



Reputations to Lose: BBC versus the Blair Government Epilogue

Director General Greg Dyke and News Director Richard Sambrook deliberated over the weekend, but decided not to urge an independent investigation, nor to pursue back channels. Instead, by Friday, July 4, 2003, BBC Chairman Gavyn Davies and Dyke had decided the situation warranted an emergency meeting of the board of directors. The next regularly scheduled board meeting was not until July 17. Davies had kept the board updated via emails on the evolving situation, but had concluded that “the matter was not going to spontaneously die.” He said later:

This had reached a level and at a pitch where the board of the BBC needed to make a statement.... I also felt that the attack on the BBC was so all-encompassing by this stage and so continuous that it really was for the board of governors to stand up and say that parts of this attack were inappropriate.¹

On Friday, Davies summoned the governors for Sunday, July 6. Never in living memory had the board met on a weekend, and at such short notice.

Unprecedented Board Meeting

Eleven of the 12 board members were able to attend, and one joined via conference call. They were sent numerous documents to review in advance of the meeting. In addition, Campbell sent a letter of his own to the governors. He asserted first that he did not intend to attack the independence of the BBC: “I respect the BBC’s independence. I believe the BBC is one of the country’s greatest assets and I have long been an admirer of its ethos, much of its journalism and many of its journalists.” He concluded:

¹ Hutton Commission, Transcript of hearing Thursday afternoon, August 28, 2003, Gavyn Davies. See: <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/transcripts/hearing-trans23.htm>.

At issue here is one specific set of allegations, profoundly damaging to the prime minister, the government and our intelligence agencies, which we know to be false and which we have sought, first privately and then publicly, to have corrected. It is about one story, the procedures that were or were not followed, pre- and post-broadcast, and the difficulties we have had in seeking redress.²

At Sunday's 6:30 p.m. meeting, Chairman Davies instructed the governors that they need not consider whether the Gilligan story was accurate. He advised thus, he said, because "I believed that the director general and the director of news had already reported on the question of whether the source's words were reported accurately... [Moreover] it was quite literally impossible for the board of governors to determine whether the allegations made by Mr. Gilligan's sources were intrinsically true."³ Their responsibility was instead to determine whether the BBC was guilty of systematic bias in its coverage of the Iraq war; whether the *Today* program had violated BBC producers' guidelines; and whether to investigate other internal rules, such as the use of a single source or anonymous sources.

The first half of the meeting was held in private session, without management. After an hour or so, Dyke, Sambrook, Whittle and a couple more of the management team joined. Davies told them the board wanted to support the BBC, but it had two concerns. One was about Gilligan's notes: did they support the contention that the source named Campbell? The second issue was whether the BBC needed to strengthen its rules about reporters writing for other publications.⁴ After discussing those points in detail, the board emerged with a statement of support for BBC management. It said in part:

[T]he Governors are ultimately responsible for ensuring that the BBC upholds the highest standards of impartiality and accuracy. We are wholly satisfied that BBC journalists and their managers sought to maintain impartiality and accuracy during this episode.

Hutton Inquiry

But the matter did not end there. The Ministry of Defense had succeeded in identifying the source of Gilligan's story, David Kelly. Kelly was summoned to testify before the parliamentary Foreign Affairs committee on Tuesday, July 15. He did so, denying that he had ever named Campbell. He admitted meeting Gilligan on May 22, but did not think he could be the central source for the story Gilligan had broadcast. He also stated he had no doubts about the truthfulness of the September dossier. He was read words from an interview he had given another BBC reporter, Susan Watts, who recorded it. The interview seemed to corroborate what Gilligan had reported, but Kelly

² Hutton Report, Evidence. See: http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_6_0011to0090.pdf

³ Hutton Commission, Transcript of hearing Thursday afternoon, August 28, 2003, Gavyn Davies. See: <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/transcripts/hearing-trans23.htm>.

⁴ For Minutes of the July 6 Board of Governors meeting, see: http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_6_0100to0110.pdf

said did not recognize the words as his. The next day, July 16, 2003, Kelly was found dead by apparent suicide. His death sparked a full-scale government inquiry.

Over the next six months, the Hutton Inquiry dissected the Gilligan story, the lead-up to it, and the storm of controversy that followed its broadcast. Emails, diary excerpts, letters, newspaper articles and reams of transcriptions of hours of testimony were entered into the public record. One piece of testimony opened a large rip in the BBC's defense.

Gilligan testimony. In testimony on August 12, confirmed in cross-examination on September 17 and 18, Gilligan stated to the Inquiry that "it was my mistake" to attribute to Kelly the words "the government probably knew" that information included in the September 2002 dossier intelligence was unreliable. This was the first time that BBC management, and the rest of the country, heard that Kelly himself had not said the government "probably knew" that the intelligence about Saddam's ability to strike British forces was likely false. While Gilligan was confident that Kelly believed those words to be true, Kelly had not used them—they were not a direct quote. Gilligan also conceded that he had been wrong to identify Kelly as a member of the intelligence community. (Kelly was a senior weapons inspector and worked for the Defense Ministry.)

Lord Hutton judged Gilligan's admissions harshly. His eventual report, issued on January 28, 2004, charged the BBC with irresponsible reporting. The BBC felt ill-used because it continued to believe that the larger story Gilligan reported had been accurate: the government had tried to cherry-pick the intelligence included in the September 2002 dossier. The BBC regarded the controversy over the *Today* program's 6:07 two-way as wildly overblown. Says then-BBC International Division Director Mark Byford:

It was a bit of a bruising thing because people misunderstood that saying we got a few things wrong and should've done it differently was code for we should never have done the story in the first place. Absolutely not. Of course we should have done it. [On the other hand], the bar of the BBC is you can't be 80 percent right on a story like that. You've got to be 100 percent right. It's the BBC.⁵

After Hutton's report criticizing the BBC was published in January 2004, heads rolled. Chairman Davies resigned; Director General Dyke was forced out. Gilligan found other work. The government also moved on. Alastair Campbell resigned on August 29, 2003. On June 27, 2007, Tony Blair stepped down as prime minister, his legacy permanently scarred by accusations he had led the country into an unnecessary war.

⁵ Author's telephone interview with Mark Byford, on January 29, 2008. All further quotes from Byford, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview. In 2008, Byford was deputy director general of the BBC.