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Defensive Discussions at the Arbuthnot Power Lunch [1]

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James Arbuthnot MP was our guest at a Power Lunch in Westminster this week. He began by pointing out that Britain's defence forces are something of a victim of their own success. With the Soviet threat gone, and the situation improving in Northern Ireland, British governments decided to scale back the forces and enjoy the peace dividend. But they moved a bit too quickly - and now we have other threats for which the armed forces are stretched to deal with.

A lot of the discussion focused on Gordon Brown's new policy - to concentrate on homeland security even (it appears) if this is at the expense of dealing with threats overseas. It appeals to the vote motive: people are instantly alarmed when bombs explode on London buses, or car bombs are driven into Glasgow Airport, but Iraq and Afghanistan are far away ventures for most of the UK population.

And yet, there is still plenty of inefficiency to be squeezed out of the ministry of defence, and out of defence proocurement ? which seems to move slower than the technology it is procuring. Time, really, for a high-level think-tank of leaders from the public sector, the defence contractors, procurement experts and finance to get together and devise a better system that would be faster and less wasteful.

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