

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

Written by Chris Robertshaw

Tuesday, 16 November 2010 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 30 November 2010 13:08

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**Speech on the [Public Accounts Committee Report on IRIS 1991 to 2007](#) , as given in Tynwald on 16 November 2010.**

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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 The report should be withdrawn.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?

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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 sa

y what did NOT go wrong. It was not the decision to site the treatment works at Meary Veg that was fundamentally flawed 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 not 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.

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