



Defence Committee

Chairman, Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP

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Dear Stuart,

Thank you for your letter of 21 January in response to mine of 12 December 2018 about UK sovereign capabilities.

The Committee still finds it difficult to understand why the Fleet Solid Support ships have not been classified as warships. At our evidence session on 9 October last year Sir Simon Bollom was clear that this was a Ministerial decision. The written evidence sent to us after the session went a little further:

“they are Naval Auxiliary Support Ships, whose primary role is the replenishment of naval vessels with bulk stores. They are non-combatant ships, manned by civilian Royal Fleet Auxiliary crews and are equipped with weapons solely for self-defence. We are clear that FSS ships are not warships.”

This approach seems to us to be inconsistent with the language used in May 2018 in the Department’s own contract to describe the role of an FSS ship:

“It must also integrate tactically with and contribute to a Naval task group. Its cargo is the life blood for the warships but, as a platform, it is also essential that it does not detract from the operational aims of the group. The primary role is to support war-fighting operations.

The Solid Support ship has to operate and survive against a capable and hostile enemy threat and continue to deliver its prime logistic service to ensure overall mission success.

The introduction of the Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carrier and its aircraft, the F-35B Lightning II, represent a significant increase in our Carrier Strike capability. That needs

a corresponding increase in the tempo and volume of solid support, something that cannot be met by our current ships. While Carrier Strike will move into new realms of Air Combat, Amphibious operations will remain equally demanding, particularly the need operate in the littoral with the different threats and environmental conditions that this will pose. The FSS ships will need to support all tasks for the future Royal Navy, from full Carrier strike war-fighting through to Peacetime operations.”

A ship that is integrated with a Naval task force, can operate against a capable and hostile enemy, and contributes to Carrier Strike capability in war-fighting sounds very much like a warship. It is therefore no surprise that our allies, such as both France and Italy, classify equivalent ships as warships.

If the UK believes that it is wrong to classify FSS ships as warships, the Government has the right to challenge Italy and France over their classification decisions and the consequent single-source procurement. We note that there has been no attempt to do so, which presumably means that you accept that it is legitimate to classify FSS ships as warships.

Given this acceptance, we should be grateful if you could explain what the potential benefits were that led to Ministers’ apparently perverse decision, which is to the detriment of UK companies and workers. We are aware that the proposal for the FSS to be put out to international competitive tender was part of the National Shipbuilding Strategy. The NSS is an MoD strategy document that was approved by Ministers, who are accountable to Parliament for the policies of their department: hence our request for an explanation of why Ministers agreed this decision.

We should also be grateful if you could (a) confirm that the weighting for benefiting the UK’s prosperity agenda is zero for the FSS ships and 2% for the Type 31e frigates, (b) provide the weightings for exportability for both FSS and Type 31e (we have been told that the figure for Type 31e is 1%), and (c) justify these weightings.

Yours sincerely,
Julian