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From Director, News

Alastair Campbell, Esq.,
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16th November, 2001

Dear Alastair,

Thank you for your letter of 12th November. I should say at the outset that I do not recognise the description of our journalism that you provide. The BBC at all levels, including the Board of Governors, is proud of our coverage of this crisis.

The BBC's newsgathering strength has enabled us to report from a wide range of sources. We have drawn heavily, especially on Radio 5 Live, News 24 and BBC World, on live press conferences from the MoD and the Pentagon, and on press conferences given by the Prime Minister and President Bush. We have covered every debate in Parliament and every statement by the Prime Minister from Downing Street. The Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence have appeared frequently on Today and other programmes. The Prime Minister was interviewed this week by the BBC's Pashto service and there are standing invitations to him to talk to the international audience in a joint World Service/BBC World interview and to the British audience through a special Question Time.

However we would not be providing our audiences with the rounded and impartial news service they expect were London and Washington to be our only points of reference. As you said after the

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Kosovo Crisis, in your speech to the Royal United Services Institute: "The day of the daredevil reporter who refuses to see obstacles to getting the truth and seeing it with his or her own eyes seems to have died. But surely the starvation of pictures and the denial of access by the Serbs increased rather than lessened the responsibility of the media to try and find out what was happening there." So I assume you applaud the fact that the BBC has reported from the outset from Peshawar, Quetta, Islamabad, with the Northern Alliance in a number of locations in Northern Afghanistan and in the past week from Kabul. I agree on the importance of first hand eyewitness reporting from experienced correspondents.

I would like to make two further general points before responding to the specific issues you raised.

I fail to understand your use of the term "moral equivalence". It is not one that would be recognised by any of our journalists, who are very clear that their job is to report events as fully and accurately as possible. Giving our audiences, both in Britain and around the world, a rounded picture from which to make their own judgements does involve reporting what is being said "on the other side". It is ludicrous to imply that means the BBC supports or endorses those views in any way. As I have indicated above, weighing the amount of coverage of British or American statements, press conferences and speeches against claims by Al Qaeda or the Taliban is overwhelmingly favourable to London and Washington.

Secondly, we would never claim that we "can do no wrong". Reporting wars is difficult and, given the circumstances in which our journalists in the field are operating it would be extraordinary if the occasional infelicitous phrase didn't slip through. However you underestimate the scrutiny we ourselves apply to our coverage if you assume we do not pick these up for ourselves and ensure they are not repeated.

Let me now address the points you raise. I do not propose to engage in detail on each and every example you cite - but I will provide evidence to show that we have neither indulged the Taliban

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or Osama Bin Laden in the way you describe - nor have we ridden roughshod over the BBC's editorial guidelines.

The BBC's Producer Guidelines were supplemented at the outset of this conflict with additional guidance drawn up by my colleagues in BBC Editorial Policy in consultation with myself and senior colleagues in BBC News relating to issues likely to arise in times of conflict and based on experience from the Falklands, the Gulf War and Kosovo. These documents were distributed to every member of staff in BBC News. Heads of Department have been actively involved on each and every day since September 11th - helping to shape the coverage, providing guidance and resolving the very many editorial questions that have arisen. Frankly, I have no idea who may have informed you that "nothing has been referred up beyond programme editor" - but that is plain wrong .

As part of your general view that we have been 'soft' on the Taliban you question the BBC's behaviour at the various Taliban news conferences held in Pakistan. Perhaps you are unaware that CNN carried some of these events 'live' - whereas we preferred first in each case to assess the material these events produced before deciding how best they contributed to audience understanding. In general the Taliban have chosen to co-operate more with organisations other than the BBC. Our correspondents tell me that the Taliban do not much like our reporting .

You take great issue with our reporting of Taliban casualty claims. You suggest both that we have taken them too seriously and that we should not be reporting them at all until officially verified by some Coalition source. I don't agree. The Taliban's claims are part of the story and we are right to report their version of events with, of course, proper testing, and ensuring their propaganda is not presented as fact. BBC journalists - time and again - have reminded our audiences of the unverifiable nature of the Taliban's statements when there is no other credible source to substantiate

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them. We do not only rely on the Prime Minister, American officials or the Northern Alliance to do the debunking - though we have provided many opportunities for spokesmen to do this. Our own journalists have pointed out the circumstances in which they have been shown what the Taliban says is 'evidence' and have made clear the difficulties in verifying Taliban assertions.

Some examples:

- "A group of foreign journalists arrive nervously in Afghanistan, Taliban troops monitoring their every movement. The reporters had been bussed in to see a village called Kadam where the Taliban claim up to two hundred civilians died in a bombing raid last week. The journalists report seeing widespread destruction and eighteen freshly dug graves but otherwise they could not verify the claims."
(14th October, TV News, Ben Brown).
- "The Taliban are fighting back but after eight days are feeling the effects of the American onslaught. So they are now switching their offensive to the propaganda front. They have invited in foreign journalists after shunning them until now and have bussed them to sights where they say American bombs have killed civilians."
(15th October, TV News, Jacky Rowland).
- A question from Huw Edwards to Fergal Keane: "How difficult is it to access the truth or otherwise of (these) claims?"
Answer: "It's extremely difficult. Principally because the Taliban will not allow a single foreign journalist into the country to verify the claims."
(25th October, 6 O'Clock TV News)

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- "Unverifiable casualty claims are often made by the Taliban who won't let outsiders investigate. But a senior human rights figure is impressed by these civilian accounts."
(25th October, 10 O'Clock TV News, Fergal Keane).
- Local residents wanted to know why US bombs had targeted them. "There's nothing connected to the Taliban around here", this man says, "The Americans only want to stop us feeding our families." In point of fact a heavily damaged Taliban ministry building stood nearby.
(31st October, TV News, Simon Ingram).
- "Western journalists have been taken to the southern city of Kandahar...They've been taken there obviously by the Taliban authorities - and they are being shown what the Taliban want them to see...but they can use their eyes and ears as well."
(31st October, 'Today', introduction by Jim Naughtie to the Simon Ingram piece mentioned in your letter).
- Al Jazeera TV claim this child to be Osama Bin Laden's son voicing defiance. It's impossible to know who these children really are."
(7th November, TV News, Stephen Sackur).

You raise the report on the alleged bombing of a dam and power station on November 1st. I note that on Radio 5 the correspondent, Susannah Price made it clear that it could not be verified. Television news attributed the claim to the Taliban in an introduction to a correspondent report. It was not referred to in the report itself. We should, however, have injected an extra note of caution.

I believe you misunderstand the nature of the BBC's guidelines on 'Staged Events'. They are aimed at preventing terrorist stunts (IRA roadblocks and the like) being deliberately staged for the benefit of

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journalists. The Bin Laden videos do not fall into this category. Nor does this guideline suggest in any way that BBC journalists should not go to areas that the Taliban claim have been damaged by bombs. What matters is that we treat material with due caution - and I believe that in the overwhelming number of cases we have done exactly that.

I turn now to your attack on Rageh Omaar. You may know that a Labour M.P. - Peter Bradiey - has written to me about the conditions of his entry into Afghanistan last week. I copied you my response - from which you will have seen that you are thoroughly mistaken to suggest that we were duped, or that we deceived the audience about the terms under which Rageh and his team were allowed to operate.

As to the substance of his journalism - you again object to the quoting of a Taliban source - as if quoting a Taliban source implied that we believed the source. I doubt very much indeed that viewers of BBC News would have been conditioned by our programmes to equate Taliban claims with the unvarnished truth - and yet this is the underlying thesis of your letter.

The focus of Rageh's report of the 9th November, to which you object, was the suffering caused to some in Kabul by the bombing. As such it was a legitimate piece of reportage. It was not attempting to balance the suffering he witnessed with the strategic goals of the Coalition. He did not say the bombing was wrong or should be stopped - nor anything of the kind. His conclusion was a professional judgement and not a prescriptive opinion on the rightness or otherwise of Coalition policy.

You attack other aspects of that night's programme. Mr. Blair may not have been included in Stephen Sackur's report - but we have carried the Prime Minister's remarks on many, many occasions often live on News 24 (and on one occasion live on BBC 1 when other terrestrial channels did not). Your description of that night's

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running order - which leads you to the conclusion that we are guilty of bias - curiously fails to mention the powerful piece filed by Gavin Hewitt on the victims of the September 11th attack.

You cite a number of examples from Today's Defence correspondent Andrew Gilligan. Some of your quotations are inaccurate and/or taken out of context. However, his remarks, as with those of all our specialist correspondents are judgements based on background conversations with a range of sources - in his case military ones. He is not voicing personal opinion. For example the statement that "unless there is an incredible stroke of luck the action will carry on over winter" was one being expressed in public as well as in private by the MoD and the Pentagon.

The rules governing our correspondents writing for newspapers and magazines are that a senior editorial figure should see the item before submission and that they should not write anything that could not be broadcast on the BBC (e.g. in terms of political opinion).

You asked whether I believe the BBC has accurately reflected the views of the Muslim community. As I told you when we met in Downing Street, it is hard to find moderate Muslim opinion prepared to voice support for the bombing. However we have gone to considerable lengths to ensure our examples are representative. For example, you may recall the Panorama programme "Koran or Country". In selecting Birmingham Central Mosque we took considerable efforts to find a Mosque and a community with no reputation for tension between Muslim and non Muslim opinion.

We took advice from the Muslim College, from Islamic Relief, from the Professor of Theology at Birmingham University and also sought the views of the British Board of Deputies. All agreed the Mosque and the Imam were responsible and moderate. And yet overwhelming opinion from the community there opposed military action.

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Where we have found extremist views we have sought to ensure there is a public interest case for hearing them (for example those who volunteered to join the Taliban). We have never sought to suggest that there is significant support for Osama Bin Laden among Muslims in the United Kingdom. Nor have we simply picked up the sensationalist claims made by some on the size and nature of Taliban sympathisers. Let me cite one particular case. On 30th October our Social Affairs editor Niall Dickson said this about the suggestion that many hundreds of British Muslims had gone to support the Taliban in recent months:

If you go on to the streets and talk to young Muslims they tend to act in a way that all young people do, so you get people saying 'I'd be prepared to go.'. But if you talk to the elders they say they wouldn't dream of doing it. You have to separate off some of the hype ... You have to keep this in perspective. I would say since September 11th we have no evidence that perhaps more than a handful, if that, actually, have gone. It may be before that, more have done so.

(30th October, Six O'Clock TV News; Niall Dickson).

On many occasions our programmes have interviewed moderate Muslims who have been given ample opportunity to express their disdain for the militants. All in all I am satisfied that the BBC has provided appropriate context when reporting the newsworthy activities of what we all recognise is a minority of Muslims.

In a separate letter you questioned the methodology behind the Today programme's poll of British Muslim opinion. There is no perfect methodology for any poll of course, and we were well aware that sampling Muslim opinion presented difficulties. After extensive discussion with ICM they came up with a methodology which we believed to be robust and one that had major advantages over other polls of British Muslims conducted since September 11th. Because our 120 primary contacts were generated at random we avoided the

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obvious pitfalls of those surveys that have been conducted outside mosques or in residential areas with large Muslim populations. Any Muslim household (with a telephone) in Great Britain was as likely as any other to be contacted for our survey.

You express concern that people will simply nominate others with the same view. This may or may not be true, but to skew the result, all primary respondents would have had to act in a concerted way. This is impossible as they are not known to each other. It seems likely that any plan to shift the results in one direction would be countered by someone else trying to move results in another.

You make three other points about the poll:

- Sample size: when interviewing 500 people the sample size has no impact on its "representativeness", but simply on the margin of error one needs to apply to the results. In our reporting we were conscious of the margin of error that applies to this size of sample.
- Sample bias: As explained above no-one knows what a representative sample of British Muslims would be. Yes, there were more men than women in the sample, more under 35s than over 35s and so on, but the views of all demographic groups were similar indicating that if we could have weighted the data to a representative sample the results would not have changed to any great degree.
- Telephone polling: telephone was much the best approach for this kind of research. Street interviews are more likely to introduce bias. Can you imagine the pressure on someone being interviewed outside a mosque with others milling around?

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You express concern about the reporting of the international nature of the campaign. We have reported the role of other countries, including Turkey, in supporting the Coalition - particularly on radio. News 24 has assiduously tracked announcements of military help from foreign governments. Television News bulletins on BBC 1 have also made it clear that other countries are involved - for instance on the night of the Downing Street summit of European leaders - though I accept we could have done more. I should have thought you might regard the decision of the 'Frost' team - with the considerable extra time at its disposal - to interview the Turkish Prime Minister as an example of good journalism rather than use it as a means to criticise our performance. And you fail to mention that the very influential international BBC channels have been remarkably good at providing broad perspectives. King Abdullah of Jordan last week was interviewed by our correspondent Bridget Kendall for BBC World, World Service and Online - probably to an audience of a hundred million or so.

You suggest that we have given too little weight to the existence of a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan before September 11th. This is not the case. Again, we have not only relied on government spokesmen to make the case that millions were starving before the bombing campaign began. We have not sought to hide the existence of a drought, nor have we given short shrift to the Taliban's obstructiveness. To take one example - Fergal Keane's report on the day of Clare Short's arrival in Pakistan

"Now there's news of a devastating blow to the suffering millions. According to the World Food Programme the Taliban has seized half the UN food aid in the country."

As for your general criticisms of Fergal Keane's reporting - he has been reporting what he has seen and the above example hardly suggests a correspondent unaware of the complexities of the story.

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I understand your depth of feeling about these issues and your concern that the government case is properly reflected through the media which is why I have replied in detail on this occasion to the points you have raised. The BBC's independence and impartiality is under even greater scrutiny at times of war. I have to say that I do not believe a detailed critique of our coverage from the government is helpful in preserving that independence. If we have something factually wrong of course we want to be told through the usual channels. But I can assure you we take extremely seriously our responsibility in reporting the current international situation and will continue to do so.

Yours sincerely,

B. Kern (Personal Assistant)

P.P. (Richard Sambrook)

Copy to: Gwyn Davies (The Chairman)
Greg Dyke (D.G.)

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