

Former BBC head attacks Blair government over Iraq war

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14 July 2004

In the last weeks, Gavyn Davies, former head of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has made a number of outspoken attacks on the Blair government, accusing it of conducting a witch-hunt against the broadcaster over its reporting of the Iraq war.

Davies was forced to resign as chair of the BBC, following the report produced by Lord Hutton into the death of Britain's leading weapons inspector, Doctor David Kelly, in July 2003.

In the run-up to war, Prime Minister Tony Blair had claimed that intelligence proved Saddam Hussein's regime possessed weapons of mass destruction that constituted an immediate threat to Britain and to world security.

The "45-minute" claim was a cynical and lying pretext on which the government sought to justify its repudiation of international law, so as to join the Bush administration's war of aggression against Iraq, with the aim of seizing control of oil reserves and establishing a strategic base in the Middle East.

Despite mass opposition in Britain and internationally to the war, Blair used his bloodcurdling claims of an "imminent threat" from Baghdad to ride roughshod over democratic norms.

The prime minister had hoped that victory in Iraq would enable him to silence dissent. Instead, the declaration of an end to hostilities was followed by mounting popular resistance within Iraq to the joint US/British occupation, as well as overwhelming evidence that Baghdad did not possess any weapons of mass destruction.

Faced with the exposure of its case for war, sections of the security apparatus sought to pin responsibility for the government's intelligence dossiers on Iraq on political "spinning" from Downing Street.

In an unscheduled meeting with the BBC's "Today"

programme reporter, Andrew Gilligan, Kelly let it be known that the intelligence had been exaggerated so as to suit the government's predetermined war aims.

His remarks, attributed anonymously, became the basis for Gilligan's broadcast at the end of March, 2003 that intelligence figures were blaming Alastair Campbell, Blair's director of communications for "sexing up" the dossiers.

That broadcast became the focus of a government-led campaign to witch-hunt the BBC, with the aim of intimidating and silencing all critics of the Iraq war.

When the government became aware that Kelly was the source of Gilligan's report, the scientist was dragged before two parliamentary inquiries. On July 18, Kelly was found dead in the woods near his home. Forced to convene an inquiry into Kelly's death, which threatened to expose the tissue of lies involved in the Iraq war, Blair established an extremely tight remit for investigation limited to the immediate circumstances surrounding the scientist's apparent suicide.

The final report by Lord Hutton was a whitewash; which exonerated Blair and his administration of any responsibility for Kelly's death. And it claimed that the government could not be held to account for giving out misleading information, as its decisions had been made in good faith! The BBC and Gilligan, on the other hand, were held culpable for having broadcast Kelly's comments and therefore supposedly concentrating attention on him.

By focusing on the most narrowest of issues, Hutton was able to deliver a verdict that marked a watershed in the undermining of democratic rights.

It was not possible to draw a definite conclusion as to what Kelly had told Gilligan, Hutton said, and he may have told him that Campbell was responsible for making the document more sensational. But, the judge

was “satisfied Dr Kelly did not say the government probably knew or suspected the 45-minute claim was wrong before the claim was inserted in the dossier”.

The BBC was held to be “remiss” for not having checked Gilligan’s story and responding to the complaints made by Campbell and the government. Its editorial procedures were “defective” and both its managers and governors were at fault.

The Hutton inquiry not only diverted attention from the broader issues under dispute—such as the patently false basis on which Britain went to war—but determined that it was wrong to question the motives of the government is sowing such obvious falsehoods. This was exemplified by Blair’s speech in parliament after the findings were issued, in which he stressed that there should never again be a public questioning of anyone’s political motives or personal integrity.

Following the findings, Davies and BBC director general Greg Dyke were forced out of their positions and Gilligan was made to resign. The BBC announced it would launch a wide-ranging review of editorial procedures—i.e., to ensure that in future it followed government diktat more closely.

Some six months after Hutton reported, Davies has finally made an open attack on his findings. Accepting an honorary doctorate from Middlesex University’s business school in London, on July 5, Davies accused the government of waging a campaign against the BBC “in a remorseless and aggressive manner, with scant regard for the freedom of the press, or the independence of the BBC.”

The BBC board of governors had come under assault because it had sought to reassert “the right of the BBC to report British and international politics without let or hindrance from Downing Street,” he continued.

He also accused Downing Street of deliberately discrediting the weapons expert David Kelly. “The government discovered that David Kelly was the source of the BBC story, and instantly decided to expose him, and discredit him, simultaneously,” he said.

Davies’ remarks were subject to a virtual press boycott, meriting just one mention, in the *Guardian* newspaper.

But in an interview with the *Sunday Times* on July 11, Davies returned to his theme. Blair had triumphantly sought to use Lord Hutton’s findings to beat his critics, he said.

Immediately after they were broadcast, the prime minister had crowed in parliament at his escaping scott-free from any responsibility for events.

“It was untenable to stay after listening to the prime minister in the Commons,” Davies told the newspaper explaining his decision to resign. And the remarks made by Campbell, who had stepped down as Blair’s director of communications in advance of Hutton’s findings, meant that he and Dyke had little choice but to go.

Campbell had effectively accused the BBC heads of lying. He told the press that what the Hutton report showed, “very clearly is this: the prime minister told the truth, the government told the truth, I told the truth. The BBC, from the chairman and director general down, did not.”

“If the government had faced the level of criticism that today Lord Hutton had directed to the BBC, there would clearly have been resignations by now—several resignations at several levels,” Campbell continued.

Campbell’s charge of deceit had led him to consider suing Blair’s right-hand man for slander, Davies said.

Davies is not the only one to have raised doubts over the Hutton findings in the last days. Dr Brian Jones, a retired Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS) told BBC’s “Panorama” programme that he “couldn’t relate” to the evidence given by Blair to the inquiry.

Blair had told Hutton that there was “a tremendous amount of information and evidence” on Iraq’s weapons programme, but Jones told the programme that, “no one on my staff had any visibility of large quantities of intelligence of that sort”.

On the same programme, John Morrison, former deputy chief of DIS, accused Blair of making public pronouncements that did not tally with the evidence.

When the prime minister told parliament during the debate on going to war that the threat from Iraq was “current and serious”, one could “almost hear the collective raspberry going up around Whitehall”, Morrison said.



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