



# Airbus Industrie

## The early political landscape — and an aerospace ‘proto-Brexit’

In February 2019 Airbus announced that it was stopping production of its mighty A380 airliner, marking what might be considered a “coming of age” for the European aerospace giant. **PROFESSOR KEITH HAYWARD FRAeS** puts the decision into context by tracing the manufacturer’s political genesis, its rivalry with BAC and the “trouble” with Rolls-Royce

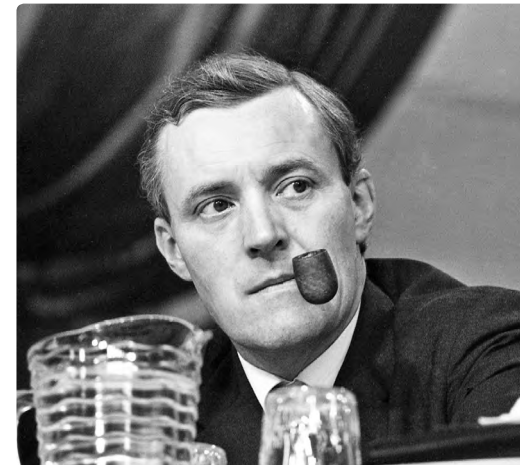
**T**HE ANNOUNCEMENT released by Airbus in early 2019 that it is to wind down production of its A380 double-deck airliner was disappointing from a technological point of view, but it was also a commercial necessity, perhaps marking a “coming of age” for the manufacturer. In this article we look back to the origins of the Airbus family in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of highly politicised aerospace projects.<sup>1</sup>

The Airbus concept nearly died at birth thanks to a “proto-Brexit” — Britain’s unilateral withdrawal from the enterprise in 1971. The project was saved by a Franco-German industrial/political alliance and a commitment on the part of one far-sighted British industrialist. Fortunately, that earlier Brexit was short-lived, and by 1978 the UK was back in the Airbus fold — but it was an episode that confirmed the end of Britain’s role

as an independent manufacturer of large airliners.

British interest in the idea of a short/medium-haul high-capacity airliner dates from the early 1960s, inspired by work at the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) at Farnborough on future civil aircraft. At the same time, the UK’s short/medium-haul national flag-carrier, British European Airways (BEA), was working up a high-capacity requirement, and Hawker Siddeley Aviation (HSA) at Hatfield (formerly de Havilland) was looking at a Trident follow-on. For its part, the British Aircraft Corporation (BAC) was interested in developing the One-Eleven regional jetliner into an extended family of designs.

In France, both Breguet and Sud Aviation were thinking along similar lines to replace the latter’s Caravelle jetliner. By 1964, with the UK’s incoming Labour government embracing



*“If there is one area in which there may be some uneasiness . . . it is in the area of international collaboration and our attitude to it. There may be some people in the industry who think that considerations of European policy or the whims of Ministers have led to ‘diktat’ about international collaboration, even where an all-British project would be best. This is not so. There is no rigid policy laid down by us that rules out all-British projects. It is the facts that drive us towards collaboration . . .”*

— Minister of Technology Anthony Wedgwood Benn at the SBAC Annual Dinner, June 25, 1969

European collaboration as the rational way forward, a link between British and French industry was an obvious step.

Political discussion on the subject continued on through 1965 and into 1966. The French and British governments converged on a 200/225-seat concept, which was soon called the “airbus”. In order to broaden the base market and share costs further, the West German government was also invited to join the talks. The airframe partnership was quickly settled. As France’s civil-aviation champion, Sud Aviation (to be rolled into Aérospatiale in 1970) was to join HSA in a collaborative programme.

The choice of HSA as the British partner was rather less logic-driven; since the aircraft manufacturer mergers of 1960–61 the government, under both the Conservatives and Labour, had tended to apply the “Buggins’s Turn” principle (i.e. by rotation rather than by merit) to major public contracts. With BAC involved in Concorde, HSA was favoured to join the European airbus project.

This was a vital step for HSA’s civil portfolio and was viewed effectively as a Trident follow-on and a vehicle by which to recover its investment in the latter. Executives at BAC certainly believed that the Corporation had lost the contract owing to political considerations, although those at Hatfield always contended that they won owing to their superior technological solutions.<sup>2</sup>

Discussions about which powerplant to use for the project revealed a deep division. The British strongly favoured an all-new concept led by Rolls-Royce, based on its radical triple-spool design. The engine manufacturer had received “launch aid” (government subsidisation in return for a share of future sales) for the RB.178 three-spool high-bypass turbofan demonstrator, and was offering two development variants, the RB.207 and RB.211. The former was best suited to a large twin-engined airliner such as the prospective airbus or the Lockheed L-1011, which at that time was configured with two engines. The French, however, preferred a licence-built version

of the USA’s Pratt & Whitney (P&W) JT9D, to be developed jointly by French company Snecma and Bristol Siddeley in the UK.<sup>3</sup>

The French were concerned that an engine partnership centred around Rolls-Royce would be dominated by the British, to the detriment of long-term French industrial interests. Rolls-Royce, with strong Treasury backing, was admittedly more interested in winning a foothold in the American market, but the airbus programme was seen as a useful insurance against failure.<sup>4</sup>

The three governments agreed on the necessity of ensuring a base market for the aircraft, with the three national airlines — BEA, Air France and Lufthansa — to order 25 each. However, BEA wanted a smaller aircraft than either Air France or Lufthansa, and concluded that its requirement would be better matched to a new design from BAC, the Two-Eleven, which would use Rolls-Royce’s RB.211, the smaller of the triple-spool concepts. In February 1966 BEA requested authorisation to buy 30 Two-Elevens, at the same time making it quite clear that it would only buy the larger airbus aircraft if compelled to do so.<sup>5</sup>

### A common proposal

In October 1966 the three governments formally unveiled a common proposal for a 225/250-seat airliner. Several important details were left undefined, primarily the question of engine choice and the level, if any, of company funding. The British were pushing hard for what the government defined as the “European” engine solution, i.e. the Rolls-Royce RB.207. According to Rolls-Royce’s Managing Director, Denning (later Sir Denning) Pearson, a formal statement defining Rolls-Royce as the government’s preferred partner would have the “advantage of smoking out the French position, as well as eliminating the threat from P&W”.<sup>6</sup>

In the event, Rolls-Royce moved unilaterally to squash the threat from P&W by buying Bristol Siddeley that year and cancelling its part in the JT9D licence application. This left the French with

**ABOVE** An artist’s impression of an A300 in BEA’s distinctive “red square” livery, complete with scarlet wing panels, as used for the opening illustration for an article entitled “The Case for the European Airbus” in a Hawker Siddeley Review in 1968. In the event, Airbus would never see one of its aircraft in BEA colours. Or would it . . . ?