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EDITOR *David Dorrell*
MANAGER *G. J. Christopher Paul*
SECRETARY *Miss M. E. Neill*

142 Sloane Street,
London, S.W.1
Tel.: SLOane 9285

ADVERTISEMENT MANAGER
Miss M. E. Miéville, M.A.A.
Cheiron Press Ltd.
3 Cork Street, London, W.1
Tel.: REGent 5301

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COVER: The Beagle B.206Z2 (XS743) is the second pre-production aircraft for the Ministry of Aviation and the forerunner of the twenty B.206R Bassets (XS765-XS784) now being built for the R.A.F.

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Cart before horse

WHEN IN OUR April issue we reviewed the Government Statement on Defence, we remarked that it looked like an interim report, which the Government would amplify at a later date. As is well known, there are several high-level examinations in progress, by committees due to report later this year. These include the Plowden Committee on the future of the British aerospace industry; the Committee studying the rationalisation of air power; and, of course, the Government's own review of the whole of the United Kingdom's defence requirements. It might therefore have been supposed that major policy decisions affecting defence would have awaited the recommendations yet to be made.

Things have not turned out that way. Decisions to cancel the three major British military aircraft (but to continue Concorde) are much more likely to determine the future size, shape, and capacity of the British aerospace industry than any recommendation which may be received at some future date from the Plowden Committee. And these same decisions, together with those to buy foreign substitutes, must equally be a major factor governing the future capabilities of British air power, regardless of the outcome of the defence reviews now in progress. In this context the Government are in the position of having ordered the uniform before having measured up the airman who will have to wear it. This criticism applies equally to the present Government and to their predecessors whose precipitate and ill-advised cancellation of weapons like Skybolt, Blue Streak, and the Saunders-Roe SR.177 so effectively prepared the way for the present situation.

The latest announcement (17th May) for aircraft to be developed in collaboration with France is yet another example of cutting the cloth before measuring up for the suit. The Breguet 121 twin-jet tactical strike/trainer seems to have little relation to any serious R.A.F. or R.N. requirement. If, indeed, there were a need for any aircraft of this kind, then it would have been preferable to buy the Northrop F-5, already in production and superior to the Breguet in almost all aspects of performance. But possibly collaboration on the Breguet 121 is the entrance fee required for membership of the club which is to collaborate on a more advanced project, the Anglo-French variable-geometry aircraft so far described only in the vaguest terms. Here again it looks as though the aircraft anticipates policy; what is its purpose? It cannot possibly fly before the American F-111 has long been in service; it must therefore have some very marked advantage over the F-111 to justify its existence; or else it must be intended for some as yet unknown but completely different role.

A lot has been said about costs. The cancelled British aircraft were said to be either too costly, or too far away in time, or both; hence the dollar deals. The arrangements with France may very well save dollars, but what about the time-scale? The variable-geometry aircraft looks like a very long-distance project indeed.

The fact is that the cancellation of British aircraft and the replacement by foreign, or partly foreign, substitutes follows no recognisable pattern of defence policy. Few people would question the need to ensure that our aircrew should prepare for battle with the best equipment obtainable; and if it were perfectly clear that the foreign aircraft now being ordered were beyond all doubt the best possible for the job, then that would be that. But this is not clear; because defence policy itself is still undecided and the job has yet to be defined. How then can anybody be sure what are the right aircraft for the job? Until the public have a clear and logical explanation of defence policy, which the 1965 White Paper on Defence failed to provide, it will remain difficult to understand the reasons for what is being done, and in consequence difficult for anybody, however well-disposed, to support the plans for military aircraft procurement now being revealed.