

Author says Dief scrapped Arrow

Greig Stewart insists only the government had the power to cancel the project

BY MARIA BOHUSLAWSKY

As the 39th anniversary of the cancellation of the Avro Arrow approaches, a debate is stirring about former prime minister John Diefenbaker's role in the famed plane's demise.

Greig Stewart, the author of a book on which the 1997 CBC miniseries, *The Arrow*, was based, insists that Mr. Diefenbaker's cabinet made the decision to scrap the project and destroy the fabled aircraft.

"A mega-million-dollar project entirely financed by the Canadian government can only be cancelled by the Canadian government," said Mr.



DIEFENBAKER

Stewart, author of *Shutting Down the National Dream: A.V. Roe and the Tragedy of the Avro Arrow*.

Mr. Stewart was responding to claims by Diefenbaker-era cabinet minister Pierre Sévigny, of Montreal, that the decision to destroy the plane and its blueprints was made by the Arrow's manufacturer, A.V. Roe.

Mr. Sévigny said earlier this week that he wanted to set the record straight nearly 40 years after the project was cancelled, to clear Mr. Diefenbaker of blame. Most of the other key players in the cabinet have died.

"Frankly, old Diefenbaker was being blamed for something he didn't do... He never gave an order like that," said Mr. Sévigny, now 80.

But Mr. Stewart noted that Mr. Sévigny was appointed associate defence minister six months after the Feb. 20, 1959 cancellation.

"He was probably not at the table," said Mr. Stewart. "He probably heard it second-hand. He is forced, as one of the few cabinet ministers left from that era, to continue to defend one of the absolutely worst decisions that the Diefenbaker government ever made."

The supersonic interceptor fighter was considered ahead of its time, unparalleled in speed and performance.

Mr. Stewart said the Diefenbaker government was concerned with the rising costs of the plane. Millions had been spent and only one or two of the planes had flown. Some members of cabinet believed the plane was dangerous and obsolete.

In September 1958, Mr. Diefenbaker met with A.V. Roe's colourful boss,

Crawford Gordon, who died in 1967. They had an argument about the Arrow — Mr. Diefenbaker asking him to justify the program, and a drunk and angry Mr. Gordon demanding it continue. Several days later, Mr. Diefenbaker announced that the program was under review.

The prime minister turned the question over to a cabinet sub-committee, made up of the heads of the navy, army and air force, as well as then-defence minister George Pearkes. The committee's job was to make decisions related to the defence of Canada.

However, after several months of deliberation, the committee, which was required to make a unanimous recommendation, could not agree. There were 45,000 jobs at stake. The army and navy, upset that the air force had received the lion's share of the defence budget, wanted to see the program scaled back. The air force wanted at least a replacement for the plane.

On Feb. 20, 1959, Mr. Diefenbaker stood in the Commons to announce the Arrow's cancellation, informing Mr. Gordon via telex. Within a few hours, Mr. Gordon ordered the plant closed and workers laid off.

The six completed Arrows and another five on the assembly line remained the property of the Canadian government. As such, they were sold for scrap metal.

Mr. Sévigny had speculated that it was Mr. Gordon, enraged at the government's decision to cancel the project, who ordered the planes scrapped.

Retired senator Heath MacQuarrie, a former Conservative caucus member from the time, has said his memories confirm those of Mr. Sévigny.

Their versions were backed by Alvin Hamilton, who was northern affairs minister in Mr. Diefenbaker's cabinet.

"The press has given Dief a rough ride on this thing," said Mr. Hamilton, now 85, living in Manotick. "Diefenbaker didn't throw the thing out at all. He was quite enthusiastic about it and wanted to see this thing completed."

Mr. Hamilton also puts the blame on Mr. Gordon. "All of a sudden this fellow lost his temper and said the hell with it."

Mr. Stewart said he agreed with Mr. Sévigny on one point — that the Americans did not pressure the government to ditch the plane.

"They were interested in seeing the project go through," he said. "What better way to test your own equipment than at another person's risk?"

He noted there was no intention to ever sell the plane to the United States because the Arrow was designed for Canadian Arctic conditions.

Mr. Stewart said the myth that the blueprints were destroyed is untrue. According to him, the Department of National Defence has a set, as does the Hawker Siddeley Group, which owned A.V. Roe.