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The Today Programme

Interview with Richard Sambrook

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John Humphrys: The accusation from Downing Street couldn't be clearer. The BBC is lying and won't apologise. In particular, Alastair Campbell - Tony Blair's Director of Communications - says that this programme's defence correspondent Andrew Gilligan has accused him of sexing up last September's government dossier on Iraq, and transforming it, giving prominence in a late draft to a piece of intelligence that was from a single source. A prominence that the intelligence agencies were said to be unhappy with. That, he told the Commons foreign affairs select committee, was a lie.

Well to respond to Mr Campbell we're joined in the studio by the director of BBC News, Richard Sambrook.

Let me ask you, Richard Sambrook, a straightforward question. What is your response to the accusation that this is something that goes beyond the normal badinage that happens between political parties and governments and the BBC, this is a case of a lie which has been propagated and which you will not withdraw - how do you respond to that allegation?

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Richard Sambrook: Well, Jim, I think Alastair Campbell yesterday seriously misrepresented the BBC's journalism. He said we had accused him and the Prime Minister of lying - that's not true, we haven't. He said we accused the Prime Minister of misleading the Commons - we've never said any such thing. He said we were trying to suggest the Prime Minister had led the country into war on a false basis - we've never suggested that. He said the BBC had an anti-war agenda - that's untrue, we have no agenda. And finally he said we've not apologised. Well that is true, because we have nothing to apologise for.

John Humphrys: We'll come to the agenda point in just a second, but their argument is that on the key question of the 45 minutes within which it was said that biological and chemical weapons could be activated, the way that that got into the dossier has been described by Andrew Gilligan. And that that description is according to Mr Campbell, according to the Prime Minister, according to the Foreign Secretary and so on, wrong. Mr Campbell therefore concludes that you are accusing - we, in the BBC, are accusing - the Prime Minister of lying.

Richard Sambrook: We've been absolutely clear about what we've done. We've always said that we had one senior and credible source in the intelligence services who had told us that some of those involved in compiling the September dossier were unhappy at how it was finally presented. And that that was in the context of broader briefings from a number of people in the defence and intelligence communities about general disquiet about the way some of this information was presented. That's what we have said, and we have then had an open debate including many representatives of the government, about whether that was the case or not.

John Humphrys: Let's hear how Mr Campbell did put his case. First of all on the question of what the BBC's attitude was to all sorts of events surround Iraq, this is what he said about our coverage:

Alastair Campbell: There are large parts of the media who have an agenda on the issue of Iraq. Now, most of those parts of the media, their agenda is open. It's avowed. If you bought the Daily Mirror during the run up to conflict, you knew that paper was against our position. If you bought the Sun, you knew that paper was passionately supportive of our position on dealing with Saddam.

My point on this is I think what I would identify as the three stages of this. In the run up to conflict, there was an agenda in large parts of the BBC, and I think the BBC is different to the rest of the media and should be viewed as different to the rest of the media, because it's a different organisation in terms of its reputation, in terms of its global reach and all the rest of it.

And I think in the run up there was a disproportionate focus upon the - if you like - the dissent, the opposition to our position. I think that in the conflict itself the prism that many were creating within the BBC was one, it's all going wrong, and I can give you an example. I think when the BBC

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Voice: I think probably many of us would agree with that.

Alastair Campbell: Okay. And now what's happening now, the conflict not having led to the Middle East going up in flames, not having led to us getting bogged down for months and months. These same people now have to find a different rationale. Their rationale is that the Prime Minister led the country into war on a false basis. That is what this is about.

John Humphrys: That was Mr Campbell to the foreign affairs select committee yesterday. Now, Richard Sambrook, that is a very serious attack because it goes right to the heart of the way BBC News under your leadership reported the war. How do you respond to it?

Richard Sambrook. Well, Alastair Campbell's right, the BBC is different, we do have a global reach, we do have a responsibility to present a wide range and diversity of views, and that's what we did. In terms of his three stages, if we go back to before the war started, the country was deeply divided. The government was in the position where there were 1 million people marching on the streets of London against the war, they had a historic revolt in the Commons, and they were under a lot of pressure. Frankly it seems to me that in that position they are not really able to judge whether or not we were impartial. What we were doing at the time was reflecting the wide range of views in the country.

John Humphrys: So the word "disproportionate", which he used in describing the way that we dealt with critics on this programme and others, you're suggesting that there was no disproportionate treatment of criticism as being better news than the other side of the story?

Richard Sambrook: Oh no, I don't believe there was at all. The way the BBC conducts its journalism is to ask questions, raise issues, and debate them openly with a wide range of views. And that's how we've approached the war, and the way that we approach everything else.

John Humphrys: And the argument that as a consequence of as he would put it having been proved wrong, the tendency is to point up failures or difficulties in Iraq now by way of justifying a previous view?

Richard Sambrook: No, all we have done since then is to raise questions which have been brought to our attention by people we know to be senior and credible sources in the intelligence service, and it's an issue of public interest.

John Humphrys: Let's get to the crux of it, which is what happened in the preparation of the September dossier, and in particular that piece of information which suggested that biological and chemical weapons could be used, having been activated, in a 45 minute time span. Mr Campbell resents what Andrew Gilligan has said about this. Here's how he described it to the committee.

Alastair Campbell: Privately, we have been trying to seek

acknowledgement about this for some weeks, and it's absolutely hopeless, because when you're dealing with the BBC, I'm afraid they just will not admit that they can get things wrong. I think there's a world of difference between political exchanges and the rest of it, and a story broadcast on the BBC followed up by every single national newspaper, followed up in newspapers around the world, that says the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, with the connivance of me and the intelligence agencies, persuaded parliament and the country to go to war on a false basis. I think that is a pretty unbelievable allegation to make unless you can sustain it. And I have not seen a single thing that sustains it. I've seen the defence correspondent change his story time and time again, talk about one source, then there were four sources, then his sources actually were journalists on other newspapers. If that is BBC journalism then God help us.

John Humphrys: Let's talk about sources. Are you satisfied that the source is credible and reliable?

Richard Sambrook: I'm entirely satisfied that it is a senior, credible, and reliable source. And frankly, Jim, I don't think the BBC needs to be taught lessons in the use of sources by a communications department which plagiarised a 12 year old thesis and distributed it unattributed.

John Humphrys: Alastair Campbell says that by alleging that the 45 minute part of the dossier was inserted at a late stage, it was added at a late stage, it was dealt with at a late stage in the preparation of the dossier in a way which disturbed elements of the intelligence services, we in the BBC are all accusing the Prime Minister of lying, effectively, and of leading the country into a war on a false premise. Now, how do you respond to that?

Richard Sambrook: As I said at the outset, Jim, we have never suggested any such thing.

John Humphrys: Well he says one leads to the other. He says if you say against what we in Downing Street claim to be the truth, that Andrew Gilligan's story is absolutely true, then we are accusing the Prime Minister of going to war on a false premise.

Richard Sambrook: I don't accept that extrapolation at all. What we have said quite simply is that a senior and credible source said there was disquiet within the intelligence services about one piece, that one 45 minute claim. That's what we have on one source. Beyond that we've had a number of people - as indeed have many newspapers and other broadcasting organisations over the last few weeks, have been briefed by senior people in the defence and intelligence communities about a level of disquiet about the way some of this intelligence was presented. That's all we have said.

John Humphrys: It's important for listeners to realise this - that in something like this, you have taken some trouble to talk to the people who have been in direct contact with these sources, and gone through this. And you personally as director of BBC News, are absolutely satisfied that this is a true statement, a statement

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which reflects accurately the feelings as we have reported them?

Richard Sambrook: I have no question that there was that level of disquiet within the defence and intelligence communities, and that is an issue of public interest. Part of the problem is that whenever we have said that, the response to it has been to suggest we were alleging something else and to deny something we haven't suggested

John Humphrys: Well, Mr Campbell is clearly angry about this, and this is another final clip from his evidence to the committee.

Alastair Campbell: I find it incredible - and I mean incredible - that people can report based on one single anonymous uncorroborated source, can report - and let's get to the heart of what the allegation is - that the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, the intelligence agencies, people like myself, connived to persuade parliament to send British forces into action on a lie. That's the allegation, and I tell you, until the BBC acknowledge that is a lie, I will keep banging on. That correspondence file will get thicker, and they'd better issue an apology pretty quick.

John Humphrys: Well, Richard Sambrook, you'd better issue an apology pretty quick says Alastair Campbell.

Richard Sambrook: We're not going to apologise for something we haven't said, it's as simple as that. Alastair Campbell can try and pretend we said all sorts of things we didn't say. We're absolutely clear about what we said. Andrew Gilligan's report is still available on the website, anybody can go and listen to it and measure it up against the kind of things Alastair Campbell was suggesting yesterday. They don't line up.

John Humphrys: And you deny that that report amounts to an accusation that the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, Mr Campbell, and the heads of the intelligence services, were lying, and have led the country to war on a false premise?

Richard Sambrook: Absolutely not, we have never suggested anything of that kind.

John Humphrys: Mr Campbell says that he's not going to make any further comment until the foreign affairs select committee reports. Obviously we did ask him for an interview at this stage, he said he's not going to say anything more about it until that report comes in. Clearly we'll invite him on to put his side of the story and be questioned on this when that report comes out. But I take it that from what you've said, that you believe that if the papers are seen by the committee, this story can be stood up? You must believe that.

Richard Sambrook: I have no doubt about our story and about source at all, and I hope that the committee will have as full an inquiry and access to as much information as possible, and I look forward to reading their conclusions.

John Humphrys: You see, he claims that the arguments about how the 45 minute bit got into the dossier and had the prominence that

it had, really don't add up in the sense that the accusation that if there was any disquiet it had to be overcome by Downing Street stepping in, is simply wrong. Now it may well be that the papers, even if the committee see every single bit of paper, that that can't be proved one way or the other.

Richard Sambrook: It may well be. But that's fine. We have reported the denial about this claim, and we've had a number of government ministers on here to discuss it. We've been completely open about that.

Mr Campbell also said yesterday that he's not suggesting that Andrew Gilligan wasn't told something by somebody, but that whatever the source told him was untrue. And that's fine - we've reported that and we've reported the debate about it. This isn't the BBC's own allegation, we're reporting what a senior intelligence source has told us.

John Humphrys: One last word. This is quite a serious row, isn't it?

Richard Sambrook: It is, yes.

John Humphrys: Where will it lead?

Richard Sambrook: I don't know. But the BBC is not going to apologise for something we haven't said. Alastair Campbell's job is to try to put the government's case in the best light, and that's absolutely legitimate, that's what he's paid to do and he does it extremely well. The BBC's job is to raise issues of public interest and discuss them, and that's what we've done and we'll continue to do it.

John Humphrys: Richard Sambrook, director of BBC News, thanks very much.

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