

# THE 7:30 REPORT

## Fitzgibbon details Super Hornets plan

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**Kerry O'Brien discusses, with Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon, the Federal Government's decision to go ahead and buy 24 FA/18 superhornet jets for the Air Force.**

### Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN: Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon has decided to go ahead with the controversial commitment from his predecessor Brendan Nelson and buy 24 FA 18 Super Hornet jet fighters from the US for \$6.6 billion despite his earlier trenchant criticisms of the way the original decision was reached. The Opposition has labelled it a humiliating backflip. Mr Fitzgibbon based his decision on an air combat capability review he'd commissioned and he declared the Super Hornet was an excellent aircraft capable of meeting any known threat in the region. His unqualified endorsement of the plane to fill a gap until a new joint strike fighter becomes available in the next seven to ten years, flies in the face of a litany of critiques from an impressive line up of experts including some very senior former Defence Force operators, some only recently retired.

They say the Super Hornet is inferior to a Russian jet fighter the Sukhoi, the preferred choice of many of Australia's regional neighbours. I spoke with the Defence Minister earlier tonight, he was in Canberra. Joel Fitzgibbon, you told the 7.30 Report in an interview just four weeks ago that the previous government's decision to pay \$6.6 billion for 24 Super Hornet fighter jets from the US was a quick political fix, a patch up job. Now you're saying the Super Hornet is an excellent aircraft capable of meeting any known threat in the region. I would have thought that's a pretty big backflip, because you're essentially saying the decision was right?

JOEL FITZGIBBON, DEFENCE MINISTER: Not at all, Kerry. The former government rolled the dice. They were gambling not only with taxpayers' money but with Australia's national security. Thankfully we've been able to come to the conclusion that we have a very capable aircraft in the Super Hornet, but it doesn't change the fact that the process was wrong, or the lack of process was the big problem. And we will never know what other capability we might have secured if we'd properly planned and what better deal we may have got for taxpayers if a proper planning process had been undertaken.

KERRY O'BRIEN: This is what some highly credible officers have had to say about the Super Hornet, because its reputation is still highly arguable. Retired air vice Marshall Peter Criss, a former air commander for Australia said, "I have troubles with the word super and hornet. I would call it superdog or super bug, but certainly not a Super Hornet. The sting in the tail is not there." This is a retired vice Air Marshal, a former air commander for Australia.

JOEL FITZGIBBON: I think retired is the operative word there, Kerry.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Not that long ago.

JOEL FITZGIBBON: Yeah, but they haven't had access to the classified briefings I've had on the capability of the Super Hornet. Look, there is no doubt in my mind now that the Super Hornet is more than capable of doing the job which will be asked of it and it is capable of meeting any potential threat that would emerge in our own region. I constantly come back to, though, the lack of planning and where that now leaves us. We still don't know with any great clarity what is the future for air capability. They are the questions which will be answered by part B of my air combat review.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Retired Wing Commander Chris Mills, air war strategist until just last year is emphatic that the Super Hornet is seriously outperformed by the Russian Sukhoi that most of our regional neighbours to India, to China to Malaysia to Vietnam, to Indonesia are using or buying. Mills quote "The Sukhoi's top speed is mac 2.350 the Super Hornets is mac 16." He says the Super Hornet might be able to get into a fight but can't get out of a fight with a Sukhoi if it's losing. He also said simulated air battles between the two showed the Super Hornet losing 50 per cent of its fleet every time.

JOEL FITZGIBBON: Well Kerry you know, these days it's not about dogfights. There are other capabilities that are very important. Amongst them of course radar capability, that is, the distance at which you see your opponents and of course stealth, the distance in which they can see you. So there are lots of aspects to this debate. I can only repeat that after having the classified briefings and advice from a range of very significant people with expertise in this area, I'm more than confident that the Super Hornet is more than up to the job.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Well, here is another significant expert, an independent one. Dr Karlo Kopp from the independent think tank, Air Power Australia. Quote, "Of the Sukhoi it outranges the Super Hornet, out climbs the Super Hornet, out accelerates the Super Hornet, outturns the Super Hornet."

JOEL FITZGIBBON: Well interoperability is very important too Kerry. It's very important that we're able to work in cooperations with our allies, in particular with the United States. I'm very surprised that a range of people really are suggesting that we move to a Russian based aircraft. In any case, I'm convinced that the Super Hornet is a superior aircraft to those that are being quoted.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Well, even if they're not necessarily saying you've got to move to the Sukhoi they're certainly saying that the Super Hornet is deficient by comparison. You've said today that the decision to retire the F 111 in 2010 is now irreversible. If it wasn't irreversible, would you have been inclined to keep the F 111 for about a fifth the cost of the Super Hornet to cover that window or, in fact, the window wouldn't have occurred if the F 111 had been kept in?

JOEL FITZGIBBON: Well first of all, the F 111 should never have been turned off so quickly. Why didn't Brendan Nelson two years ago or more identify the fact that there's some risk that the F 111 may need to retire prior to 2015 or even 20 in the eyes of some and start planning for that

transition process? This is where the system really broke down. Now there are two aspects in answer to your question. First of all, the former government already started turning off the F 111. Many of the upgrades it should have had by now were not followed through, were not undertaken. So to turn it back on again would be very expensive. In addition to that, all the people have moved on, the skills have been transferred to other areas, but the second part, the second part of the answer is the chief defence scientist is saying that there are real safety risks now involved with the F 111 beyond 2010 and no politician, in particular me, is going to make a decision contrary to that advice.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Alright, I spoke to Wing Commander Chris Mills today, that senior defence strategist, another F 111 expert. I put to him your line that the decision is irreversible. He said, "Nonsense, that the defence science technology organisation has recently completed fatigue test s that all F 111s have at least 10,000 flying hours remaining. The trained crews and maintenance systems are in place, that there are warehouses full of spares that could keep the F 111 going until 2020".

JOEL FITZGIBBON: I don't know where he gets his advice. Turning the F 111 back on would cost around \$2.3 billion. I'm going to resist making the same mistakes as Brendan Nelson and John Howard made and that is make ad hoc decisions on the run. We're not going to gamble with the most important capability we have in the defence of our country, that is our air capability. We'll continue with the review. If chief defence scientist has made it clear that the opportunity to turn the F 111 back on is gone. We need to look to the future.

KERRY O'BRIEN: So you're not influenced at all by the findings of the Australian Audit Office in report 27 on the air combat fleet last year that the F 111 is in the best shape it's ever been?

JOEL FITZGIBBON: No, I'm not encouraged by that report Kerry, I'll listen to the expert and in particular the chief defence scientist. The chief defence scientist tells me that it's not safe to turn the F 111 back on and fly it beyond 2010, well unsurprisingly I'm going to take his advice.

KERRY O'BRIEN: One of the dot points that you have for coming to the decision you have is that to cancel the Super Hornets would create understandable tensions between the contract partners. Is that part of the real reason why you've gone this way, a concern about a damage to the alliance with America, as well as just the people who'd be building the planes?

JOEL FITZGIBBON: It's certainly appropriately in the mix of consideration, Kerry, and we have contractual obligations. If we were to renege on those there would be significant financial penalties. Currently about \$400 million and growing by between \$80 and \$100 million every month. It wouldn't matter who the other party to the contract was, you'd expect some tensions if you were to turn around at this late stage and say, "Look, we're going to rip up this deal", remembering that the US Navy is purchasing the Super Hornets from Boeing. So they've already entered into a contract with Boeing, as well. This would leave them with a significant problem.

KERRY O'BRIEN: We're out of time Joel Fitzgibbon. There may be further debate on this and we look forward to the next part of your review but thanks for talking to us tonight.

JOEL FITZGIBBON: That's a pleasure, Kerry.

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