

Britain: Government attack on BBC threatens press freedom

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The ongoing feud between the Labour government and the BBC raises issues that directly impact on the democratic rights of the working class.

Essentially the government's aim is to restrict freedom of the press in order to silence any voice of criticism, no matter how faltering.

For months now the government has targeted the BBC for attacks, based on the claim that the broadcaster slandered Prime Minister Tony Blair's communications director, Alastair Campbell. Numerous government spokesmen, including Campbell himself, accused BBC Radio 4 journalist Andrew Gilligan of improperly citing a source who claimed that Campbell was responsible for "sexing up" a September 2002 intelligence dossier by insisting on inserting the claim that Saddam Hussein could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes.

The government forced the exposure of Gilligan's source, Ministry of Defence microbiologist Dr David Kelly, and set in motion a chain of events that culminated in Kelly dying from a slashed wrist on July 17. The government has tried to use his death against the BBC by claiming the corporation put Kelly in a high-pressure situation and that Gilligan misquoted the scientist as the latter had claimed before parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee that he did not remember mentioning Campbell's name during his meeting with the journalist.

The government's immediate aim in attacking the BBC is threefold.

Firstly, it has attempted to use the issue of whether Campbell was personally responsible for the 45-minute claim to divert public attention away from its abject failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, when the supposed threat they posed to world peace was the main justification for war.

Whether or not Campbell was the personal author of one fraudulent claim amongst many—and the BBC never said he was, but only cited Kelly's statement to this effect—is immaterial. The government has been caught out in a monumental lie used to justify an illegal predatory war of aggression against a largely defenceless country. It is to conceal this that the BBC has been accused of a supposedly anti-war and anti-government bias for having the temerity to note that sections of the intelligence establishment, including Kelly who was one of the authors of the September dossier, were unhappy with the government's spin.

The second aim of the anti-BBC diatribe has been forced on the government by subsequent events. It is to cover-up its own political responsibility for Kelly's death. The Blair government was instrumental in forcing Kelly into the public eye and making him testify before the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee. In doing so the government effectively hung the scientist out to dry in pursuit of its campaign against Gilligan and the BBC. The BBC is the scapegoat behind which the government is seeking to hide its own misdemeanours.

The government's third immediate aim is to silence any expression of criticism of its policies and actions, both in respect to the war and the ongoing occupation of Iraq and more generally.

It is this aim that feeds into a more long-term goal of the government,

which is to so discredit the BBC that there will be less opposition to its plans to bring the corporation more directly under its control, downgrade its importance and encourage deregulation to ensure the spread of private media operations to which the government is beholden.

Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell made explicit the threat to the BBC when she warned that the judicial inquiry by Lord Hutton into Kelly's death could impact on a forthcoming review of the BBC charter. On July 25, she told the *Times*, "I will consider very carefully any recommendations and conclusions which can be drawn from the Hutton Inquiry in relation to the BBC. Trust is important for public institutions and the government... It is important that broadcasters and the wider media continue to show that they are worthy of that trust."

Media Select Committee chairman Gerald Kaufman MP said of Gilligan's report, "The way this story has been pursued by the BBC and endorsed by the board of governors raises the most profound questions about the nature of the BBC as a public sector, public service, publicly-funded organisation."

He hinted that the regulatory role of the BBC's Board of Governors should be taken over by the government's newly created media regulation body, Ofcom.

These threats prompted a letter to the *Sunday Telegraph* on July 27 from BBC Chairman Gavyn Davies. He wrote, "Our integrity is under attack, and we are chastised for taking a different view on editorial matters from that of the government and its supporters. Because we have had the temerity to do this, it is hinted that a system that has protected the BBC for 80 years should be swept away and replaced by an external regulator that will 'bring the BBC to heel'..."

"Alastair Campbell's recent attack on the BBC was not mainly about Andrew Gilligan's story on the *Today* programme, but amounted to a full-frontal assault on the motivation, skill and professionalism of the entire news operation. Coming from where it did, the governors could not simply let this attack pass unchallenged..."

There can be few occasions where the relations between government and a national broadcaster have become so embittered. Yet in reality the BBC is no hotbed of anti-government propaganda or anti-war sentiment. Until recently its board was more often accused of pro-government bias by the Conservatives after Gavyn Davies was appointed BBC chairman by Blair in 2001 and because BBC Director-General Greg Dyke and Davies have both given money to the Labour Party. The BBC's coverage of the war was recently judged by independent academic reviewers to be the most pro-government and least likely to cite oppositional sources of all the major broadcasters.

More fundamentally, the BBC has been the official voice of the British ruling class since it was founded as a national broadcaster in 1926. It fulfills this role in Britain and throughout the world. Indeed, the BBC World Service has long been considered to be a major asset of British imperialism from the standpoint of disseminating propaganda and shaping international opinion. To fill this role, however, it is not enough to simply

parrot the line of the government of the day. A degree of distance and an element of criticism on certain issues are sometimes essential if the corporation is to maintain an appearance of impartiality and independence.

It is a strategy that has paid dividends in the past and continues to do so. A recent poll, for example, found that more than half of respondents—54 percent—said they trusted the BBC over the government in the row over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. And just one fifth said they trusted the government over the BBC. The BBC was also the most trusted news bulletin, named by 44 percent of respondents.

(It should be noted that there are limits to all things, however, and the BBC did not get away unscathed for having so shamelessly supported the war against Iraq. More than half of those questioned said they trusted the TV and radio news less than they did a year ago, prior to the war, and of these almost half said they had “much less” trust.)

By any criteria, therefore, the government’s efforts to take on and discredit the BBC seem shortsighted. Why attack a body that is better than you at winning public trust for policies you wish to implement? Some within the establishment have warned against doing so. Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy said in a recent interview, “This government will come and go, like any other government, but the BBC is here to stay as an independent broadcasting organisation on a global level, and ministers would do well to remember that.”

Governments, particularly the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher, often bridled at what they considered to be undue impertinence on the part of “Auntie”. But none, until Blair’s, has contemplated such drastic remedial action. Why? An indication can be found by examining the most ardent supporters of the government’s offensive.

Leading the pack is Rupert Murdoch’s News International and his British newspapers, the *Sun*, *Times*, *Sunday Times* and the *News of the World*. Of them all the *Sun* is the most vocal and crude.

On July 21, the *Sun* called Gilligan a “rat”, claiming that he was trying to save his job by branding Kelly a liar and said that “heads must roll at BBC”, including those of Davies, Dyke and head of news Richard Sambrook.

Murdoch is not only a leading supporter of the Blair government. He has much to gain from Blair’s policies for the media and any misfortune that may befall the BBC

Two issues are of central importance.

The first is the attempt to make the BBC answerable to Ofcom. The government is about to undertake its review of the BBC prior to the date for renewing its public charter in 2006. And handing over the regulatory responsibilities of its Board of Governors to Ofcom is the most probable outcome.

Ofcom amalgamates five existing regulators to give it overall control of broadcasting. Its board is made up of nine members, six of whom (including the chairman and deputy chairman) are appointed by the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry and for Culture, Media and Sport—giving the government unprecedented, albeit indirect, influence over broadcasting content. The board includes Blair’s former senior policy adviser on media and telecommunications, Ed Richards, as one example of its political physiognomy and intentions.

The other aspect of government policy that interests Murdoch directly is that the creation of Ofcom is bound up with efforts to deregulate the entire media sector. The government’s Communications Bill, presently going through various readings and amendments in the House of Lords, removes cross-media and radio ownership barriers and allows companies from the United States and other overseas investors to buy ITV and commercial radio licences.

The moves will also directly benefit Murdoch, who owns most of Britain’s top satellite broadcaster, BSkyB, but wants desperately to acquire a terrestrial TV station. He will now be able to buy Channel 5

because under the Communications Bill, a newspaper proprietor who owns more than 20 percent of the national market will no longer be prevented from buying further stakes in TV channels. Newspaper owners are currently restricted from buying more than 20 percent of a terrestrial TV station, but this would be lifted under the new laws except with respect to the ITV stations.

The move is so nakedly favourable to Murdoch that Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell said that those who pointed this obvious fact out were propagating a “conspiracy theory without any substance at all... This is not about Rupert Murdoch, and let’s be absolutely clear about that. These proposals are proprietor-neutral.”

Labour’s Lord David Puttnam has claimed that amendments he fought for during the passage of the Bill in the House of Lords—to give citizens rights alongside those with an economic interest in decisions made by the regulator and to force Ofcom to assess whether any takeovers of commercial TV companies are in the “public interest”—have ended the threat of a Murdoch monopoly. But this appears to be wishful thinking, given the attitude of Ofcom to the BBC and its close relations with government.

Lord Currie, Ofcom chairman, said that Puttnam’s amendments had “unbalanced” the duties of the new media regulator and could prove “counterproductive.” Earlier he had warned, “There are certain points beyond which a broadcaster may not go, without abusing the immense privilege which is implicit in the right to broadcast. Ofcom will establish where those limits are with careful reference to the context of the broadcast, and after full consultation.”

This meant the BBC would have to “think very carefully” about its producer’s guidelines: “It will also mean that the BBC will, for the first time, face the sort of sanctions which have applied to commercial broadcasters. We fully expect that the BBC will keep its own house in order. But be in no doubt: if Ofcom needs to take firm regulatory action, it will have no hesitation in doing so.”

Liberal Democrat peer Lord McNally said that he still believed Murdoch could buy into Channel 5. “This bill was authorised in Number 10 where Mr Murdoch has had worrying influence,” he said on BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme.

As well as the commercial considerations animating the attack on the BBC by the government and the media—and the immediately political aims regarding the Iraq war—one should not ignore the ideological element of the drive to gut public broadcasting and elevate the role of big private news operators such as Murdoch.

Lord Conrad Black, the Canadian owner of the *Daily Telegraph*, provided a valuable illustration of this when he made an extraordinary attack on his own paper and its journalists for defending Andrew Gilligan and not joining in the BBC bashing with sufficient enthusiasm.

In a letter to the July 26 edition, he slated Boris Johnson, right-wing Tory MP for Henley and editor of the *Spectator* magazine, for defending Gilligan. Black declared, “The BBC is pathologically hostile to the government and official opposition, most British institutions, American policy in almost every field, Israel, moderation in Ireland, all western religions, and most manifestations of the free market economy.... It is a virulent culture of bias. Though its best programming in non-political areas is distinguished, sadly it has become the greatest menace facing the country it was founded to serve and inform.”

He continued: “Where Boris Johnson and the Tories go badly wrong is they don’t recognise the present news and public affairs service of the BBC as a greater enemy to all they believe in than the government.”

For sections of the right wing, the BBC is clearly still the “Bolshevik Broadcasting Corporation”—or more recently the “Baghdad Broadcasting Corporation”—of their own myth making. And, as far as Blair and company are concerned, they would be happier working with Murdoch-run TV channels such as Sky in Britain and Fox in the United States.

Although “independent” from the standpoint of being privately rather than publicly owned, they are considered far more reliable voices for the government because they are answerable directly to their fabulously wealthy owner and his prejudices and do not have even the formal commitment to “accuracy”, “impartiality” and reflecting “the needs and interests of the public” that is part of the BBC’s charter. And anyone who has had the misfortune to watch news coverage in America can testify that Blair will not be disappointed in his political calculations.



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