

The Hawker Siddeley 146 saga, 1973-78

By the early 1970s the Hatfield division of the Hawker Siddeley Group was ready to explore the viability of a civil jet airliner — enter the HS 146. **Prof KEITH HAYWARD FRAeS** describes the genesis and evolution of the type's start-stop-start development programme, in which the irresistible force of Tony Benn met the immovable Denis Healey...

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THE HAWKER SIDDELEY — later British Aerospace (BAe) — 146 was the last example of a tradition of de Havilland Hatfield jet airliner designs stretching back to the D.H.106 Comet. The decisions surrounding the launch of the 146 in the early 1970s were somewhat overshadowed by the 1971 bankruptcy of Rolls-Royce (see *Collapse of an Icon* in *TAH34*), the ongoing huge costs of Concorde and the complex politics of the Airbus and British-designed competitors (see *Airbus Industrie* in *TAH28*). However, the 146's start-stop-start history reveals much about the complicated politics of UK aerospace in the 1970s, culminating in the formation of BAe in 1977. It was also affected by an intense triangular personal and political contest between two members of the 1973 Labour government and the head of Hawker Siddeley.

Launching the 146

For much of the 1960s, as part of the Hawker Siddeley Group (HSG), the Hatfield design team focused on wings for the European Airbus project. By the end of the decade there was time to consider a smaller independent project. By 1971 preliminary work suggested that a high-wing jet feederliner with four Avco-Lycoming ALF 502 turbofan engines had promise. Although prospective development costs — £90m — were relatively modest, some element of government

support would be welcome. Accordingly, in 1973 Hawker Siddeley submitted a request to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) for launch aid (subsidisation from the government in return for a share of future profits) to cover 50 per cent of the total development costs. As DTI officials noted, Hawker Siddeley could have raised the money, but “sought government participation in order to maintain better balance over the Group’s diversified activities”.¹

In light of Rolls-Royce’s bankruptcy, announced in February 1971, the application was carefully examined by the DTI and was discussed at some length in Cabinet. As a minister later put it, the aim was to ensure that “the prudent industrialist cannot unwittingly blunder into a situation in which he finds he has put himself at risk”.² The government was impressed by the company’s confidence in the concept, designated 146, and asserted that it was “a crucial project for keeping the British aircraft construction industry alive” and sustaining the Hawker Siddeley design team — “the elite of the industry”.

Treasury ministers were less sure; as a national programme it would do little to promote European integration or domestic rationalisation — key concerns of the Conservative government of Edward Heath. But the clinching argument was that rejection would “undermine the new strategy for the aircraft industry” and “signal major doubts about our determination

ABOVE The wooden mock-up of the Hawker Siddeley 146 at Hatfield in 1974, comprising a complete fuselage, wing with engine nacelles and fully instrumented cockpit. The fuselage was designed to accommodate five Boeing 747 seats abreast, with two variants, the Series 100 (up to 88 passengers) and Series 200 (up to 112), to be developed.