commons – and been slapped down by the Shadow Defence Minister.

Gerald Howarth MP said " As far as the defence industrial strategy is concerned, I am afraid to say that I fundamentally disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich. He is entitled to his view, but I have to put on the record that some of the things that he said about buying off the shelf are not the policy of the Conservative party. The policy of our party is to ensure that we have sovereign capability over key equipment, such as the joint strike fighter, and his suggestion that the whole procurement programme is a corporatist, protectionist racket is very wide of the mark."

Mr Carswell has gone out of his way to avoid making friends and influencing people. His recent attack, covered by Parliamentary Privilege, followed on from a fringe meeting at the Conservative Party Conference at which he made similar charges. But some of his colleagues take a jaundiced view, suggesting privately he should be "wearing a straight jacket." A previous approach by Defence Viewpoints to Mr Carswell to publish his unexpurgated views was politely but instantly and firmly rejected personally by him – "I don't have anything to do with any platform connected to the defence industry".

In the major part of his speech, Mr Carswell said : "Labour came to power promising to overhaul defence procurement, yet according to the best-selling author Lewis Page, its defence industrial strategy amounts to business as usual. The defence industrial strategy is more about industry than defence. It does more to safeguard the interests of selected contractors than the interests of the armed forces. The DIS is good at putting large amounts of public money on to the balance sheets of a few contractors, but that is about all it is good for. The DIS talks about best value for money, and improving delivery and costs, but all the evidence shows that the DIS promises things that are almost by definition mutually exclusive. We cannot both shore up our defence industrial base and provide our armed forces with the best value kit in the world; it is a logical impossibility.

"The DIS is, in reality, a corporatist, protectionist racket. Lobbyists for the DIS on the political left justify it as a means of preserving jobs. The same arguments once trotted out to justify Government subsidy of British Leyland are used to legitimise squandering our defence budget. To those on the political right, the fig leaf justification is about something called sovereignty of supply. The same arguments were once trotted out to justify the corn laws.

"Defence procurement is run in the interests of the big contractors, not our armed forces. Billions are spent on what it suits the likes of BAE Systems, VT and others to supply. The taxpayer pays a high price for protectionist procurement; the soldier pays a blood price. I shall give one example. In Afghanistan, helicopters allow our troops to cover distances quickly and

give us tactical flexibility, yet there are not enough of them. Why? Protectionist procurement. In a letter to me, dated 31 July last year, Lord Drayson admitted that the MOD had not run a competitive tender process to replace the Lynx. It was, he wrote,

"the judgment of the department that a competition...would cause delay".

"Thus the alternatives were never fully considered.

"A £1 billion contract to build helicopters was awarded for a helicopter that cost almost 50 per cent. more than the alternatives, and which would not be ready until at least 2012. That is a long time to wait if one is on a minefield in southern Afghanistan. Sir Kevin Tebbit, who was the permanent under-secretary at the MOD when the decision to exclude rival bids was made, did not have to wait anything like that time before he joined the board of the company that got the contract. Our armed forces in Afghanistan pay a blood price for the shortage of helicopters. The price of protectionist procurement is paid in English blood in Helmand.

"It is ironic that the helicopter that eventually lifted Corporal Mark Wright and his comrades off the minefield in Helmand was apparently an American Sikorsky—precisely the kind of alternative never considered by the MOD. Those who think that procurement policy should be about protecting jobs should perhaps remember that. Sikorsky tells me that it wrote to the MOD, offering to supply some 20-plus lift helicopters within months. It tells me that it took Sir Kevin's former Department longer to respond to the offer than it would have taken the firm to fulfill it.

"Protectionist procurement weakens us. The idea that it can somehow strengthen our standing in the world to purchase military equipment from only a handful of supposedly UK suppliers is nonsense. We need off-the-shelf defence procurement. In any market where there is a constraint on supply, the seller sets the terms of trade; so it is in defence. The DIS restricts supply to a few privileged contractors. No through-life approach can stop the taxpayer being ripped off, or the armed forces being denied the kit that they need to have on time, every time.

"We need to consider making off-the-shelf procurement the default setting for our defence procurement policy. BAE Systems and VT might not like it, but it would ensure that our armed forces had the kit they need to do the tasks that we set them. It would help us to meet the challenges that Robert Kagan writes about in his book. We need off-the-shelf, multilateral procurement, working in collaboration with our democratic allies."

Criticisms were rejected by an MoD spokesman this afternoon. "We have delivered equipment valued at more than £10bn to the Armed Forces in the last three years. We give priority to equipping people on, and training for, operations but also ensure that we provide the necessary core capabilities for our forces over the longer term.

"Alongside industry, we continue to tackle the challenges in the complex business of delivering high quality battle winning equipment for our forces; but the recent HCDC report on Defence Equipment praises the speed with which we are delivering vital equipment to our Armed Forces on the front line and we remain committed to the Defence Industrial Strategy. We are working closely with industry to develop it further."

The attack on Sir Kevin Tebbit has incensed his friends. The allegations were "ludicrous, untrue and personally insulting," said one. "Amongst Carswell's misconceptions are that UK defence procurement is ukase rather than collegiate - there's no way that Tebbit could act as alleged even if he wanted to."

Another said "Kevin has been a diligent public servant, privy to the most sensitive information, and has always displayed the utmost integrity. I'm sure he'll have been deeply wounded by this, but given the attitudes ingrained in him over many years working for the nation, he'll feel unable to respond even though now a private citizen. Such comments repeated outside Parliament may well be libelous. No doubt he'll grit his teeth, but if he were grinding them too that would be no surprise."

As part of his campaign, Mr Carswell recently published an entry on his blog "indecision time in defence". In response, Dr Jeffrey Bradford, Editor-in-Chief, DefenseIndustrialBase, has pointed out that the purpose of defence is to deter (i.e. not to start from a position of "choosing which wars to fight"). Deterring potential aggressors requires the investment in capabilities to put them off doing wrongful things.

Capabilities require an industrial base capable of providing them - what is the point of knowing the problem but being unable to address it? And has been found in the past, critical items cannot be subject to the whims of other nations. Defence Industrial Strategy was all about matching industrial capabilities to defence needs and further enhanced with the Defence Technology Strategy (identifying R&D priorities in support).

Criticising procurements such as the Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft at the superficial level is all too easy. However it is with no small sense of irony to note that the Eurofighter contract was so tightly written because of the propensity of politicians to change their minds causing chaos for the military and industry alike.

The Future Aircraft Carrier is regarded a key to projecting military capability around the world to protect British interests in an era of globalisation - is this not the logical product of reviewing British foreign policy interests and defence needs ?

Lastly, with regard to buying the best kit in the world, there is an implicit assumption that overseas developed military equipment is superior - interesting that the USA is buying defensive electronics and means to combat improvised explosive devices from the UK by the bucket-load.

To suggest the military and MoD lack clarity is perhaps a reflection of the broad failure both of politicians in government to manoeuvre as circumstances change but also of fringe elements within the opposition for choosing to be shrill about defence rather than pursuing a more detailed analysis and critique of the subject as best befits the role of the Opposition.