

BBC's Gilligan resigns after condemning the Hutton Inquiry and Blair government

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BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan resigned last night, but issued a statement denouncing the Hutton Inquiry into the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly and defending his story exposing how the British government had “sexed up” its September intelligence dossier on Iraq.

Gilligan accepted that some of his May 29 *Today* programme report was wrong and apologised for his specific errors, but insisted that his report, despite some minor errors, had been substantially correct. The government had indeed “sexed up” the dossier, by heavily promoting the now completely discredited claim that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes, and that there was considerable disquiet within the intelligence services, as his source David Kelly had indicated.

Gilligan's resignation follows that of BBC director general Greg Dyke and chairman of the board of governors Gavyn Davies. Like Gilligan, they too were savaged by Lord Hutton for standing behind their reporter and defending his story when he was attacked by Prime Minister Tony Blair's communications director, Alastair Campbell. Gilligan said that the entire BBC had been the victim of a “grave injustice” due to Hutton's biased verdict exonerating the government. He went on to warn that the Hutton Inquiry “casts a chill over all journalism.”

His statement was a sustained broadside against both Hutton and the government. He insisted, “If Lord Hutton had fairly considered the evidence he heard, he would have concluded that most of my story was right.”

On his mistake, he explained, “It is hard to believe now that this all stems from two flawed sentences in one unscripted early-morning interview, never repeated, when I said that the Government ‘probably

knew’ that the 45-minute figure was wrong. I attributed this to David Kelly; it was in fact an inference of mine.”

He had “explicitly made clear” that the “45-minute point was based on real intelligence. I repeatedly said also that I did not accuse the Government of fabrication, but of exaggeration. I stand by that charge, and it will not go away.”

Gilligan insisted, “The Government did sex up the dossier, transforming possibilities and probabilities into certainties, removing vital caveats; the 45-minute claim was the ‘classic example’ of this; and many in the intelligence services, including the leading expert in WMD, were unhappy about it.”

He warned, “This report casts a chill over all journalism, not just the BBC's. It seeks to hold reporters, with all the difficulties they face, to a standard that it does not appear to demand of, for instance, Government dossiers.”

He also expressed the fact that he was “comforted by the fact that public opinion appears to disagree with Lord Hutton and I hope this will strengthen the resolve of the BBC.”

Earlier, Greg Dyke had said he was shocked by Hutton's findings and did not accept all of the report. He that he did not understand what exactly the BBC was apologising to the government for when his resignation was announced. Hutton's findings had “given the benefit of doubt to every government witness and not to any at the BBC.”

Gilligan's statement reinforced the earlier remarks of Greg Dyke, who said he did not agree with Hutton's findings and had been forced to resign only because the BBC's directors “decided I did not have their full support.”

He too warned that Hutton's findings should arouse

grave concern for the media. “Lord Hutton does seem to suggest that it is not enough for a broadcaster or a newspaper...to simply report what a whistleblower says because they are an authoritative source,” he said. “You have to demonstrate that it is true. That would change the law in this country.”

The BBC’s legal department has let it be known that this is also their initial understanding of Hutton’s findings. The BBC always insisted that they had never accused the government of lying, but had honestly reported the views of their source. Not to be able to do so in the case of future whistleblowers would constitute a major attack on the freedom of the press and allow the government to suppress many politically uncomfortable reports.

The government was clearly thrown onto the defensive by Gilligan’s statement, coming as it does in the midst of mounting public criticism of Hutton’s whitewash of the lies used to justify going to war against Iraq and the role of Blair and others in the death of Dr. Kelly. Other journalists and some editors queued up to defend Gilligan, describing his story as the most important of the past quarter century and praising him for performing a “public service.”

A Downing Street spokesman said it had “nothing to say” on Gilligan’s departure, but its efforts to “draw a line” under the affair have failed utterly.

Blair is under pressure to make a statement on the government’s intelligence and the failure to find any evidence of WMD in Iraq. He is to be questioned next week by the Liaison Committee—made up of the heads of parliament’s various select committees—on why he continues to insist that evidence of WMD will be found when the Bush administration and US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice has been forced to admit that its pre-war intelligence was wrong.



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