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A New Decade

A decade has flown and today we are on the threshold of a new one. It seems an appropriate moment to take account of the sixties and to resolve that the seventies will have stronger wings.

A ten-year candle is a fair measure of progress in most departments of aviation. The last decade began momentarily for defence: Blue Streak was cancelled; TSR.2 was launched; and the Zuckerman report on defence-project management was published.

Blue Streak died unwept as a weapon, and its transfiguration into Europe's space launcher seemed to make good sense. Eldo became the first token of Britain's historic decision to throw in her lot with Europe, using technology as her admission ticket. But it became a monument to political technology, having been conceived in a political rapture without due care for cost or commercial purpose. By the end of the decade, though Blue Streak had fired perfectly, Eldo was foundering in disillusionment.

TSR.2 was killed by party-political shot: it had long been regarded by the left as the embodiment of all that they hated most about the right. It seemed to them to stand for outdated imperialism, and to prey upon social funds. It had to be destroyed. Its cancellation was a gross affront to the technology on which Britain's bread and quality of life increasingly depend. But TSR.2 did not die in vain. Its death taught that cost is the enemy of technology. The old wartime dictum "never mind the cost, get it right", had persisted too long, together with its handmaiden the cost-plus Ministry contract. The sixties saw these discredited.

TSR.2's pallbearers realised that thenceforth the priority had to be cost. It followed that before a project could be costed it had to be precisely defined and specified, and the export market carefully researched. This created a new branch of technology, in which job-definition, breakdown and costing demand as much intellect as do weight or aerodynamics. With TSR.2 died the notion that plane-making is for planemakers. This lasts in France and Germany, but the same social and economic forces must prevail in the end.

The Zuckerman report of 1961 prescribed the project phases which are now so familiar: feasibility study, operational requirement, definition study, specification, contract, development, and so on. While money spent defining a project can save money in the long run, the Z method has produced a greater tonnage of British paper and wood than of new British aeroplanes. It has had a crazily convincing momentum particularly congenial to civil servants: meetings, holding-contracts, busy design teams, and no awkward questions about public money from inquisitive MPs like Messrs Onslow or Dalyell—though if they inquired they would probably discover that during the sixties the Ministry of Technology spent at least £30 million on A-300B, AFVG and MRCA paper and wood.

As the sixties dawned the Ministry of Aviation was formed. It brought everything aeronautical together—airlines and manufacturers—recognising the national importance of aviation by putting it under a Cabinet Minister. But to the Labour Party the Ministry of Aviation became the temple of

profligacy, and in mid-decade they tore it down. Aviation was ignominiously bundled into the basement of a new Ministry of Technology, under a junior minister. This, it was reasoned, would teach aviation to give the nation value for money.

But the physician had not healed himself. Vast sums of public money had indeed been wasted and Ministry contracts had been too easy to get. But whose fault was that? The inadequacy of the Civil Service was measured in the sixties by the number of outside committees to which it passed its aviation problems: Corbett, Plowden, Cairns, Lang, Wilson and Edwards—to name only some of those set up to deal with pressing crises. The Fulton report on the Civil Service came out in 1968 and observed what aviation had been the first to

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Front cover: Twin pinnacles of European technology: Concorde and, cloaked in unpainted metal, Olympus—a twin-spool turbojet of classic lineage