

It was a perfect news story for a Monday morning. Potentially comic (depending on your sense of humour), defence spending involved, and plenty opportunity for harrumphing; with extra points for getting the word 'woke' into reader comments and the twittersphere.

Yes, according to a story first reported by The Times' Defence Editor and widely shared, the Royal Navy is planning to spend up to £200,000 on a new uniform for female officers because the present design is believed to have 'inappropriately placed buttons'.

Specifically, according to a RN internal document the position of the top two 'decorative' buttons on the current female officer's No 1 jacket (in other words, dress uniform) are deemed to be 'inappropriately placed'.

I admit that the thought never occurred to me and I'm a bloke, but according to the story's obligatory Royal Navy source -

'The button placement on the jacket has always been a bit of a joke within the service, but ...'

If that's so, that sounds like there could have been potential embarrassment for some, if not the end of the world.

Importantly, the Times story does say that 'Some female sailors are believed to be infuriated by the decision...'

The Royal Navy source (who, just guessing, is male) went on to say that

... at a time when the navy has been tasked with gearing up to a warfighting readiness, surely there are more urgent matters for the navy to focus on and better uses for this money. Surely the obvious answer would have been to simply cut off the offensive nipple buttons on the existing uniforms?"

And there were many reader's comments agreeing with that, both on the incorrect priorities and on simply removing the buttons.

No tailoring expert, I doubt that the buttons could easily have been removed without leaving some mark, inviting yet more years of 'joke' according to the Royal Navy source.

The other objection to simply removing the buttons is that instead of four rows of buttons like their male counterparts, female Commissioned officers would then have three rows like male Warrant Officers, Chief Petty Officers and Petty Officers, who are senior ranks but not commissioned officers.

'That's an elitist argument' some might say but, if so, they are not such sturdy traditionalists as they liek to think they are.

According to The Times' story, 'Some female sailors are believed to be infuriated by the decision', and that's important. Some female officers might be happy at the change. We don't know.

This is all of course against the background of a real crisis in defence. Financially, but also in recruitment and retention.

As said at the recent Dartmouth passing-out parade by HRH Princess Anne, whose honorary Naval appointments include Chief Commandant of Women in the Royal Navy -

It will always be the people who deliver operational success.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of Buttongate, let's not let the defence crisis get us into a state of reflexive sniping at every well-meaning attempt to improve something -

- including 'for officers', and including 'for women'.

*Douglas Young (former BAFF Chair)*