

Labor's evasive action on grounded choppers won't...

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Labor's evasive action on grounded choppers won't fly



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The public deserves an explanation for the rushed scrapping of \$1bn worth of Taipans

There is something deeply suspect about the government's decision to disassemble and bury 45 MRH-90 Taipan utility helicopters. Attempts to justify the decision have been incomplete, evasive and at times incoherent.

What's at stake is potentially \$900m to \$1bn of value from selling the helicopters. More important, Ukraine has asked for the Taipans, which they would use for battlefield casualty evacuation.

Asked about the Taipans on Adelaide radio on Wednesday, Anthony Albanese claimed three times that he was acting on Defence advice: "We take the assessments from the Australian Defence Force.

"These choppers were reaching the end of their period of operation in Australia. What we have done is just as a result of the advice after that tragedy (Defence announced on September 29 that the Taipans would not be brought back into service after a fatal crash involving a helicopter in July) is just bring forward by a short period of time the end of operation that occurs ... We take the advice of the Australian Defence Force, not any other defence force, with regard to these operations."

Saying "these choppers were reaching the end of their period of operation" could be taken to mean the Taipans were old and out of flying hours. Not so. They have

around 15 years of remaining use.

The Taipans were being replaced early because Defence didn't like or want them, preferring instead American Blackhawk helicopters. The original planned retirement date was December this year.

The grounding of the Taipans 15 months early is not "a short period of time" given that only three Blackhawk helicopters are in country and not yet accepted into service. We have a major capability gap damaging counter-terrorism, disaster and regional contingency planning.

The decision was just a few months in advance of the highly predictable flood and bushfire season in Australia and the cyclone season in the South Pacific and Indian oceans – the time when Defence regularly is asked to respond to natural disasters.

On Thursday Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy, who apparently is responsible for the disposal strategy, gave a garbled explanation on Radio National, claiming an international search to sell the helicopters had taken place last October and November.

"There was zero interest in buying the air frames," he said. "Therefore, the best value for taxpayers was to disassemble the aircraft and to begin selling the spare parts." Conroy repeatedly stated "we have

no idea whether these aircraft are safe to fly". If there was international interest to buy them, a process he rightly said "would take months, if not years", Australia would make the sale only "should the crash investigation clear them".

This explanation doesn't fit any sensible timeline. The grounding was announced on September 29 and the plan to disassemble and bury them was well under way before Christmas. That means at most 2½ months were allocated to find a buyer. The Defence Department I know couldn't buy a photocopier in 10 weeks. It takes our system years, in some cases a decade or more, to decide on equipment purchases.

The Taipan is a complex NATO standard utility helicopter. Assessing a billion-dollar purchase would take months, involve a detailed inspection of what was on offer and require consultation and approval at government level.

It seems the "disposal strategy" Conroy described was done in complete secrecy in the lead-up to Christmas. With "no interest" confirmed, Defence is moving at top speed to break up the aircraft. I know of no comparable disposal strategy – not the Seasprite helicopters, not the F-111 bomber or the classic F/A-18 Hornets – to have been done at such haste.

On Ukraine, Conroy said: "Some months after that process began, Ukraine made a formal request for the MRH-90s. It will require considerable taxpayers' money and time to get those aircraft back into flying conditions."

Taxpayers deserve a more detailed explanation. If a sale was the first option why were the platforms so rapidly broken up?

On Tuesday Conroy said: "There are multiple crash investigations still going on right now to determine the cause of that tragic accident in Queensland. So, it



would be irresponsible for us to move away from the disposal strategy that we've locked on in."

Aircraft crashes, even ones involving tragic fatalities, happen quite often in military organisations. While forensic investigations into the cause of crashes can take months and indeed years, it is never the case that aircraft are grounded for months or years.

Defence forces put a priority on getting the aircraft back in the air as soon as possible. That is what happened after the tragic Blackhawk crash in June 1996, where 18 people died. Blackhawks were flying soon after. This happens after all Defence aircraft crashes.

The Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter quotes the Taipan's manufacturer, NHIndustries, saying after the July crash: "We want to make clear that we believe that this decision is not linked to any particular safety concern regarding the NH90 (Taipan) ... we have not identified any technical issue or any

malfunction, or alarm or alert ... The aircraft ... has worked without any particular issue."

More than 500 Taipans are flying with a dozen other defence forces. The aircraft has logged more than 378,000 flying hours globally. If Australia has any knowledge of a mechanical problem, has this information been passed to New Zealand and the various NATO users?

Conroy maintains "this disposal strategy ... offers the best value for money for taxpayers". How so, minister? Breaking up and burial yields no benefit and only the embarrassing realisation that Defence is better at destroying military capabilities than it is at acquiring them.

Conroy was asked on Thursday why it was that Ukraine had not been informed of the government's decision to scrap the Taipans fully a month after Kyiv asked for the platforms: "The response is going through the normal process of being worked up. This is not an ex-

traordinary timeframe for a response of this kind."

So, Defence can't respond to a letter in under a month but it can destroy \$1bn worth of equipment in the same timeframe.

This farcical business needs to be investigated. How is it that a second-tier minister in a third-rate government can agree to destroy a critical military capability without anyone questioning the wisdom of this approach?

The opposition and Senate crossbench should press for a parliamentary inquiry. The timing and content of Defence's recommendations to government should be revealed and we need to understand what the Prime Minister, Defence Minister Richard Marles and Conroy did with that information.

We do not elect governments for ministers to passively accept poor quality advice. Accountability needs to be exercised.

'We have not identified any technical issue or any malfunction, or alarm or alert ... The aircraft ... has worked without any particular issue'

NHINDUSTRIES
TAIPAN MANUFACTURER



An Australian Army MRH-90 Taipan helicopter from 6th Aviation Regiment on a counter-terrorism training exercise