

A BLUR OF BLADES

Little is known about the fine print in either of the two rival offers to keep the rotor blades turning at the Westland works in Yeovil. From the details that have so far emerged, both would seem to fall well short of ideal. But then Westland is in a far from ideal position and it might in the end be the lesser of two evils to which it must turn for its salvation.

That this is so is not altogether surprising. As a specialized private company operating in a world of fiercely competing giants, Westland has for far too long looked vulnerable. It should arguably have been brought under the wing of British Aerospace, either when BAe was formed or some time later. BAe has now come riding over the hill as part of the European relief force. But earlier involvement to broaden the base of the Westland operation would have been a logical development and might have prevented the Yeovil plant from falling into its present state of siege.

It would not of course have answered all Westland's problems. These arise from the simple fact that there are too many firms making helicopters. Supply outstrips demand - or would if it were allowed to. With a dearth of orders between now and the end of the decade the future for Westland and its employees has looked bleak for some time.

Their survival has a national importance because of the Min-

istry of Defence's interest in having a British source of helicopters. Ironically the future for the military helicopter, not only as a means of transporting troops but as a weapon system in its own right - remains very bright. The argument against turning to an overseas source for our machines is well founded on economic and security grounds.

Yet the ministry's response to Westland's growing difficulties has been painfully unimaginative and slow. While Rome has burned, the ministry has fiddled - even when the flames started licking round the windows. Mr Michael Heseltine has steadfastly refused to bend the Government's rules of self-help - until Westland did just that and summoned aid from the one place it was available, across the Atlantic. Only then did the alarm bells start ringing in Horse Guards Avenue.

The Sikorsky-Fiat offer looks less than perfect for all the reasons that have already been well aired. Sikorsky, a helicopter giant whose machines have already been made under licence by all the big manufacturers on this side of the Atlantic, has long been looking for a permanent European partner. That it sees the plant at Yeovil as no more than a "metal-bashing" and marketing facility for its own US-designed products, is a danger that both Westland and the Government must try to guard against.

On the other hand Westland's only alternative would seem to be a hastily constructed consortium of European interests which, despite the respectability conferred by the presence of British Aerospace and GEC, has a no less shifty look about it. The cause of European collaboration is a very sound one and the rationalization of the Old World's helicopter industry is long overdue. But companies like the Elysée-backed Aerospatiale are not known for their altruism. The interest of companies like Aerospatiale, MBB and Augusta lies in blocking Sikorsky's entry to Europe - not with giving a helping hand to Westland.

Having told Sir John Cuckney and his board to find a way out of their own difficulties, the Ministry of Defence cannot reasonably expect them to start listening to Whitehall advice now. But there is also a more positive argument why Sikorsky-Fiat sounds the more promising option. Sikorsky is looking for a means of expanding and, with United Technologies behind it, perhaps in other fields than helicopter manufacture. The European bid has been made largely by companies which are looking for survival - primarily of themselves. There was a time when this Government and others might have hoisted the European flag and ensured a better future for them all. As it is Westland has had to look to its own.

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