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BBC Press Release27.06.03BBC NEWS**Letter from Richard Sambrook, Director, BBC News to Alastair Campbell**

Dear Alastair

Thank you for your letter of 26 June. I chose not to reply yesterday as I wanted time to examine fully the questions you asked and to write a considered reply. That was not possible in the timescale you gave me.

Before I answer the questions in detail I wish to explain the wider context in which we came to broadcast the story in question. I will summarise this under three headings:

- Your general claim that the BBC's reporting of the war and the events both before and after was biased.
- The impact of your February dossier being discredited.
- The general concern expressed by members of the security services that intelligence reports were being exaggerated.

1. Allegations of biased reporting

In your evidence to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee you made it clear that you believed the BBC had an anti-war agenda.

It is our firm view that Number Ten tried to intimidate the BBC in its reporting of events leading up to the war and during the course of the war itself.

As we told you in correspondence before the war started, our responsibility was to present an impartial picture and you were not best placed to judge what was impartial.

This was particularly the case given the widescale opposition to the war in the UK at that time, including significant opposition inside the Parliamentary Labour Party.

For example, you will remember when the key division on the war took place in the House of Commons in March you wrote to me to suggest that we had given too much prominence to the vote which recorded the largest backbench parliamentary revolt in modern history.

During the war you again accused us of unfairness – in

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particular criticising our reporting from Baghdad.

You know that we strongly dispute that charge and the BBC's Board of Governors, after detailed discussion both during and after the war, have expressed their complete satisfaction with the impartiality of BBC News coverage.

In your evidence to the Select Committee you extended your attack on our journalism suggesting that we have been animated by a rationale "that the Prime Minister led the country to war on a false basis".

It seems you have missed the many reports we have filed from Iraq about mass graves, torture and political repression - evidence which has been used to justify the war.

2. The February Dossier

It is impossible to discuss our reporting of the September 2002 dossier without seeing it in the context of what we knew by then of the February 2003 dossier - the dossier which even the Foreign Secretary described as "a complete Horlicks" earlier this week.

What was by then clear was that your department had plagiarised an article from the internet, based on an old University thesis, changed crucial parts of it and then used it unattributed to strengthen the case for Britain going to war.

That was the provenance of the February dossier - which might still stand were it not for the intervention of a Cambridge academic.

The discrediting of the February dossier inevitably influenced questions asked about any similar dossiers. In these circumstances any decent journalist would inevitably question whether similar tactics had been used when writing the earlier dossier.

In addition, in early March, the Director General of the IAEA, Dr Mohammed El Baradei, described the documents on which an important claim in the September dossier was based (the Niger uranium claim) as "not authentic" - and indeed cast doubt on other aspects of the September dossier's claims about a nuclear weapons programmes.

We thus made a judgement that the information provided by the source fitted into a pattern of concerns - and that it was perfectly proper to report the allegations made by Andrew Gilligan's source.

Your correspondence and evidence to the FAC ignores this background - which is central to any understanding of the BBC's journalism.

3. Unease in the Security Services

As we have told you before, a number of BBC journalists who

have close contact with both the military and the security services had reported that their contacts were concerned that intelligence reports were being exaggerated to strengthen the case against Saddam Hussein.

In particular they were saying that whilst low scale Weapons of Mass Destruction existed they did not pose the level of threat the government was suggesting.

Many journalists in other news organisations were receiving similar briefings.

For example:

Peter Beaumont and Gaby Hinsliff wrote (Observer 24 February 2003) of disagreement between the intelligence services and Downing Street - "the essence of the disagreement is said to have been that intelligence material should be presented 'straight' rather than spiced up to make a political argument."

Their article also talks about "fairly serious rows" between at least one member of the JIC and Alastair Campbell.

Raymond Whittaker (Independent on Sunday 27 April) wrote of "a high level UK source" saying that "intelligence agencies on both sides of the Atlantic were furious that briefings they gave political leaders were distorted".

He went on to write: "You cannot just cherry-pick evidence that suits your case and ignore the rest. It is a cardinal rule of intelligence," said one aggrieved officer. "Yet that is what the PM is doing."

Another said: "What we have is a few strands of highly circumstantial evidence, and to justify an attack on Iraq it is being presented as a cast-iron case. That really is not good enough."

Richard Norton-Taylor, Guardian 30 May: "British intelligence sources expressed fury at Downing Street's behaviour. They were reluctant to allow Downing Street to use their intelligence assessment because they feared it would be manipulated for political ends....Caveats...were swept aside by Mr Blair, egged on by Mr Campbell, well-placed sources said."

Daniel McGrory, Times 30 May: "Senior sources say they received a barrage of phone calls from staff at No 10 demanding more evidence. Intelligence chiefs insist that the dossier was written by someone inside No 10 and not by British Intelligence...agents were wary that frightened defectors who wanted asylum would say what the British and Americans wanted to hear...there was debate amongst intelligence analysts whether the [45-minute source's] claims should have been passed to No 10, as senior figures doubted whether it was true, but were under pressure to deliver 'compelling evidence.'"

Glenn Frankell, Washington Post 30 May: "One official acknowledged that there had been what he described as

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'pressured and superheated debates at the time' between Downing Street and intelligence officials over the contents of the dossier."

Peter Beaumont, Gaby Hinsliff, Observer 1 June: "What we are seeing is something very new, and very strange. MI6 is sticking its head over the parapet as much as it ever will...MI6 feels totally discredited and used." ("source")

"MI6 feels that it has been pushed rather unwillingly into the limelight by the Government. It is a shot across the bows." (a second "source")

Nick Fielding, Sunday Times 1 June, reported that the dossier was the result of a "deal after months of bitter disagreements between intelligence chiefs and Blair's aides. Campbell had attempted to persuade the agencies to include hard-hitting conclusions. They were reluctant to agree because they said the case was not proven."

Furthermore on 22 March, the UN Chief Weapons Inspector, Hans Blix, criticised the manipulation of intelligence to make the case for war - accusing the coalition of using "shaky" evidence.

Robin Cook - soon after his resignation - echoed that, questioning the Government's evidence (such as that in the September dossier) that Iraq presented an imminent threat: "it was difficult to believe that Saddam had the capacity to hit us."

It was in this context that we judged that reporting the claim made by Andrew Gilligan's source was in the public interest.

Having dealt with the context, let me turn now to the report on the Today programme. This week you have misrepresented our journalism.

- You have said we accused the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and other ministers of lying. We have not.
- You have said the BBC deliberately accused the Prime Minister of misleading the House of Commons and of leading the country into war on a false basis. We have not.
- You have accused the BBC of damaging the integrity of the political process. We believe we have done the opposite.

The nub of what the BBC reported was:

- unease among some of the intelligence community about the use of intelligence in government dossiers
- the assertion of one senior and credible source - who has proved reliable in the past - that the "45 minute claim" was wrong and was inserted late into the dossier.

In response to this we have provided the Government with frequent and ample opportunities to state their position and

rebut the allegations and this you have done. This is a perfectly fair and proper journalistic process which we stand by.

Now to your questions and I make no apology for repeating some of the points I have just made.

- Does the BBC still stand by the allegation it made on 29 May that Number 10 added in the 45 minute claim to the dossier ?

The allegation was not made by the BBC but by our source – a senior official involved in the compilation of the dossier – and the BBC stands by the reporting of it.

Andrew Gilligan made it clear that according to his source the 45 minute claim was real, but unreliable, intelligence information.

We do not report everything that every source tells us. In this instance we believe that the source is credible and that it was legitimate to place his concerns in the public domain given what we knew of the February dossier and the other points I have listed above. We stand by this decision.

- Does it still stand by the allegation made on the same day that we did so against the wishes of the intelligence agencies?

Again we reported accurately what we had been told by the source that the 45 minute claim was included in the dossier 'against our wishes.'

- Does it still stand by the allegation made on that day that both we and the intelligence agencies knew the 45 minute claim to be wrong and inserted it despite knowing that.

Andrew Gilligan accurately reported the source telling him that the government "probably knew that the 45 minute figure was wrong" and that the claim was "questionable."

The basis for this assertion by Andrew Gilligan's source was that the information about the 45 minute claim had been derived from only one intelligence source – whereas most of the other claims in the dossier had at least two. Gilligan's source also believed this single Iraqi source had probably got the information wrong.

- Does it still stand by the allegation, again on the same day, that we ordered the September dossier to be 'sexed up' in the period leading up to its publication – and that Gilligan found what Humphreys (sic) called "evidence" that it was "cobbled together at the last minute with some unconfirmed material that had not been approved by the security services?"

We stand by our reporting of the source as saying that the dossier was "sexed up" and that had happened at a late stage in its preparation – and that the "sexing up" relied on uncorroborated material not approved of by all in the intelligence agencies.

I note today that Mr Peter Ricketts, Director General of the

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office has told the Foreign Affairs Committee that the "45 minute" claim was not in the first draft of the dossier.

- Does it still stand by the statement made on 6 June that the JIC is not part of the intelligence community, but a Number 10 committee which exists to arbitrate between government and the intelligence services?

We never said that the JIC was not part of the intelligence community. What we actually said was the JIC is not the same thing as the intelligence services.

- Does it still stand by the claim on 3 June that the chairman of the JIC only kind of "bureaucratically signed off his report?"

It would have been better if Andrew Gilligan had attributed this answer to his source and that was a slip on the day. However he had frequently reminded the audience that claims were derived from the source.

What Andrew Gilligan did in this section of the report was to acknowledge that the JIC chairman had indeed 'signed off' on the dossier - but that did not of itself mean that all members of the intelligence services were happy with its contents.

Further we know from other sources that some senior members of the intelligence community were reluctant to use intelligence material in this way.

- How many sources was the original "45 minute" allegation being added in based on? Was it one source or more than one source? You will be aware of the BBC Guidelines on this.

I have repeatedly made it clear that the particular allegations made in Andrew Gilligan's report of the 29 May came from one source and I have outlined why we felt it appropriate to broadcast the information.

The audience was told time and again on the 29 May that the criticism of the dossier's compilation was being made by one source.

The source was credible and what he chose to tell Andrew Gilligan was highly plausible given what we knew by then about the preparation of the February "dodgy dossier".

Other journalists, including some within the BBC, had been told of concerns held in the intelligence community about the way intelligence was used in the run-up to war in Iraq - and they had been told this by sources other than the one who spoke to Andrew Gilligan.

In the light of this it would have been wrong for the BBC to decide not to put into the public domain the information provided to Andrew Gilligan by his source - and we did so with transparent attribution to a single source.

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As for your point about the BBC Guidelines let me quote:

"Programmes should be reluctant to rely on only one source."

That is true. The BBC would have preferred it if the source had been on the record. But you well know that in this field sources very rarely – if ever – choose to speak on the record. I do not accept your inference that means we cannot publish information on intelligence matters if only derived from one source – particularly in light of what we knew about the February dossier.

There is a clear editorial procedure involving referral up to senior managers which was followed in this case.

We also note that Adam Ingram told us on May 29 that your "45 minute" claim is based on a single uncorroborated intelligence source.

- Is that source on the JIC and do you agree that any source not on the JIC did not have the full picture?

I do not intend to say anything more about our source. You well know that it is a matter of principle for us not to reveal our sources. I will do nothing to help you in this regard.

- Was the source, as Gilligan has said, "a senior official involved in drawing up the dossier," or is he, as you said today, a source "in the intelligence services?" I'm sure you at least understand the significance of the difference to which I am alluding.

I refer you to my previous answer.

- Is it now normal BBC practice not to seek to corroborate single source stories?

Of course we would prefer corroboration. The fact remains that we made a judgement about whether in the particular circumstances it was appropriate to place the allegations made by our source into the public domain. I have already outlined the context which justified this decision.

- Finally do you believe that Gilligan's statement to the FAC that all he had ever alleged was that we gave "undue prominence" to the 45 minute point, or do you share my views that it is utterly inconsistent with what he and others or the BBC have said and what Gilligan has said, writing as a BBC journalist in the Mail on Sunday, The Sunday Telegraph and The Spectator?

It is incorrect to say all Andrew Gilligan ever said to the FAC was the single charge made by the source. His evidence was more wide ranging and it corresponds with what was broadcast. I quote from his evidence to the FAC:

Q450 Sir John Stanley: "You are making, Mr Gilligan, a very, very serious allegation against the integrity of the JIC. The entire ---"

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Mr Gilligan: "I am not making any allegations. I would repeat, as I have said throughout, I am not making any allegations. My source made the allegations. We were reporting the charge of my source, who is a figure sufficiently senior and credible to be worth reporting.

" I reported the source as saying there was unhappiness within the intelligence services, disquiet within the intelligence services."

Q455 Sir John Stanley: "In terms of your evidence to this Committee, the only piece of evidence which you are specifying was allegedly made at the last minute subject to a political requirement to "sex it up", to use your phrase, is the 45 minute claim?"

Mr Gilligan: "That was the only specific piece of evidence that my source discussed, yes."

Sir John Stanley: "Thank you."

Q456 Mr Olnier: "So the rest of the evidence that was in the dossier was reliable? By implication, if your source said he was not happy about the 45 minute thing then he was happy with the rest of it."

Mr Gilligan: "The fact that my source was not specifically unhappy with other elements of the dossier does not necessarily mean that other elements of the dossier were reliable. Of course it might mean that, but I do not think anything can be drawn from it the other way."

Q552 Mr Chidgey: "So the only degree of certainty that your source has or had was that he did not believe the 45 minutes?"

Mr Gilligan: "No, as I say, my source was reasonably sure, as are all the other intelligence people I have spoken to, that Iraq had a WMD programme of some description, but it was smaller and less of an imminent threat than that claimed by the Government. That was the view of my source and the view of several other people's sources in the rest of the media and indeed other sources I have spoken to, intelligence and non-intelligence.

"The words of my source was that it was transformed in the week before it was published to make it sexier. Given all that you have said and given the other things I have described, I think that is a credible allegation."

As for newspaper articles - Andrew has not written on this subject for The Sunday Telegraph. The only significant difference in any piece he has written is when he wrote in the Mail on Sunday that the source had indicated your own involvement in the story.

- Finally, have you seen today's Spectator, in which Mr Gilligan, writing not in a personal capacity but as a BBC correspondent writes an article concluding that the Prime Minister is a 'push

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over' in his relations with President Putin. Is that the BBC view? If it is a personal view, could you tell me what rule governs what BBC correspondents may or may not write in a freelance capacity to boost their BBC earnings? What are the procedures and were they followed in relation to this article? I am interested too, in respect of the many BBC journalists who boost their incomes by writing for national newspapers, what procedures govern their conducts and this writings? (sic) You will be aware that MPs have also expressed concern on this.

This piece was submitted in advance to an appropriate editorial manager as is our procedure. Our guidelines on conflicts of interest cover what our journalists are allowed to write. These guidelines are in the public domain. As for this specific article the BBC does not impose a single view on its correspondents.

Alastair, I have set out my views at considerable length . You will see that I do not accept the validity of your attacks on our journalism and on Andrew Gilligan in particular.

We have to believe that you are conducting a personal vendetta against a particular journalist whose reports on a number of occasions have caused you discomfort.

Given the context described in the first part of my letter and given the credibility of our source are you really suggesting that an independent broadcaster should have suppressed this story because it only had one source?

In my previous letter to you (16 June) I drew your attention to our complaints procedure and invited you to make a formal complaint if you so wished.

You chose to ignore this. That avenue remains open. I should also say that if the information provided by our source is proved to be incorrect we would make the fact very clearly known to our audiences and we would express regret. As we stand today, that is simply not the case.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Sambrook
Director, BBC News

Notes to Editors

Letter from Stephen Whittle, Controller, Editorial Policy, BBC to Ben Bradshaw MP (03 07 03)

Letter from Richard Sambrook, Director BBC News, to Ben Bradshaw MP (29 06 03)

Letter from Andrew Gilligan, Today programme Defence and Diplomatic Correspondent, to Phil Woolas, Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (28 06 03)

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