BACKSTAGE AT OTTAWA
WITH BLAIR FRASER

What led Canada to junk the Arrow

NEVER, not even in June 1957, has Prime Minister Diefenbaker met the press with such well-earned glee as when he announced the discontinuance of our all-Canadian supersonic fighter aircraft, the Avro Arrow. Both times, the prophets and soothsayers had been wrong, but there was a difference. In the case of the Arrow, the ill-starred reporters and their ill-informed sources were misled not just by lack of foreknowledge, but even more by lack of faith.

The plain truth is, nobody thought the government would have the courage to make such a painful decision. The fact that the decision was right didn't carry enough weight. It meant an early end to more than twenty thousand jobs, most of them in the very heartland of the Conservative Party. It went against the emotional urges of all Canadian air-force men, and of most air-force veterans. It disappointed a big Canadian industry with many big Conservative shareholders. In short, it was political poison, of a kind to scare any politician out of a year's growth.

This is the first time the Conservatives have had to face a choice so difficult. Never before, in seventeen months of office, have they had to look a large number of voters squarely in the eye and say "No." All governments have to do this sooner or later, but usually it's unavoidable. This time it wasn't. There was an obvious, comfortable, not-too-expensive compromise that the government could have adopted, and this was the course that everybody bet on.

It may seem odd, considering how wrong all the dope stories were, but it is true that the background facts about the Avro Arrow were well known here long before the crucial decision was taken. It was known, and not seriously disputed, that there was no great military need for the Arrow. Even its warmest advocates in the RCAF tended to fall back on economic arguments—the jobs it would create, the drain on U. S. dollar reserves that any alternative would cause, the value of nourishing a Canadian aircraft industry. Nobody really contended with any vigor or conviction that we'd be safer with the Arrow than without it.

But in that case, why did we ever get into the project in the first place? Why did we have to spend four hundred million dollars, from 1953 to next March 31, to find out we didn't want it?

The answer is that the whole picture has changed since 1953—not just the missile picture, for missiles were not unheard-of even in those ancient days, but the aircraft picture too. The original decision to develop the Arrow may have been unwise (lots of people opposed it at the time, including C. D. Howe) but it made a lot more sense in 1953 than it does now.

At that time it was already apparent that the all-Canadian CF-100 would be obsolete by the time a replacement could be developed, and the RCAF wanted the replacement to be all-Canadian too. The CF-100 was built to Canadian design for Canadian needs, it was a good aircraft, the RCAF was enormously proud of it and wanted to project it into the supersonic age.

However, it was recognized that supersonic fighters would be vastly more expensive. Even the CF-100 had been costly enough; the RCAF thought it worth the price to have a unique aircraft for Canada's special requirements, but they'd have been happier if they could have sold the CF-100 abroad and brought the unit cost down. They did sell fifty-three to Belgium for fifty million dollars, but that wasn't enough. To make it pay, they would have had to sell it to the United States, perhaps for the equipment of other NATO forces like Canadair's version of the Sabre.

So this time they took very special care. Once the design and specifications had been completed they took the whole project to Washington. They asked: "Does this duplicate anything you are planning to make?"

The Americans answered: "No, it doesn't. It fills a gap in our line of fighter aircraft."

The RCAF went to London and asked the same question of the British; same answer. Everybody assured them that it looked like a good aircraft, and one that nobody else proposed to make. Three times in the earlier stages of the Arrow's development the RCAF made this pilgrimage of enquiry, and always they got the same reply:

"Go ahead, you've got a fine aircraft; God bless you."

At this point, some argument develops between the RCAF and the defense-production department. The defense-production men say, rather sourly, that the RCAF read too much into these polite compliments and reported to the cabinet that the U. S. would probably buy the Arrow. Certainly they continued to entertain very lively hope, although in fact no solid promise was ever made. Naturally, if the United States had undertaken to buy a few thousand Arrows, instead of letting Canada develop it just to buy her own two hundred, the whole project would have looked very different.

But at least the RCAF could argue that the Arrow, like the CF-100, was unique. It had the extra long range, the extra seat for a navigator, the extra electronic equipment for all conditions of weather and distance, that Canada's great northern spaces seemed to require. No such aircraft could be bought anywhere. Even at ten million dollars apiece (which is what the Arrow would have cost, for an order of two hundred) it still looked worth while—especially since there was always hope of selling it abroad.

What really pulled the rug out from under the RCAF and the Avro Aircraft Company was an American decision to do what they'd said they weren't going to do—build a fighter very like the Arrow, the F-106. This will be an extension of the "Century series" of new fighters; the supersonic F-104 is just coming into production now. The F-106 is two or three years away, roughly the same as the Arrow. It has approximately the same range, the same altitude capability, the same firepower, the same electronic fire control — not identical, maybe not quite as good, but as near as makes very little difference. For a while the RCAF and Avro clung to the argument that the F-106 would be a one-man aircraft, and that Canada's Arctic distances still call for a navigator even in a semi-automatic aircraft flying twenty miles a minute and controlled from the ground. But now even that bastion has fallen—one out of every six F-106 fighters will be built with room for the extra man. And Canada could buy the F-106 off the end of the American run, at about the same time as Avro could deliver the Arrow, for just about half the price of the all-Canadian plane.

The military argument really ended right there. There was no longer any military reason for going ahead with the Arrow. However, there were other reasons — economic, emotional, and above all, political.

Moreover, there was an easy way to cut the aggregate cost away down, nearly in half, and thus keep Avro workers employed without making the taxpayer yelp with pain. The Arrow could easily be redesigned to carry American weapons (instead of her own Sparrow II, the air-to-air missile that Canadair was preparing to make in Montreal). It could also be fitted with American electronic gear instead of the Astra, the fire-control system that was being developed to Canadian specifications in New Jersey, for eventual manufacture in Montreal. Only a few existing jobs in Canada would be affected by these changes. Avro could go ahead and make a hundred Arrows, instead of two hundred as originally planned, and the cost might be only a billion dollars or even less (on top of the four hundred million already spent).

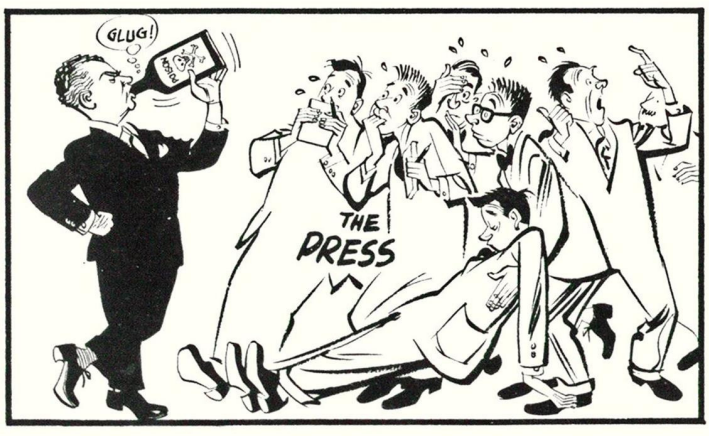
This was the politically safe course, and the one most people thought the government would take. But the government had more pluck than even its best friends expected.

Since the decision there have been statements by Avro people that "the Arrow program has not been canceled" (quite correct, it hasn't); along with the prime minister's soothing words about a "review" of the situation in March, these may have raised some doubt whether or not Canada will produce the Arrow after all. In fact no such doubt exists. There is not the faintest intention of making the Arrow, even in the light of those international tensions to which the prime minister referred.

If war were to come tomorrow we'd certainly want supersonic fighters, and all the skills we could muster to build them. That's a military argument for keeping the Arrow team together for a few more months, no doubt. But even if they went suddenly into war production, it's no certainty that they'd be making Arrows.

And if peace continues for a few more years, the whole picture may change once more. There are signs in both Ottawa and Washington that the air forces are losing the ear of the government, that the advisers who are heeded now are the men who say the manned aircraft is as dead as the muzzle-loading musket.

Remember a few years ago, when Air Vice-Marshal Johnny Plant was fired for suggesting facetiously that we ought to abolish the army? Maybe it will turn out that he abolished the wrong service.



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