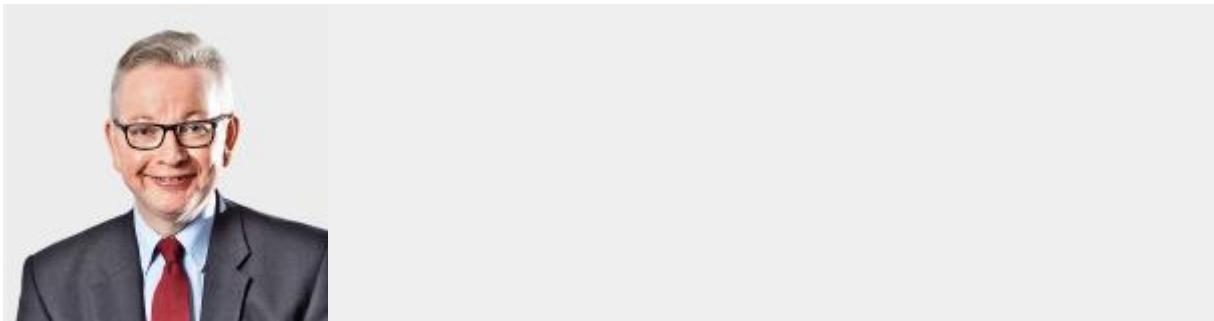


Sir Humphrey needs to learn who's the boss

michael gove

Too many Whitehall officials care more about cosying up to lobby groups than looking after taxpayers' billions



With all appropriate respect to the chancellor, I'm not convinced that the autumn statement was the most significant public spending announcement of the week.

No, that came in House of Commons Paper 221 on our national shipbuilding strategy published on Monday. Tucked away in paragraphs 80-86 are the latest plot twists in the ongoing tragi-comedy that is British defence procurement.

Here we discover that the Type 45 destroyer, the most modern ship in the Royal Navy, has an engine system made by Rolls-Royce which doesn't work in "areas with high ambient air and sea temperature". Just as well we'd never want to send any ships to somewhere like the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf or the coast of Somalia then.

The inability of our destroyers to match the seaworthiness of a Swan Hellenic cruise liner was a consequence of the Ministry of Defence failing to test the ships "sufficiently long enough to demonstrate that the engine was reliable".

The bureaucrats at the MoD appear to have accomplished something that neither Napoleon nor Hitler ever managed — they've effectively disabled the navy. The former first sea lord, Sir Mark Stanhope, says there is a "risk inherent" in using the Type 45. And the risk is not to the Queen's enemies. It's to our brave sailors who've been sent into harm's way on the naval equivalent of a Samsung Galaxy Note 7.

Never mind Britannia no longer ruling the waves, we can scarcely send a ship south of Skegness without the propulsion system going phut and the insurance premiums going through the roof. The cost of repairing these latest procurement disasters will be at least £280 million. And because of the way the MoD agreed the contracts, the shipbuilder gets off scot free and it's you and me who pick up the tab.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. After all, this fiasco comes from the government department that brought you aircraft carriers without planes, helicopters that can't fly when it's cloudy, automatic rifles that won't work when it's a bit chilly, a radio system so unwieldy

it breaks the axles of Land Rovers and desert boots whose soles melt in the heat of, well, the desert.

But tempting though it is to dwell on the many disastrous and scandalously misguided public expenditure decisions of the MoD it would be quite wrong to focus on their sorry history of failure.

Because there are so many other examples of massively wasteful government spending that the MoD is entitled to feel aggrieved about being singled out.

The NHS's abandoned national IT programme cost us north of ten billion pounds while private companies have claimed millions for monitoring offenders they never had on their books and building schools which had to be closed because the doors couldn't cope with high winds.

The projects they're supposed to manage fail and fail again

Worthy projects, such as linking the people of St Helena to the rest of the world, or helping the poorest in our society into work, have been mismanaged with hundreds of millions spent on an airstrip in the South Atlantic on which planes cannot land and similar sums squandered on the Troubled Families programme which has made no measurable impact on the poorest and yielded no reliable evidence of what works in tackling deprivation.

Which is why I welcome the chancellor's decision to scrap the tradition of using the autumn statement to make new spending announcements. In its place I'd like to see not half-yearly but weekly statements — reporting results in the real world rather than promises for the future — updating us on how effective all the public spending that's already been announced has actually been. And alongside these updates I'd like to see the names of civil servants responsible for these programmes published, their explanations for failure (or success) recorded and those who've failed be removed while those who can demonstrate clear, measurable, success get promoted.

I know this concept — let's call it accountability — may be somewhat revolutionary for our civil service. But as the prime minister pointed out in another context, a change has got to come. Ministers get sacked from time to time when things go wrong. But the senior civil service survives and prospers, insulated from responsibility for their actions, while the projects they're supposed to be managing fail and fail again.

They fail because the civil service does not welcome outsiders who challenge groupthink. When I was at the Department for Education the officials who did speak out were described as "viruses" in the system. I have seen at first hand how ill-equipped the civil service is to handle complex negotiations with private sector organisations intent on ripping off the taxpayer.

It's how we get airports with no planes and programmes that leave troubled families in trouble because the civil service all too often goes along with ministers who are engaging in virtue-signalling to lobby groups by spending money on feelgood initiatives with no demonstrable public policy benefit. The officials know that a cosy relationship with such lobby groups leads to an easier life and more certain promotion than standing up for the taxpayer. So millions more get wasted.

Having worked for six years in Whitehall I got to know lots of brilliant civil servants. I also know that many of them left and are leaving in exasperation at the complacency, blame-shifting and bottom-covering among too many of their superiors who duck responsibility when crisis after crisis occurs.

The Rolls-Royce engines in our Type 45 destroyers don't work in hot water and neither does our allegedly Rolls-Royce civil service. It's time we stopped fooling ourselves and got machinery, on the high seas and in Whitehall, worth what we pay for.