BBC vindicated on charge that government "sexed-up" Iraq dossier

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Amidst its apologetics for government lies on Iraq's non-existent "weapons of mass destruction", the inquiry report by Lord Butler was forced to address the claim that Iraq could launch WMDs within 45 minutes at British targets in Cyprus.

Butler is characteristically diplomatic about the now notorious claim that appeared in the September 2002 intelligence dossier on Iraq in which the Labour government attempted to argue in favour of war.

He is clearly anxious to defend the government and the integrity of the security services, but has to make some accounting of why such discredited claims were made. He therefore acknowledges that the claim Iraq could deploy chemical and biological weapons within 45 minutes would have been "more accurate" had it explained that it referred to battlefield weapons. The Joint Intelligence Committee "should not" have included it without stating to what it referred, but instead it was cited four times—leading to "suspicions that it had been included for its eye-catching character".

After the war the validity of the "reporting chain" that produced the 45-minute claim had "become doubtful", making it an "uncharacteristically poor piece of assessment."

Responding to these supremely diplomatic passages, Greg Dyke and Andrew Gilligan have stated that the BBC "Today" programme report that the September 2002 dossier had been "sexed-up" has been vindicated.

"Today" reporter Gilligan, Dyke, who was the BBC's director general, and BBC Chairman Gavyn Davies were forced to resign after a vicious witch-hunt by the government that began with the outing of the source of Gilligan's story, top weapon's inspector Dr David Kelly. After Kelly's death, this led to the inquiry by Lord Hutton, which exonerated the government of inserting material it "probably knew to be wrong", as claimed by Gilligan in one early morning radio report where he departed from his script.

Gilligan has now told the press: "I am very pleased with Lord Butler's report, which supports much of what I already said—and what the Government has always denied. Although Lord Butler says he finds no evidence of deliberate embellishment or misleading, many of his findings of fact do exactly that...

"Lord Butler finds that more weight was placed on the intelligence than it could bear; that the Joint Intelligence Committee's neutrality and objectivity were strained by the dossier process: and that the Joint Intelligence Committee chairman must be a person beyond influence. He finds that ministers misrepresented the quality, quantity and certainty of intelligence judgements to Parliament and the public."

"He finds that crucial caveats were dropped and he finds that the 45-minutes claim, the core of the dispute between the BBC and the government, should never have been in the form it took, leading to 'suspicions that it had been included because of its eye-catching character'."

Dyke told "Channel Four News": "If you go back to the very beginning, Dr Kelly told Andrew Gilligan the document had been 'sexed up' and one of the examples of it having been 'sexed up', the most significant example, was the 45-minute claim.

"Here, we are told today ... that the 45-minute claim should not have been in the document without a set of caveats, caveats that were there in early drafts and disappeared. The question is who took out the caveats? And it appears Butler doesn't tell us and nobody is owning up. The BBC was perfectly right to report Dr Kelly's allegations, Dr Kelly's concern.

"That's why I am not at the BBC today, that's why

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Gavyn Davies is not at the BBC today and I would defend that decision forever."

The 45-minute claim was the centrepiece of the September 2002 dossier, despite being based on a single source and the prominence given to it being questioned during the drafting process.

A draft produced in September 16 contained an executive summary stating that intelligence allows the government to judge Iraq "has military plans for the use of chemical and biological, some of which could be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them".

The main text added, "The Iraqi military may be able to deploy chemical or biological weapons within 45 minutes of an order to do so."

Members of the Joint Intelligence Committee questioned the emphatic character of the assertion, with a September 17 e-mail calling the wording "rather strong since it is based on a single source. 'Could say intelligence suggests...'".

In contrast, Prime Minister Tony Blair's Director of Communications Alastair Campbell advised JIC chairman John Scarlett, the dossier's nominal "author", that "may" in the main text wording of the claim was "weaker than the summary". Scarlett responded by telling Campbell that the language in the main text has been "tightened".

The dossier was finally published on September 24, 2002, with a foreword by Blair that focused on the 45-minute claim, an assertion that Blair then repeats in an address to parliament.

In March 2003, Kelly, who had been involved in producing the dossier, gave an unscheduled interview to Gilligan, which became the basis for a May 29 report that an anonymous source had spoken of significant discontent within the security services over the September dossier who had blamed Campbell for having made it more "sexy."

The government counterattacked by going after the BBC, accusing it of lying and demanding that Gilligan's source be revealed. Kelly was outed by the government as the source of the Gilligan report and forced to testify before two parliamentary inquiries. On July 18, 2003, Kelly was found dead in the woods near his home.

Refusing an inquiry into the war, the government instead set up a far more limited inquiry into Kelly's death—with the aim of shifting attention away from the failure to find Iraqi WMDs and onto supposed mis-reporting by the BBC.

In January, Hutton's report declared that the fact that no WMDs have been found in Iraq was irrelevant. All that mattered was whether Blair knowingly used false intelligence claims, which he found no evidence of. Gilligan was found to have impugned the integrity of the government, especially by his remark that the government "probably" knew its claim that Iraq could launch WMD within 45 minutes was wrong.

This is despite the fact that Scarlett, the head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove and Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon all admitted to Hutton that they knew the 45-minute claim only related to "battlefield mortar shells or small calibre weaponry".

Gilligan said at the time, "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."

In December that year it was revealed that source of the 45-minute claim was a Lieutenant Colonel al-Dabbagh, a spy working for the Iraqi National Accord (INA) that was set up by MI6 after the first Gulf War and later backed by the CIA which had a vested interest in prompting a war that would lead to the downfall of Saddam Hussein.

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