

Britain: Blair government blames BBC for crisis over Iraqi war lies

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Any magician will tell you that misdirection is the first principle of sleight-of-hand tricks. The aim is to conceal what you are doing by getting everyone to look elsewhere.

One must conclude that Prime Minister Tony Blair's Director of Communications Alastair Campbell aspires to the art of political legerdemain, but isn't as good at it as he thinks.

His vicious attack on the BBC and its journalist Andrew Gilligan is seen by most observers as a transparent attempt to divert attention from the embarrassing disclosures made during the Foreign Affairs Select Committee investigation into whether the government distorted intelligence to justify war against Iraq.

Campbell, like his boss Blair, initially refused to testify before the inquiry but decided that this stand was untenable. The government was being asked to answer for the veracity of two intelligence dossiers, one produced in September last year and one on February 3, under Campbell's direct supervision as head of the Iraq Communications Group.

Top government personnel, including Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, had acknowledged that the second "dodgy dossier"—largely plagiarised from a doctoral student's thesis—was a political embarrassment for which Campbell must carry the can. On top of this, Campbell had been accused by an intelligence source cited by the BBC of having "sexed-up" the first intelligence dossier, particularly by adding the claim that Saddam Hussein could launch weapons of mass destruction at 45 minutes notice.

In his June 25 appearance before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FASC), Campbell first attempted to downplay the significance of the "dodgy dossier" so that his admission that a mistake had been made in not attributing sources could be portrayed as a purely technical error. This meant side-stepping the fact that alterations had been made to the PhD thesis of the student, Ibrahim al-Marashi, such as changing the assertion that Iraq funded foreign "opposition" groups to a claim that it funded "terrorist" groups.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell singled out the dossier as vital proof of Iraqi guilt during his speech to the United Nations Security Council. However, Campbell described it as "interesting", but "very, very different" in "their breadth and in their intended impact" to the September dossier. "The dossier in September 2002 was one of the most important pieces of work developed during the entire build-up to the conflict," he said, and was "a serious, thorough piece of work setting out why it was so vital to tackle Saddam and WMD."

Campbell was largely allowed to get away with this initial stage in his damage limitation exercise by a committee that spent a great deal of effort portraying Blair as the unfortunate victim of his advisor's incompetence. Even Campbell's incredible statement that "The changes that the Chairman referred to on the text were made by people thinking they were making changes to make more accurate a Government draft," passed without comment.

When dealing with the September dossier, Campbell's main aim was to

insist that it was the product of the government's Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), was agreeable to the intelligence agencies such as MI6 and had not in any way been "sexed-up" by insertions he had made.

Jack Straw had previously insisted to the committee that the 45-minute claim was included in a working draft before Campbell saw it.

Campbell dismissed the proven inaccuracies in the September dossier, such as the claim that Iraq had tried to purchase uranium in Africa, which was revealed by the UN International Atomic Energy Authority to have been based on crudely forged documents, by stating that this was the intelligence he was given. He was "not an intelligence expert ... my position on this is if something comes across my desk that is from [JIC head] John Scarlett and the JIC, if it is good enough for him, it is good enough for me."

Two days after Campbell's testimony, William Ehrman, the Foreign Office's director general of defence and intelligence who sits on the JIC, admitted to the committee that the dossier's claim that Iraq had tried to procure nuclear material from an African country—Niger—had come "from a foreign service"—adding to speculation that the allegations were black propaganda emanating from Mossad or the CIA.

Campbell then concentrated on an attack on the BBC. "What is completely and totally and 100 percent untrue—and this is the BBC allegation, which is ostensibly I think why the Chairman called me on this—what is completely and totally untrue is that I in any way overrode that judgment, sought to exaggerate that intelligence, or sought to use it in any way that the intelligence agencies were not 100 percent content with," he began.

He maintained that the BBC was claiming that "the Prime Minister took the country into military conflict and all that entails—loss of military and Iraqi civilian life—on the basis of a lie.... The allegation against me is that we helped the Prime Minister persuade Parliament and the country to go into conflict on the basis of a lie. I think that is a pretty serious allegation. It has been denied by the Prime Minister, it has been denied by the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, it has been denied by the Security and Intelligence Coordinator and it has been denied by the heads of the intelligence agencies involved, and yet the BBC continue to stand by that story."

"When you have a situation when all of those people, from the Prime Minister down, the Foreign Secretary, the FCO Permanent Secretary, the heads of all the agencies deny a story and the BBC persist in saying it is true, persist in defending the correspondent whom you took evidence from last week, when I know and they know that it is not true, I think something has gone very wrong with the way that these issues are covered."

And that is how Campbell's submission continued. As far as he was concerned, it was no longer he and Blair who were on trial, but the BBC and Andrew Gilligan for using a single anonymous source. It should be noted that Campbell was not shamed by his own admission that the 45-minute claim was supposed to have also come from a single source

from pursuing his hysterical diatribe.

Gilligan, the defence correspondent for Radio 4's *Today* programme, had reported that a senior intelligence officer responsible for the September file blamed Alastair Campbell for "sexing up" the Joint Intelligence Committee document and stood by his story in his evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Campbell used his testimony to demand an apology from the BBC and thus began a sustained offensive to throw as much dirt at the corporation as possible in order to shift attention away from the government's duplicity.

In the next days he had drafted a letter to the BBC demanding that they answer for their supposed accusations against the government and burst into Channel 4 News studios to bang the table and demand an apology. He was backed up by a number of equally irate colleagues, including Health Secretary John Reed and Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon.

The government's strategy is immensely risky. To seek to destroy the reputation of the BBC—the leading domestic and international voice of the British ruling class—is not the best political strategy ever chosen. Previous governments, particularly the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher, have accused the BBC of bias (ironically towards Labour), but they never backed it into a corner in the way Campbell and others have done.

The BBC has so far refused to back down. Its top personnel responded aggressively by making a detailed defence of their story and their journalist and an equally devastating critique of the government.

Richard Sambrook, the director of BBC News, wrote to Campbell, "It is impossible to discuss our reporting of the September 2002 dossier without seeing it in the context of what we knew by then of the February 2003 dossier—the dossier which even the foreign secretary described as 'a complete Horlicks'.

"What was by then clear was that your department had plagiarised an article from the Internet, based on an old university thesis, changed crucial parts of it and then used it unattributed to strengthen the case for Britain going to war. The discrediting of the February dossier inevitably influenced questions asked about any similar dossiers."

He insisted, "a number of BBC journalists who have close contact with both the military and the security services had reported that their contacts were concerned that intelligence reports were being exaggerated to strengthen the case against Saddam Hussein. It was in this context that we judged that reporting the claim made by Andrew Gilligan's source was in the public interest."

The letter denied that the BBC had made any accusations against Blair, Straw and other ministers. It had reported accurately what it had been told by sources indicating "unease among some of the intelligence community about the use of intelligence in government dossiers" and specifically, "the assertion of one senior and credible source, who has proved reliable in the past, that the '45 minute claim' was wrong and was inserted late into the dossier."

Gilligan had "accurately reported the source telling him that the government 'probably knew that the 45 minute figure was wrong' and that the claim was 'questionable'. The basis for this assertion by Andrew Gilligan's source was that the information about the 45 minute claim had been derived from only one intelligence source, whereas most of the other claims in the dossier had at least two."

The BBC also stood by "our reporting of the source as saying that the dossier was 'sexed up' and that happened at a late stage in its preparation—and the 'sexing up' relied on uncorroborated material not approved of by all in the intelligence agencies."

Just as devastating for the government, the letter began by accusing it of political intimidation. Sambrook wrote, "In your [Campbell's] evidence to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee you made it clear that you believed the BBC had an anti-war agenda. It is our firm view that No 10 tried to intimidate the BBC in its reporting of events leading up to the war

and during the course of the war itself."

The stakes were upped once more when on June 28 Gilligan announced that he was ready to sue Phil Woolas, Labour's deputy leader of the House of Commons, unless he received a full apology for allegations that the reporter had misled the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. Woolas had sent a letter to the press on June 26, before Gilligan had received it, that the reporter said was "defamatory, casting grave doubt on my professional integrity and honesty. Unlike the claims made by Alastair Campbell against me in the committee on Wednesday, your claim is not protected by parliamentary privilege. I now require a full apology and retraction of your claims, which were widely reported on Friday morning, are entirely unsupported by evidence and were clearly intended to blacken my character."

He said he was acting, "with the full knowledge and support of the BBC".

Still the government has not backed down from its chosen course. Its next step was to let it be known that the majority of Labour supporters on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee would find Campbell innocent of the charge of having altered the September dossier in its findings to be released on Monday July 8.

Barnsley Labour MP Eric Illsley, who sits on the committee, made an extraordinary statement in a June 29 radio interview that the intelligence reports he had seen removed any doubt that Campbell was not guilty of exaggerating the key September dossier.

The partisan character of his actions provoked an immediate response from the Conservatives on the committee, with Richard Ottaway remarking, "He's a Labour MP and probably found it easier to make his mind up about it," and John Maples stating, "We haven't met to decide yet what we're going to do." Maples complained, "We have not been given some of the papers we requested" and have not been allowed to interview Sir John Scarlett, head of the Joint Intelligence Committee.

The net effect of this latest initiative has been to weaken the government, rather than the BBC. Campbell made clear that he was waiting to bludgeon the corporation with the FASC's findings, stating in another letter that there was little point in the two sides having further exchanges until next week's judgement was issued. But now there is speculation that the non-Labourites could issue a minority dissenting report that would leave any whitewash provided for the government by the committee without any authority.

And the BBC, with the backing of its director general Greg Dyke, said its journalists were ready to rebuff Campbell's offensive after going through the evidence he had given to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee line by line discovering "inaccuracies and inconsistencies". They and Gilligan would produce a new dossier in support of the allegations made against Campbell, which they promised to send to the committee and then publish.

As well as provoking a direct fight with the BBC, moreover, the government has also alienated many of its usual supporters in the media. The *Independent*, *Guardian*, *Observer* and the *Mirror* have all criticised Campbell for attacking the BBC and opinion pieces have been published supporting Gilligan's central contention that the security services were unhappy with the government's use of intelligence.

Two of the more damaging are by Richard Norton-Taylor in the June 28 *Guardian* and Peter Beaumont in the June 29 *Observer*.

Concerning the September dossier Norton-Taylor states, "The security and intelligence services knew full well that any dossier would be shamelessly used by the government to promote a war against Iraq. They generally opposed the war on the grounds that, far from making the world a safer place, it would make it more dangerous, because they saw the real enemy as extreme Islamist terrorism."

He continued, "When it finally became clear that Blair, on Campbell's advice, was adamant that a dossier which had been drawn up half-

heartedly by the joint intelligence committee, would indeed be published, MI6, MI5, GCHQ, and the Defence Intelligence Staff bowed to the inevitable. What John Scarlett, chairman of the JIC, described as a “debate” with Mr Campbell then took place.

“The result was a 50-page document containing everything MI6 and others could possibly think of. It included the 45-minute claim—mentioned four times—and the claim that Saddam Hussein had tried to procure uranium from the west African state of Niger.”

He concludes, apropos the document having been “sexed up”: “Mr Scarlett and his colleagues may not be politicians but they have astute political antennae. They know what their masters wanted. The dossier was cleverly worded, with enough conditional phrases to satisfy their professional consciences but also enough for ministers and their spin doctors to play with.”

Beaumont wrote that while Gilligan’s specific information may be wrong, “the problem for Campbell is that a journalist who has followed this story knows that Gilligan still got it right. He did so because he reported what was widely being briefed to journalists—including myself—by MI6 officers and the Foreign Office that Number 10 (Campbell in particular) had gone out of its way to overstate the threat posed by Iraq to make the case for war.”

He continued, “It was not what was actually in the dossier that was a problem, because it had all been cleared through the head of the Joint Intelligence Committee, John Scarlett. It was what was said about the material to journalists and politicians ‘on the QT’. Number 10 sold it in the crudest of ways. Journalists were told that MI6 had been bolshie about including material that would pose any risk to its sources. It was intimated that there was stuff kept out that would make the ‘hairs on the back of your neck stand up’.

“Except the spooks weren’t saying that in their own rounds of the media. What they were saying—pre-war—was that Iraq did not pose an immediate threat to the UK (contrary to the September dossier’s most alarming headline). I recall a conversation with a middle-ranking officer around the time some 1.5 million protesters marched through central London. He admitted that there was a problem in making the case for war precisely because the threat was not really immediate as was being claimed.”

He added, “I recall talking to an intelligence officer the day before Gilligan’s first story broke. Hostility to Number 10 and Campbell from MI6 was already in the air. He described Campbell’s behaviour in mixing material plagiarised from a student thesis in the February dossier as ‘shameful’. When I called to check later, after the first allegations over the 45-minute warning had broken, he described Campbell’s behaviour as a ‘disgrace’.

“I rang a friend who has different kinds of contacts with MI6 and asked him to check. How widespread was this view? He came back with the answer that—like me—he believed briefings against Campbell had been authorised, that there had been a massive breakdown of trust between the Secret Intelligence Service and Number 10. So does it matter Gilligan may have got the detail wrong? The thrust of his story was right—and it still is.”

The aftermath of the war against Iraq has seen a deepening of the government’s political isolation. On every front circumstances have conspired to exacerbate divisions within ruling circles—the continued political embarrassment over the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, the growing resistance of the Iraqis to the occupation of their country by the US and Britain and the fear that things will continue to deteriorate. Instead of Blair being able to offer his opponents a chance to bask in the reflected glory of his and Bush’s military victory, he finds them scrambling to distance themselves from what is coming to be seen as an unfolding political disaster.

To make matters worse, the dissension within ruling circles is only a

pale reflection of the chasm that has opened up between the government and the electorate. A recent opinion poll for the *Financial Times* suggests that only a third of respondents trust Blair.

Nearly two thirds of those questioned thought Blair was “losing his grip”, including 43 percent of Labour supporters. Most damning of all 40 percent said they had lost confidence in Blair since the beginning of the year, showing that even accounting for anger over the government’s failures on health and education, opposition to the war against Iraq is the single most important issue haunting the government. There is little doubt, therefore, that the government’s attacks on the BBC for reports that back up the suspicions broadly held by working people that Blair lied about weapons of mass destruction will backfire on its authors.



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