

# Future Frigate haste means Anzac waste

MARK THOMSON

THE taxpayer is at risk of being hit hard as a result of a new naval shipbuilding plan proposed by the Defence Department.

In a document developed in consultation with Australian shipbuilders, the plan focuses on continuity of work for local firms without properly considering the costs of doing so. The government should look carefully before putting the plan into action.

Naval shipbuilding is undergoing a renaissance in Australia. Three air warfare destroyers are being built in Adelaide at a cost of \$8 billion and two 27,000-tonne amphibious vessels (cost of \$3bn) are being fitted out in Melbourne. Even larger projects are on the drawing board, including 12 submarines and eight Future Frigates, slated for next decade.

The new submarines will be the largest and most complex defence project undertaken in Australia. Costs are estimated at \$36bn.

Studies are under way to refine the scope of the project and chart a way ahead. One of the first to be completed is the Future Submarine Industry Skills Plan, released alongside the white paper.

Far from being restricted to traditional issues of skills, training and apprenticeships, it sets out a plan for Australian naval shipbuilding.

The 2009 plan to replace the navy's Armidale-class patrol boats with larger offshore combatant vessels is on the backburner.

Instead, the Armidale-class boats, heavily used in border protection, will be replaced early as a matter of necessity.

Given that West Australian fast-ferry builder Austal is building Cape-class patrol vessels for Customs, it's likely that the present production line will be used to deliver a modified version of these boats to the navy.

Support vessels HMAS Success and Sirius now will be replaced "as soon as possible", rather than remaining in service until at least 2018 as planned.

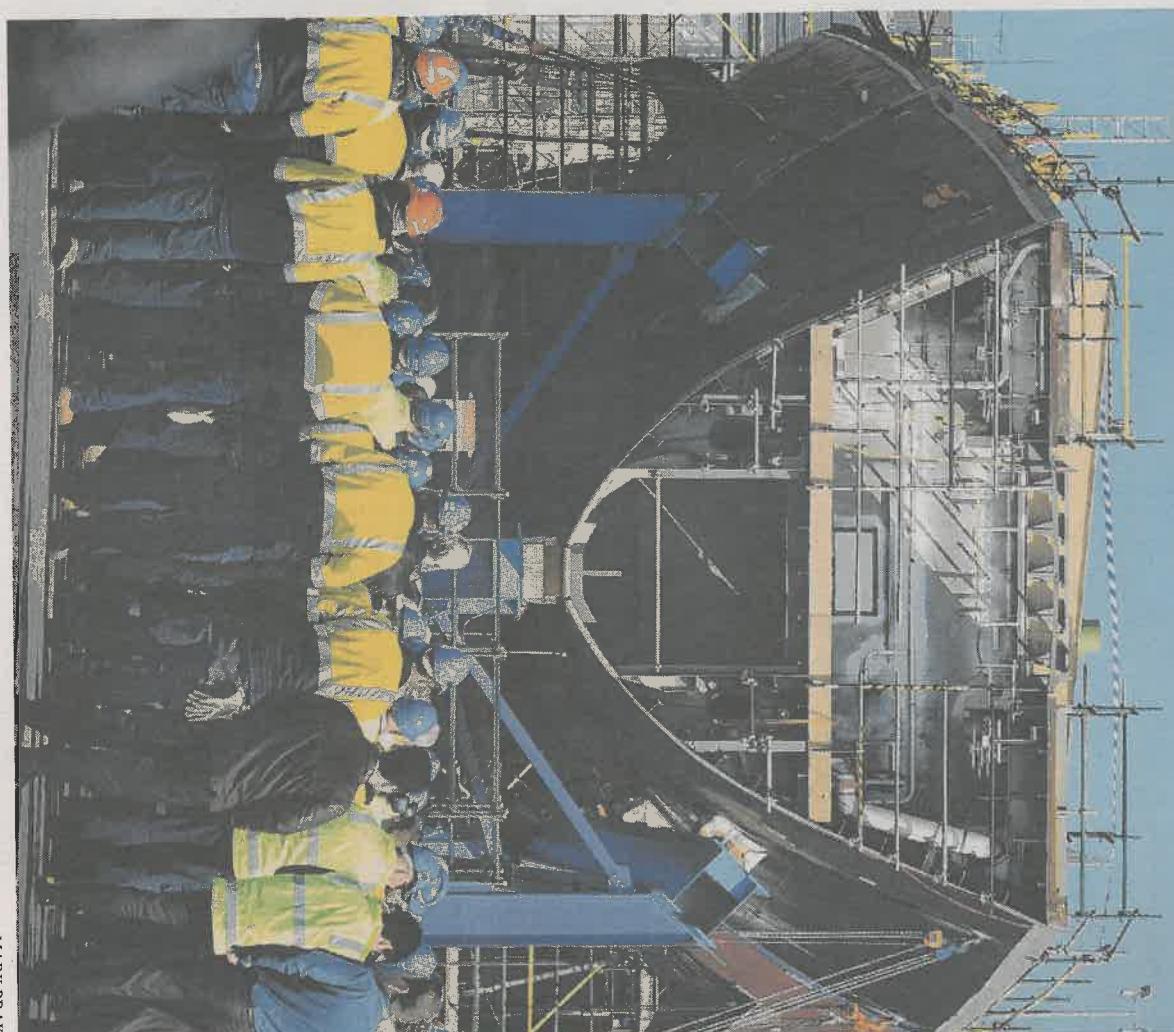
While the early replacement of Success and Sirius will help meet the navy's anticipated growing demand for support at sea, the desire to keep Australian shipyards in work probably has been a factor. So too with the decision to move module construction for the air warfare destroyers to maintain work at the Williamstown yard owned by BAE Systems.

The goal of these moves is to close the gap between present and future projects, filling in the valley of death around 2019 when today's projects end.

According to the plan, such demand-leveraging will ensure that skills are retained in the sector, thereby reducing the cost and risks of future projects.

If attempts to maintain work in local shipyards were restricted to re-jigging work on the air warfare destroyer and the accelerated replacement of two support vessels, there wouldn't be too much to worry about. But the proposed plan goes much further.

The government is considering bringing forward the Future Frigate project designed to replace the navy's eight Anzac frigates. But the last Anzac frigates entered service only in 2006 and the vessels are halfway through a \$670 million missile defence upgrade. On existing plans, a decision on the Future Frigates isn't scheduled until around 2022, and



Air warfare destroyer HMAS Hobart is part of a renaissance in Australian shipbuilding

MARK BRAKE

THE current state of the future submarine program can be likened to that of a duck swimming—not much action apparent on top of the water but plenty of activity out of sight.

The SEA 1000 program office is now in its fifth year of scoping options for government's consideration of the 12 large, more capable conventionally-powered submarines called for in the 2009 defence white paper to replace the existing six-strong Collins-class fleet.

While SEA 1000 has continuing bipartisan support, Tony Abbott has not committed to a specific number of new submarines, only a pledge to make within 18 months of the election the short and medium-term decisions necessary to ensure there is no capability gap.

The choices for the future submarine remain a military-off-the-shelf (MOTS) European submarine, a modified MOTS, an evolved MOTS that would include a major redesign and development of Collins or an entirely new design.

Apart from Collins, only three MOTS types are under consideration: the French DCNS Scorpene, German HDW Type 214 and the Spanish Navantia S-80.

Receipt late last year of the government's statement of strategic intent—what it wants

the next generation of submarines to do; where, how and over what duration—has provided a benchmark against which the capabilities of the contending platforms can be compared by the program office.

Assisting it in this work is Systems Planning and Analysis (SPA), a US company that is used by the US Navy for its own capability analysis.

According to sources close to the program, a mass of data from DCNS, HDW and Navantia has now been analysed in the context of strategic requirements that reflect those in the 2009 white paper—that is, longer range, greater endurance on patrol and expanded capabilities, including a submarine to replace the Collins.

Although some of this data was

released by the European company in addition to the program office, some was not.

According to the sources, the findings, yet to be presented to government, are "quite stark", that those submarines are designed for a different purpose in inherently limited, whereas the original designer Kockums—utilising a new Adelaide-based integrated project team (IPT) to produce the concept for a totally new design.

"The intention is to present to government a picture that shows a clear comparative choice between the two in relation to the top-level requirements," said another source.

"It's important to show what might be attractive about building a somewhat evolved Collins with its known design and obsolescence fixed, versus a new design.

"If you do it with Collins, you're embarking on a path which is close to a dead-end because the ability of that design to be evolved further is inherently limited, whereas the ability to develop a new design of a similar capability could be done in a way that inherently is much less limited."

The Adelaide IPT is to be headed by a leading overseas expert with relevant experience that is recent and current, albeit with nuclear-powered boats.

He will be backed by a number of specialists from ASC subsidiary Deep Blue Tech and US company Electric Boat, with the work being

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