The death of Dr. Kelly

Britain: Inquiry exposes lies on Iraq war

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At one point during his questioning by James Dingemans QC, the chief counsel in the judicial inquiry by Lord Hutton into the circumstances surrounding the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly, Alastair Campbell was asked to explain a phrase used in his personal diary.

Campbell, Prime Minister Tony Blair's director of communications, made a show of reluctance due to his supposed concern that he would inadvertently misrepresent Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon.

He told Dingemans, "The reason I did not use it in answer to you now is I think it does risk being unfair to Mr. Hoon. He actually said his initial instinct was, as I say, to be severe in this regard but there was a case for trying get some kind of plea bargain. That is what I recorded."

Dingemans asked, "A plea bargain with?" Campbell replied, "In relation to the person who had come forward," a reference to Kelly who had admitted that he was the probable source of BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan's May report claiming the government had "sexed up" intelligence material to justify its pre-emptive war on Iraq.

Two things of importance are revealed by Campbell's response. Firstly, he protesteth too much. For weeks, government efforts to shield itself from criticisms that it had misused intelligent material to justify its illegal war against Iraq had focussed on attacking the BBC for reporting the allegations. That strategy went disastrously wrong with the discovery of Kelly's body in woodland on July 18, necessitating the convening of the inquiry under Lord Hutton.

Even within the narrow remit of the inquiry itself, whose terms were laid down by Prime Minister Tony Blair and limited to investigating the circumstances surrounding Kelly's apparent suicide, a mass of highly damaging material has emerged.

Campbell's naming of Hoon is in line with the latest attempts by the government to mount a damage-limitation exercise, which focuses on efforts to shield Campbell and ultimately Blair from direct criticism by apportioning blame to Hoon, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) for both the production of the September 2002 dossier on Iraq and the later outing of Kelly as Gilligan's source.

In both cases, however, the government has suffered badly over the last weeks of the inquiry.

The second week has been dominated by the testimony of a number of key Blair personnel, including Campbell, Jonathan Powell and Sir David Manning, both from the prime minister's office, and Sir Kevin Tebbit and Pam Teare from the MoD.

Though efforts were made by all concerned to exonerate the government, all were equally anxious to ensure they individually did not carry the can. Therefore, it became impossible to present a common picture of events in order to shield Blair.

Testimony, documents given over to the inquiry and leaks to the press have made clear that Blair was intimately involved at every stage in the drafting of intelligence dossiers, particularly through the person of Campbell, and that he was personally involved in directing the policy of outing Kelly and forcing him to testify before the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) investigating the veracity of the allegations reported by the BBC.

Blair's and Campbell's defence is essentially to claim that they were acting on the advice of the civil service and Hoon himself, who bore immediate responsibility for this area of policy.

Under the limited terms of the inquiry, greatest emphasis has been placed upon the circumstances leading up to Kelly's death. The picture that has emerged shows that the government was intent on rebutting the BBC's report for a number of reasons and that Kelly's testimony before the FAC was considered vital in this regard.

Kelly and Gilligan had pointed up an open rift between the government and substantial sections of the security services over the advisability of going to war against Iraq and the use of unsubstantiated claims to justify this.

Not only was such a schism embarrassing in itself, but also it focussed attention on the campaign of lies and misinformation employed by the government to steamroller overwhelming popular opposition to the war and defy all legal norms in launching unprovoked military aggression against a largely defenceless country.

The BBC became a target for the government not because of any anti-war agenda on its part, but because a narrow focus on whether or not Campbell himself had been responsible for sexing up the dossier by including the claim that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction (WMD) within 45 minutes gave the government room for denial in a way that it could not deny the broader charge that it had lied to parliament and the British public.

This was perfectly illustrated by Campbell's own testimony. At one point, he explained why he and Blair agreed to his testifying before the FAC inquiry and the strategy behind this. "I accepted some of the criticisms that were being made in relation to the February briefing paper [the February 2003 dossier that was found to have been plagiarised from a US Ph.D. thesis], and forcefully rebutted the allegations made on the WMD dossier of September... My approach was going to be to acknowledge the mistakes that were made in relation to the briefing paper, to forcefully defend the government and myself on the September dossier and to make public the efforts that we had been making trying to get redress from the BBC and to demand an apology."

He was then asked, "And I think you conclude your entry on 25th June with a comment about the BBC. What is the comment and what do you mean by it?"

He replied, "What I said is that I felt that the hearing had gone pretty well, I found it gruelling, I was exhausted but I felt a lot better and I had opened a flank on the BBC."

It was for this reason that Kelly's testimony at the FAC was considered essential. He had to speak and deny that he had told Gilligan that the dossier had been sexed-up by Campbell. Kelly was therefore named and put before the inquiry, where he claimed that he did not recollect mentioning Campbell's name to Gilligan and did not believe he was the

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main source of his report.

We now know that Kelly was lying and that he had made almost identical statements to another BBC reporter, Susan Watts. He could have done this in his own defence, of course, but he probably did so as part of a deal with the government or as a result of being coerced. This may be a reason why Campbell was genuinely concerned about using his diary statements on Hoon. Later, he was asked, "Why do you say that [the entry on Hoon] is likely to be misinterpreted or unfair?" He replied, "Because I think it carries a suggestion that Mr. Hoon was saying to me: I think we can do some kind of deal with this guy, and that is not what he was saying."

Sometimes, however, appearances are not deceiving. That a deal was done with Kelly is likely. And Campbell uses some formulations suggesting a degree of cooperation with him. At several points, he explained that Kelly's name was not released immediately because Kelly had made clear he did not want to be in "the first wave of publicity"—referring to the efforts to discredit Gilligan and the BBC before the FAC.

Kelly's death is important, but with regard to the inquiry's focus it has a negative political role to play in elevating the minutiae of Kelly's outing and its tragic consequences above the more substantial question of the lies told by the government and its trampling on the democratic process.

It is this fundamental issue that the inquiry is aimed at obscuring. But despite its proscribed limits, there has been a series of damaging revelations relating to the distortion of intelligence material.

Any objective reading of the evidence given on this count proves that the government was intent on shaping intelligence material to suit its war aims. In testimony from Powell, Campbell and others, it emerged that the prime minister's office and his top officials were all involved in a campaign to secure from the intelligence services the type of material they felt necessary to justify recourse to war.

Campbell's questioning by Dingemans was informed by references to a series of e-mails sent by himself and others close to the government. Campbell wrote to Powell on September 5 that the final dossier's structure should be "as TB's [Tony Blair's] discussion."

On September 11, Foreign Office press officer Daniel Pruce wrote to Campbell asking, "Why don't we issue [the dossier] in the name of the JIC? Makes it more interesting to the media."

Later he added, "The more we advertise that unsupported assertions (e.g., Saddam attaches great importance to the possession of WMD) come from intelligence the better."

On September 17, Powell wrote to Campbell explaining the thinking behind using the JIC's authority to endorse government policy. "I think it is worth explicitly stating what TB keeps saying. This is the advice to him from the JIC. On the basis of this advice what other action could he as PM take? Something like 'I am today taking the exceptional step of publishing JIC advice to me because I want MPs and the British public to see the advice on which I am acting. When you have read this I ask you to consider what else a responsible PM could do than follow the course we have in face of this advice.'"

Other memos make clear that at every stage of the dossier's preparation, it was the government that determined content and style. Despite his denials, Campbell had seen drafts earlier than September 10, including ones that did not contain the 45-minutes claim. And he was chiefly responsible for drafting the introduction attributed to Blair that focussed on this claim.

There is correspondence between Campbell and JIC head John Scarlett in which Campbell makes a number of detailed suggestions that certainly read as efforts to strengthen or sex up the dossier. One that was rejected by Scarlett is a query: "Can we say he [Saddam] has secured uranium from Africa."

Significantly, one that was incorporated was Campbell's complaint that the word "may" used in relation to the 45-minute claim was too weak. JIC head John Scarlett dutifully replied that this had been "tightened" so that the final version of the dossier read "The Iraqi military *are* able to deploy these weapons within 45 minutes" (our emphasis).

A number of other key advisers tried to get in on the act, making similar suggestions.

Despite the best efforts of a largely pliant and supportive media, anyone who has followed the inquiry would find much in it to confirm that the government lied repeatedly to justify war and was well aware of the weakness of its case.

Campbell's special adviser Philip Bassett wrote to to Pruce on one draft stating, "Very long way to go, I think. Think we're in a lot of trouble with this as it stands now." And in another e-mail, Powell had warned, "We will need to make it clear in launching the document that we do not claim that we have evidence that he [Saddam] is an imminent threat."

To which Campbell replied evasively to Dingemans, "We always sought to describe it [Iraq's supposed WMD programme] as a serious and credible threat," rather than an imminent one.

But if there was no imminent threat, there was no justification for war.

The Hutton inquiry may be aimed at limiting political damage to the government, but events are not wholly under its control. Even a partial lifting of the veil of government secrecy provides a unsavoury picture of how the political process has become divorced from all genuine democratic accountability and how state policy is decided in a manner more akin to a conspiracy.

It could not be any other way. Government policy is objectively opposed to the social and political interests of the broad mass of the British population. Its domestic programme is dictated by what best facilitates the further enrichment of the narrow layer of the super-rich and the profit drive of big business. It involves destroying social services, shifting the tax burden onto working people and cutting wages to the bare minimum. Internationally, it means a renewal of the strivings of British imperialism to seize control of vital resources and markets, essentially as a junior partner of the Bush administration. No government could possibly secure a popular mandate for such an agenda. Hence, the recourse to politics of the big lie and dirty deeds in the dead of night.

But the fact that this situation can be glimpsed in the proceedings of the Hutton inquiry does not lend the inquiry itself any legitimacy. The inquiry's outcome is not predetermined. It is clear that there are strenuous efforts to protect Blair, but even if this were to prove impossible and he was forced to quit, nothing fundamental would be resolved. Labour under a new leadership, or the coming to power of any combination of the opposition parties, would not alter the political relations that have been exposed in the Kelly affair.

Only an independent and conscious intervention by the working class can secure a decisive shift in the balance of political power in favour of the broad majority of the population. The deliberate shortcomings of the Hutton inquiry have only confirmed the necessity for a full and genuinely independent investigation into how the government conspired to drag the country into war against Iraq and to what ends, and for the working class to create its own political vehicle to fight for such an outcome.

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