

# No excuse for disgraceful episode

By BRADLEY PERRETT

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While other countries deliver aid to Ukraine, we withheld choppers to save our Army's blushes.



- AGE OF -  
THE DRAGON

THE government has brought shame upon this country. As our friends are rushing to send more aid to Ukraine, Australia is destroying valuable military helicopters that could be saving lives in the fight against Russian invasion.

We still haven't heard an adequate reason for the decision to strip parts from Taipan battlefield helicopters and bury what's left. That's because there is no adequate reason.

Quite likely, the army and Department of Defence have pushed this measure onto the government because they'd be humiliated if the world saw Ukraine fighting a war with helicopters that they had been incapable of maintaining.

Instead, they and Defence Minister Richard Marles are humiliating Australia.

Don't think this has passed unnoticed in foreign capitals. Just in the past week, Britain allocated another £2.5 billion (\$4.8 billion) for military aid to Ukraine, France said it would send more bombs and strike missiles to the struggling country, and Japan pledged it would keep up support.

They and other countries are scrounging stocks of military equipment to see what can be spared for Kyiv. They must be aghast at our ripping apart of helicopters that are actually newer than what most of them have in their own armies.

The Taipan is an Australian version of the multi-national European NH90 helicopter type. More than 500 NH90s have been built for 14 countries, and while some are unhappy with theirs, others, notably New Zealand, find that they can use the type well enough.

We bought 47, struggled to keep them going, lost one in a fatal crash in July and,

quite reasonably, grounded the rest pending an investigation. Not so reasonably, the government determined in September that the army would never again fly Taipans. It would instead await delivery of US-built replacements that the Coalition had decided to buy.

Labor should have immediately offered to donate the Taipans to Ukraine, but instead the department looked for possible foreign buyers - briefly and perfunctorily, it seems.

When Defence found no takers, the government should again have thought to offer the Taipans to Ukraine. Instead the department secretly negotiated for their manufacturing consortium, led by Airbus, to disassemble them for spare parts. We're likely to get a few tens of millions of dollars for the bits.

Compare that with Britain's £2.5 billion.

Dismantling began in October, says a source familiar with the process. Marles should have stopped it as soon as the government became aware of Ukraine's wish to have the helicopters - in November, according to *Asia Pacific Defence Report*.

Then Ukraine's chief of defence intelligence wrote formally on December 17 to ask for the aircraft, saying his country wanted them for rushing wounded soldiers to hospitals.

Though it was no business of ours, he assured us that Ukraine could maintain the choppers with help from France and other nearby NH90 operators.

And still Marles issued no stop-work order on dismantling. You can guess what his department and the army were imagining: videos of Ukraine saving lives and reinforcing its front line with helicopters that they had said were unusable.

Australians would ask: "Hang on. If Ukraine can fight a war with those helicopters, why are we spending \$3 billion on replacements?"

Now Defence Industry Minister Pat Con-



roy says putting the Taipans back together is not feasible. Well, if it is too late, that's the government's fault. It's had five months and repeated opportunities to make the right decision, and it's failed every time.

But how can it be too late? A helicopter is a collection of bolted-together parts, just like a car. If you take a piece off, you can put it back on. The cost is labour.

Reassembly does become impossible when the stripped carcasses are trucked to some remote place and dropped into pits, as is planned. So there's the Albanese government, Department of Defence and army handling public assets for you.

If we're too miserably cheap even to reassemble the Taipans for Ukraine, we can at least hand over the pieces. Then Ukrainian technicians can put them back together - though goodness knows they have enough other things to do in a war of national survival.

Or maybe France or Germany would be kind enough to do the work. Oh, wouldn't that be embarrassing.

Marles's office and the department gave no on-the-record response to my questions on this subject, such as why we had not promptly halted disassembly of the aircraft when we discovered that Ukraine want-

ed them.

Opposition defence spokesperson Andrew Hastie says: "Why couldn't we provide the Taipans? The government needs to explain why they haven't done so. The government should be pushing as much kit as possible Ukraine's way."

Too right. It's not just that all democracies must do all they can to prevent Ukraine from losing territory and possibly falling under the malign power of Vladimir Putin. Xi Jinping in Beijing must be given a demonstration that wars for territorial expansion can fail.

So Ukrainian soldiers are fighting for us, too. We owe them all the help we can give them. The crash that prompted the Taipan grounding is irrelevant. First, there's no conclusion that a design fault caused it, which implies there was an error in operation.

Second, even if the NH90 is a fundamentally unsafe type, which would be a surprise to all the countries that still operate it, Ukraine's risks in using it would be entirely a matter for Ukraine.

If our defence establishment can't operate those aircraft, Ukraine's should be given a go. There is no excuse for not handing them over. Labor is disgracing our country.



Were the Taipans buried to save Defence Minister Richard Marles some embarrassment? Pictures Defence Images, Keegan Carroll

■ Bradley Perrett was based in Beijing as a journalist from 2004 to 2020.

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