

Stephen Mitchell

From: Kevin Marsh
 Sent: 21 July 2003 11.14 AM
 To: Stephen Mitchell

S,
 Obviously, I'm finding this extremely difficult: whatever the state of the current argument, whatever other peoples' roles in all of this and however composed one has to appear in public, I'm still deeply affected by the knowlege that a very good man is dead as a result of a series of events that, in the end, I set in train.

I have thought very long and very hard about this - in particular what, with hindsight, I would have done differently and whether at any time I was driven by unworthy motives or fell short of my professional duty. I find it hard to believe that I - or anyone else - would, could or should have acted differently, given the state of our knowlege at the time or that my assessment of the story or the processes that got it to air was flawed. Nevertheless, what has happened has happened.

The important thing for me is to disentagle what I knew at the time from what I know now - obviously, I have a more precise knowlege now of specific pieces of information that were, perhaps, more of an impression then. Nevertheless, I think I have been able to separate out the two strands.

One key point that has troubled me in this whole row is around this description of Dr Kelly as the "principal source" for AG's story. That may be how AG describes it and indeed may be how it looks now. At the time, though, AG's account of Dr Kelly's testimony seemed to me to be more of a corroboration of what we seemed to be hearing from a variety of other sources - and it fed into the decision to broadcast the story in that way. In only one aspect - the single sourcing of the 45 minute claim - was AG's account of Dr Kelly's information truly surprising, though of course it was harder on some other points than the state of knowlege at that time. It's quite crucial to understand this

How the Gilligan story got to air.

I was first alerted to the Gilligan story shortly after regular afternoon meeting which takes place between 1615 and 1700 daily. There had been no mention of the Gilligan story - AG was not even in the building at that time - at that meeting: the main concerns were an Iain Watson piece on Labour MPs' unhappiness at the way in which cluster bombs had been used in Iraq and an interview with the father of a young British man shot by Israeli troops in the Palestinian territories. Both items raised important editorial questions - in the case of cluster bombs, whether or not there would be a ministerial response... and what we should do if there wasn't one: in the case of the Hurndell shooting, what we should do about if the Israeli government continued to decline to appear.

At about 1730, I was asked by the day editor whether I knew about AG's story. I said I did not. The day editor briefly outlined AG's story - that a source he had used before had told him that the September dossier had been "sexed up" at the behest of Downing Street. My first response was to place this in the context of what I knew up to that date about the Govt dossiers: clearly, I have gone over this in some detail subsequently but am clear that the following factors were in my mind at the time.

- 1) A general feeling of unreliability about Govt Iraq dossiers - arising out of the discrediting of the February dossier.
- 2) A more specific feeling that at least one element of the September dossier had appeared to have been challenged at the highest level, by Mr El Baradei - this was the Niger Uranium evidence. This appeared to challenge the credibility of one of the three key claims in that dossier.
- 3) Comments made by Mr Hans Blix that suggested the intelligence offered to his inspection teams by the UK and the US had turned out to be unhelpful, faulty or misleading
- 4) A number of articles by very reputable specialist journalists quoting intelligence sources - and which had not to my knowlege been denied by the Govt - indicating that the intelligence services were unhappy that intelligence had been used at all in the public domain and were even more unhappy that the many caveats and qualifications that always accompany such intelligence were being stripped out to give the public documents more impact.

5) A long term understanding that the "dossier" - first announced by Alastair Campbell to US journalists in March - had not been produced publicly "because there was nothing new in it". The failure to produce the dossier was never officially explained, though in interviews ministers had always promised that it was imminent.

6) The recollection that at the beginning of September 2002, AG had reported - as it turns out, using Dr Kelly as his source - on Today that the dossier was still delayed because there was nothing new to say. FCO minister Mike O'Brien appeared on the same programme promising that the dossier would soon be published and implying that he had seen it.

7) The recollection that when the dossier was published, AG had pointed to two specific claims in it as what he called then the "tabloid headlines": one was the 45 minute claim, the other was the claim that Iraqi missiles could reach Cyprus. In that report, AG had pointed up the discrepancy between the prominence given to the 45 minute claim in the foreword and the executive summary; and that that prominence did not seem consistent with what was said about the 45 minute claim in the body of the dossier.

8) My own briefing from [redacted] and two other [redacted] on [redacted] after the end of the war. From that briefing, I took away the very clear impression that [redacted] analysis of the intelligence to hand did NOT justify war against Iraq at that time. I also took away the impression [redacted] believed hard evidence of WMD in Iraq would never be found - an odd conclusion to draw if WMD had been, in September, held at 45 minutes readiness. This conversation was, by its nature, elliptical and, of course, unreportable. However, I am clear that if the conversation had been reportable, I would have been wholly justified in broadcasting a story whose headline was [redacted] admits intelligence did not support the case for war on Iraq." As a result of this, a doubt was opened in my mind about the faithfulness of the September dossier to the original intelligence that went into it - and the possibility that there was a gap between the presentation of that intelligence and the intelligence itself.

My interpretation of this meeting is shared by [redacted] who was also there and although there have been several contacts with [redacted] since, they have never put forward any other interpretation of our meeting.

Given this background, it seemed to me that, on the face of it, the story AG was offering was at the very least a useful corroboration of some of what we seemed able to conclude about the dossier at that time.

I asked for a number of details about AG's source and the meeting with him. I was told that the source was someone "senior in the preparation of the dossier" - had been Britain's most senior inspector with UNSCOM and was about to return to Iraq in a senior weapons inspection role. I was told that AG had known him for a couple of years and that he had been a source for AG's stories in the past, including at least one previous story on the dossier. It was clear to me that he was not a member of the intelligence services, at least not ostensibly so though an employee of the Foreign Office. I was assured that he would have had access to intelligence information that went into the dossier. I was not told nor did I ask his name. However, I felt assured that the source was reliable, credible and reportable; that he had the seniority we ascribed to him and that he had the role in the preparation of the dossier that we ascribed to him. I then asked what exactly it was that the source had said to Gilligan and had read to me a note AG had written and sent to the day editor. This note contained many details that seemed wholly consistent with what I felt I knew at the time, apparently corroborating some aspects of the dossier story and adding only one or two new details: at the time, only one detail struck me as genuinely new -- that the 45 minute claim was believed to be unreliable - and "probably false" - because it was ascribed to a single source. The other details, including Alastair Campbell's/No10's editorial role in preparing the September dossier, did not seem to me to be wholly new - though it is true to say that the source appeared to be corroborating and making more precise these aspects of the story that had, in one form or another, been in the public domain. Balancing all of this, I gave the go ahead to use the story, on the basis that AG would script the main report at 0735 and that I would see it before broadcast - and instructed that the bid we had already placed for a MoD minister on the cluster bomb story be broadened straight away to include a response to AG's story I did not instruct Downing Street to be approached since it's my understanding that it's normal practice for Today programme bids for ministers to be cleared by Downing Street. It was a reasonable expectation, therefore, that that would happen in this case I was aware of no problems with extending the bid to the MoD.

I did not refer my decision to anyone else because there seemed no doubt to me that this was a decision properly made at my level.

I read over AG's note of his conversation with his source that evening and then again in the morning before clearing his script for transmission. Alastair Campbell was not named in that - nor as far as I can tell - any BBC report although he WAS named in AG's note of the conversation. This was not the result of any conscious decision making process: I was content with AG's formulation of "Downing Street" in the Today reports and did not consider asking him to change it.

The Mail on Sunday

I did not read the MoS article.

AG approached me on, I think, the afternoon of the original broadcast to say he'd been asked to write a piece for the MoS. I told him straight away that I would not be able to read it and that he would have to find someone else to vet it. I explained I was due to be in Lincolnshire at my mother's wedding that weekend and would not be able to get access to a computer or fax. AG said the piece would go no further than what he had already broadcast - therefore I had no reason to assume that he would name Alastair Campbell (as he had not done on the BBC) nor give more details of the meeting with his source. I said that if he was simply re-writing what had already gone out on the BBC then in principle I did not object to him writing a piece - but said again that he would have to make arrangements for someone else to finally approve his copy since I would not be able to.

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