



Concorde

INTERDEPENDENCE DAY

The political perspective

50 years ago, on March 2, 1969, the iconic Anglo-French Concorde first flew. The political road to this aeronautical milestone — representing the opening of a new era in international collaboration for the British aerospace industry — was far from smooth, however, having taken a long, hard decade to traverse, as **Prof KEITH HAYWARD FRAeS** explains

IT IS NOW commonplace to describe the UK as being at the heart of a European aerospace industry, certainly since the 1965 Plowden Report, which stated categorically that “Britain is unlikely to be justified again in embarking alone on an expensive new [aeronautical] project”. This was a hard truth to accept, but by the end of the 1950s the rising costs of both civil and military aircraft were increasingly difficult to support by means of the British market alone.

International collaboration was a solution to this — but with whom? The USA was too big and unwilling to concede much to the UK technologically speaking. Germany, Italy and Holland were either too weak or too small to be considered desirable partners. This left France, still rebuilding its industry after the war, but with a growing confidence backed by a run of successful civil and military aircraft designs.

Working with the French emerged as the “least-worst” alternative, and by 1964 the UK and France were working together on an ambitious supersonic airliner, a series of joint military programmes and a European organisation developing a civilian satellite-launch vehicle. Of these, the supersonic transport (SST) project was the linchpin of collaboration; the one programme large enough and expensive enough to force proudly independent national companies to combine in their mutual interest. Never free of political interests and controversy, the Concorde had a highly political birth.

A FALSE START

British work on SST concepts had begun in 1954 with the establishment of the Supersonic Transport Aircraft Committee (STAC). By 1959 preliminary work had established the basic outline of a Mach 2.2-capable aluminium-alloy airframe design. All involved felt that this was the obvious direction for air travel to take, and presented an opportunity for the UK to regain its position in the civil aircraft market. It was also clearly too expensive to be undertaken by industry alone and would have to be given government support.

To move things along, Bristol was awarded a design study contract based on its Type 198 supersonic transport. Costs of full development were estimated to be £60m–£100m, about twice those of the Vickers VC10 airliner.¹ The Minister of Supply, Aubrey Jones, was rather more pessimistic about the cost estimates and came to the conclusion that international collaboration would be necessary. But the crucial question remained — with whom?

Ministry of Supply (MoS) officials felt that working with the USA would reduce competition,

even if at first sight it seemed “absurd” to work with “our obvious rivals”. The Ministry clearly felt that there were no “rivals” across the Channel, and working with a European partner would “lead to difficulties and delays”. However, failing the American option, Europe was “well worth investigating” and as an option, a political approach might be justified.²

In the event, France took the initiative. In July 1959 the French wrote to Jones suggesting a meeting of officials and technicians to discuss collaborating on an SST. They too had been investigating such a project, albeit along the lines of a “Supersonic Caravelle”, focusing entirely on medium-range services to avoid direct competition with any American design. Jones replied positively, but felt that progress would be best achieved through a commercial association between firms.

The proposal received a lukewarm response in London; “laughed to scorn” in Jones’s words. The UK felt that the French had little to offer technologically and were seeking to fill a major gap in their civil aero-engine capabilities. The Cabinet rejected the French offer.³

NEW GOVERNMENT, NEW POLICIES

Within a year a major shift in policy was evident. The general election of 1959 brought a new sense of direct engagement in the aircraft industry and a determination to press ahead with the SST. Crucially, Harold Macmillan’s government also decided to apply for membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) and as the French President, Charles de Gaulle, might be something of a barrier to entry, working with the French on an SST achieved a wider political objective.

Soon after the election Duncan Sandys, in the newly minted position of Minister of Aviation, met his French opposite number to discuss collaboration generally, and exchanged information on SST progress. It was evident that the UK was further ahead than France, and wanted a clear focus on a long-range aircraft. The British also made it clear that they expected prospective manufacturers to contribute to the cost of development and that any agreement must include some form of cost-recovery for government contributions. The meeting closed with a tentative collaborative formula.⁴

In April 1960 the ministers met again. Sandys stated that the UK was not committed and was mindful of the risk of being first into the field and “losing a lot of money”, but he was also aware of its importance to the future of the industry. He also made it clear that the UK was still looking across the Atlantic. Both sides agreed to keep in contact pending more substantive developments.⁵

In the UK the internal debate picked up speed.