We need to stop IRIS dead in its tracks...

Written by Chris Robertshaw
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Thank you Mr President - A PAC report of this nature covering the first 16 years of such a significant and costly capital project presented an extremely important opportunity to produce a fearless, comprehensive and honest document which could inform, advise and guide those who come after us for the good of the Isle of Man, the taxpayer, the whole capital contract commissioning process, our Government and Parliament and indeed the standing of the Public Accounts Committee itself.

This has been an opportunity completely missed.

I recently read an academic paper on the impact of scrutiny committees on the Westminster parliament. I was particularly drawn to the section concerning the Public Accounts Committee. In it their PAC is consistently rated as powerful and is described as, and I quote:

‘the one select committee before which even the most exalted permanent secretary can be made to tremble’

Reading the report before us today I did not for one moment feel that the same could be said of our PAC. It gives me the impression that being subject to their inquiries relating to this report would have been more like being mauled by your favourite duvet.
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This simply cannot be respected as a serious attempt to get to the bottom of the real concerns that exist over IRIS. The report should be withdrawn.

If I could first look at the recommendations in the report:

**Recommendation One** - Sinc

e when did the PAC become an apologist for government? – that is not its role. Having spent £85 million pounds so far I damn well hope that there has been a significant reduction in the discharge of raw sewage into the sea. Period!

I totally disagree with **Recommendation Two**. It is a deeply flawed well meaning piece of nonsense. Surely to goodness it is the PAC’s duty to periodically review a long term high cost capital project both on a reviewing and previewing basis. Last month in this honourable court I pointed out why the Peel Regional Sewage Works proposals as submitted were a disgraceful shambles. Why was it up to a new member to have to point this out – where was the PAC – why were they not doing their job? If it is not here for this sort of thing then what exactly is it for?

**Recommendation Three** is just a cheap piece of buck passing on to the Treasury. The real issue here which I focused on last month was how we as a parliament and those of you who are members of government use and relate to consultancy services. That is the key issue here – not what treasury is or is not asked to do. We need to be a great deal more honest with ourselves before we start dictating further to the Civil Service.

**Recommendation Four** - I just loved this one. What, it asks, are the lessons to be learned from the Meary Veg experience? I thought that was exactly what the PAC was supposed to investigate. It asks the Council of Ministers to come up with answers within six months. Well all I can say about that is that the PAC could not come up with any answers itself and it took longer than six months to achieve nothing. More buck passing.

Let’s now turn to the three conclusions.
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In the first part of the first conclusion.

It's clear that the PAC has allowed itself to become preoccupied with running costs at Meary Veg without ever really understanding exactly what went wrong at a much more fundamental level. I suspect they were rather conveniently led astray here.

In the second part of the first conclusion.

The PAC regrets that Tynwald was not properly informed about the drying process. There is much I could say about this conclusion but the only comment I will make is that I understand we enjoyed paying out for the last dryer so much that we are now contemplating buying another for what is it? £10m? Bad habits, it seems, die hard.

There are alternatives we must consider.

The third part of the first conclusion
...is just plain nonsense – the department did not stay within budget or anything remotely near it but more of that in a moment.

Turning to the second conclusion – here we go again, patting everyone on the back for their efforts over the Whitehoe pumping station. With these compliments flying around in the report - I am beginning to think that either I live on a different planet or a number of honourable members must be on some sort of happy pills. Again I think it is plain daft that this comment is a main conclusion in a report on a subject of such enormous import - but if the PAC really wanted to say anything at all about Whitehoe it should have been to ask and answer the question why was it put there in the first place?
I really have nothing at all to say about the **final conclusion** because it does not actually say anything. I don’t have a clue why it is there.

What is so terribly disappointing is that the PAC has completely missed the proverbial elephant.

So what did go so terribly wrong with the IRIS project? What in my opinion should the PAC have concluded.

First of all let’s say what did NOT go wrong. It was not the decision to site the treatment works at Meary Veg that was fundamentally floored nor in fact the subsequent decision to opt for two treatment works one for the south/central and east central and one for the north.

No it goes deeper than that.

It lies in the early days of the project when a powerful political will to initiate it was allowed to triumph over common sense and where the consultants paid far too much attention to that political will and nothing like enough attention to doing their own job properly. **They chased the fees instead of the facts.**

The Achilles Heel, the weakness at the heart of the project, was the total failure on the part on the consultants to do their job in a professional fashion.

The project was predicated on near industry standard measurements by the consultants and did not take into account the very special ground conditions that exist in lower Douglas.
Mr President let me explain for anyone who is not clear about this. Almost the whole of lower
reconcile the advised running costs of the dryer at £228,000 per annum as shown on page 30.
Along came our politicians with great plans, with consultants in tow who would simply do their
Report we have been fed a series of cock and bull stories about how much more cost effective
embarrassment. But no one did – so here we are.
The August 2006 report states that Meary Veg is sized for everything from Laxey and the
Either that or the information was produced only then to be ignored.
Looking at a couple of particular points within the report I have to say that I cannot reconcile the
I appreciate that Minister of Infrastructure does not like the use of this type of phrase – I just
douglas sewers could possibly have taken place - but this they absolutely should have done.
Anyway, The IRIS scheme, as incorrectly sized, forged ahead and it was not going to be until
Friday. This should have gone to the PAC – the PAC should have asked for it and they should
relationship between government and its consultants should work.
Dryer? – they can't both be right.
Imagine if the Minister of Education said we needed a new school for 400 pupils and then
sewers, and asked them for their advice and then, furnished with that wealth of knowledge, had
to distract members from this central truth. Since the advent of the April 2007 Mouchal Parkman
In order to draw attention away for this serious and costly mistake every attempt is being made
central valley and all stations south.
Situation number two:
Does the PAC not understand its proper duties to this parliament?
The proverbial elephant does almost momentarily appear in the last paragraph of page 31 of the
non existent August 2006 report that suddenly its existence materialised. I finally saw it last
Douglas and not the settlements to the south. This is totally contradicted by the IRIS Master
consultants because no one really wants to accept responsibility.
No thorough investigation, on the part of the consulting engineers, of the flow rates of the
committee to produce a solid report? I don't know.
August 2006 and the subsequent Mouchal Parkman Report of April 2007. The former being pre
That failure takes us to the very heart of the problem.
That is the simple truth
withdraw it as I believe that it has been led up the garden path just as there have been a
understands its duty is to Parliament not to the council of ministers.
onto the beach to carry away the sewage – to keep the sewer pipes flowing.
second – an increase of 145 litres per second or a flow rate
Plan 1998 vol 2 of 3 Feasibility Report (yellow page number 5) which tells a completely different
Nor could any advice have been taken from the men who knew all about our Douglas sewers –
subject to sea water ingress. Also as it sits at the foot of a huge escarpment – lower Douglas
focused on running costs.
late 2006 early 2007 that the full magnitude of this gross error would come fully to light because
The April 2007 report (only eight months later) tells a
I believe we need the following:
- We need to stop IRIS dead in its tracks...
- We need to stop IRIS dead in its tracks until we are able to produce an open honest