

PRESS BRIEFING: 11AM THURSDAY 26 JUNE 2003

PLEASE CIRCULATE URGENTLY TO MINISTERS' OFFICES, SENIOR OFFICIALS, SPECIAL ADVISERS AND PRESS OFFICERS

PRIME MINISTER'S DAY

- Attend Russia-UK Energy Conference with President Putin. Patricia Hewitt, Brian Wilson and Igor Yusofov (Russian Energy Minister), Lancaster House - 8.50am
- Cabinet - 10am
- Lunch with President and Mrs Putin. Downing Street - midday
- Press conference with President Putin. FCO - 2pm
- Meeting with Condoleeza Rice - 4.30pm

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Written Questions

- Ann Coffey: To ask the Prime Minister when he will publish the list of Ministerial Committees of the Cabinet.

Statements

- Leader of the House Business Statement - 12.30pm
- Margaret Beckett Statement on CAP reform - c1.15pm

PRESS NOTICES

- Appointment of Prof Marilyn McCord Adams as Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Oxford
- Appointment of Dr Chris Pelling as Regius Professor of Greek, University of Oxford
- Appointment of Richard Lambert as Trustee of British Museum

OTHER DEPARTMENTAL BUSINESS

FOREIGN

DOMESTIC

- DH - John Reid addresses NHS Confederation annual conference, Glasgow. 4pm.
- DH - John Hutton announces £40m investment to provide another 16 NHS walk-in centres by Sept. 10am.

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- DfES - David Miliband announces way forward on schools capital funding following consultation on proposals "Building Schools to the Future" to change the way capital resources are used to improve secondary schools. 9.30am.
- MoD - Geoff Hoon speech on maximising the effectiveness of expenditure on defence. RUSI. 1.45pm.

CABINET

The Prime Minister's Official Spokesman (PMOS) advised journalists that the Prime Minister had chaired Cabinet this morning. Geoff Hoon had updated Ministers in sombre mood on the disturbing incident on Tuesday in Iraq. The Prime Minister and Cabinet had taken the opportunity to express their condolences to the families of those who had been killed. Obviously our thoughts were with them. The PMOS added that Major General Peter Wall had put out a statement this morning containing as much information as we knew at this stage about the incident. The Prime Minister had emphasised - and Cabinet had concurred with his view - that while we mourned the loss of our troops, it was important to continue to drive forward the process of transforming Iraq. In doing so, it was necessary to be realistic both about what we had already achieved, in large part through the efforts of our troops on the ground, but also about how much we had yet to do. A twenty-minute discussion had then followed concerning the involvement of various Departments in addressing post-conflict issues in Iraq. Asked if troops deployments had been discussed, the PMOS said no.

The PMOS said that the Prime Minister had also taken the opportunity to look ahead to his meeting with President Putin this afternoon. A press conference at the Foreign Office would follow the meeting at 2pm.

The PMOS said that the Prime Minister had also welcomed the 'superb result' which Margaret Beckett had done so much to help achieve in terms of the CAP reform deal announced this morning in Luxembourg. He had pointed in particular to the establishment of the principle of decoupling - up to a minimum of 75% and a maximum of 100% of production from subsidy. He had underlined that he believed this had only been possible because of the engagement of the UK with its EU partners. The deal was important not only in terms of farming and agriculture - although their importance should not be underestimated - but also because of its implications for the EU as a whole: most significantly in terms of the run-up to the Cancun WTO negotiations and the possibility of having

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genuinely free international markets which would bring so many benefits to developing countries.

IRAQ

Asked if it was right to say that the British Government had been warning for some weeks about American inertia in dealing with reconstruction issues in Iraq, the PMOS said that as a Government we had recognised that we were all on a steep learning curve in Iraq. It was important to remember that we had taken over a country whose basic infrastructure had been reduced to a very low state, in which people had been terrorised for thirty years and were not used to making decisions on their own and, indeed, continued to live in fear that Saddam might return to power. We had had to address each of those issues and had been open in acknowledging that we were still making progress. Rather than play the blame game, the important thing was to recognise the scale of the problem. The presence of US Ambassador Bremer, together with the support of John Sawers, the UK's representative, meant that there was a clear grip at the top of the organisation. No doubt that would continue with Mr Sawers' successor, Sir Jeremy Greenstock. So yes, we were making progress - and yes, there was still more to do. But we believed that we had the necessary organisation and personnel in place to continue to carry out this important work effectively.

Put to him that Britons inside Iraq had been warning for days that we were close to 'tipping point' and that it could be argued that we had already 'tipped' in the light of the incident on Tuesday, the PMOS said he did not think it would be helpful to pre-empt the final report on the incident. That said, there were reasons for believing that this might have been a particular incident at a particular time and in a particular place, rather than being part of some wider problem. In our view it was matter of getting a grip of the problem incrementally. We remained confident that that was what the Coalition as a whole was doing. Put to him that the British had been pressing the US privately to wake up to the seriousness of the situation but that the US had clearly failed to do so, the PMOS said that to characterise UK/US relations in such an adversarial way was to misunderstand the nature of the relationship. We had constructive discussions with our American counterparts on a regular basis, as you would expect, to discuss what, and how, improvements could be made. Those conversations were clearly achieving real results. Asked about mounting concerns about a lack of sensitivity towards the Shi'ite population in Iraq, the PMOS said he thought that that was one generalisation too far. Our troops had gone out of their way to deal sympathetically with local sensitivities.

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Asked how far Alastair Campbell believed the BBC's 'agenda' extended beyond Andrew Gilligan, the PMOS said that despite Mr Campbell's complaint against the BBC yesterday, it was important to remember that he had also praised some of their reporting during the Iraq conflict. Indeed, he had stated specifically that some of the best reporting to come out of Iraq during the war had been from the BBC. That said, the leaked memo from the BBC's correspondent, Paul Adams, on 24 March set out our concerns. As Mr Adams had written, "We need to be really careful not to get sucked into the 'it's all going pear-shaped' school of thought. The loss of a helicopter there, a Tornado there, some video of dead or captured soldiers, of fire fighting at Umm Qasr - none of these things singly or together means that things are going wrong. I was gobsmacked to hear a set of headlines today that the Coalition is suffering significant casualties. This is simply not true".

In answer to further questions about the BBC, the PMOS said that there were a number of questions still outstanding. They were quite simple:

- Did the BBC still stand by the allegation it had made on 29 May that No 10 had added in the 45-minute claim?
- Did it still stand by the allegation made on the same day that we had done so against the wishes of the intelligence agencies?
- Did it still stand by the allegation made on that day that both we and the intelligence agencies had known that the 45-minute claim was wrong?
- Did it still stand by the allegation, again on the same day, that we had ordered the September dossier to be 'sexed up' in the period leading up to its publication - that it had been "cobbled together at the last minute with some unconfirmed material that had not been approved by the security services" (Today Programme, 29 May)?
- Did it still stand by the statement made on 6 June that the JIC was not part of the intelligence community but was a Number 10 Committee whose job was to arbitrate between the Government and the intelligence agencies?
- Did it stand by the claim on 3 June that the Chairman of the JIC only "kind of bureaucratically signed off his report"?

And there were other questions which had yet to be answered:

- How many sources was the original allegation about 45-minutes being added on based on? Was it one source, or more than one source?
- Was that source on the JIC, given the fact that only the JIC had the full picture?

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- Why had the BBC's journalist not checked the story with us before broadcast? Was this now normal BBC practice for all stories?
- If that was so, would it broadcast a story, for instance alleging financial malpractice by a member of its Board of Management, without checking it first?
- Finally, did the BBC believe that its one anonymous source outweighed the combined weight of the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the security and intelligence co-ordinator, and the heads of the intelligence agencies?

Asked why Mr Campbell had made him read out the questions, the PMOS said that Mr Campbell had not 'made him' do anything. He was perfectly capable of writing his own scripts, thank you very much.

Asked if we had written a letter to the BBC containing all the above questions, or whether we were delivering those questions through the Lobby this morning, the PMOS said it was the latter. Asked how far up the chain of command at the BBC we had gone in order to obtain answers, the PMOS said that as Alastair Campbell had underlined to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee yesterday, we had repeatedly asked the BBC questions about these matters, but we had not yet had a satisfactory response. Asked why the particular list of questions he had just read out had not been sent to the BBC, the PMOS said that he was posing the questions to the BBC through the Lobby because, as Mr Campbell had said yesterday, extensive private correspondence unfortunately had not managed to resolve the issue, particularly since the BBC's answers kept changing. Pressed as to why Downing Street would not be sending a letter to the BBC, the PMOS said that the questions were based on what had already been broadcast by the BBC. So far, we had failed to obtain any satisfactory answers. Asked if the questions he had posed this morning had been put directly to the BBC, the PMOS said that all the issues had been addressed by the questions he had asked today.

Asked if Downing Street was considering whether to go through official channels, such as the Broadcasting Standards Commission, to obtain a satisfactory response from the BBC, the PMOS said that we wanted the BBC to answer the outstanding questions, and it seemed that the best way to get them to do that was to direct the questions to the organisation itself. Asked if No 10 had asked for a meeting with the Chairman of the Board of Governors to initiate an internal investigation at the BBC, the PMOS said that what the BBC did internally was a matter for them. We had been in lengthy correspondence with them, as he had set out, to obtain satisfactory responses to our questions. Asked

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if we would be publishing any of that correspondence, the PMOS said that the correspondence was private because we had wanted to resolve the matter privately. Put to him that, rather than have a 'public whinge', it would be perfectly proper for Downing Street to ask for a meeting with the Chairman of the Board of Governors - given the fact that the BBC was a public service broadcaster - to ask him to investigate what we considered to be a serious matter, the PMOS said he wouldn't characterise our complaint as a 'public whinge'. The BBC had surely been in no doubt for several weeks that we wanted the questions to be answered.

Questioned as to whether No 10 was demanding the BBC name its source, the PMOS underlined that we had never requested the BBC to do such a thing. We were simply asking the organisation to say whether they believed that their one anonymous source outweighed the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the security and intelligence co-ordinator, and the heads of the intelligence agencies - and that if so, whether they would accept that they were, in effect, calling all those people liars.

Asked if there was any reason as to why he had used the particular example of financial malpractice by a member of the BBC's Board of Management, the PMOS said no. He had plucked it out of the air as an example. Asked if he was making an allegation against the Board of Management, the PMOS said no, of course not. He could state on the record that he had no evidence of financial malpractice by the Board. He had merely been asking the BBC whether they would broadcast such a story without checking it first in the light of the fact that they had broadcast a claim designed to question the integrity of the Government without even checking it first - and had, in fact, continued to broadcast it, despite the fact that we had denied it with the full authority of the Chairman of the JIC and the heads of the intelligence agencies.

Asked if he would accept that the only way some of the questions, such as the 45-minute claim, could be answered was by publishing the first draft of the September dossier, the PMOS said that it was important that the request by members of the FAC was considered in all seriousness, together with its implications. It was also important for Mr Campbell to give his response to the Committee first rather than to the media. Asked if Mr Campbell had had an opportunity to discuss the FAC's request with the JIC, the PMOS said it went without saying that we were treating the FAC's request with all due seriousness and we were consulting all the relevant people, as you would expect. Asked if

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we were expecting the JIC to accede to the FAC's request, the PMOS cautioned journalists against getting too far ahead of themselves at this point.

Asked if he would characterise what was going on as a row or an attack on the BBC, the PMOS said that he would simply characterise it as Downing Street trying to set the record straight. Questioned as to whether No 10 had ruled out settling the matter through the libel courts, the PMOS said that we were still looking for an apology from the BBC. What might happen in the future was another day's work. Asked if that meant he wasn't ruling out the possibility of legal action, the PMOS said that he had no intention of engaging in speculation today about what might or might not happen further down the road. What was important was to set the record straight. As several distinguished personages had stated, the BBC's allegation was about the most serious that could be made against any Government. Questioned as to whether any legal advice had been sought, the PMOS said not as far as he was aware at this stage.

EUROPE

Asked if Cabinet had discussed Europe, the PMOS said yes, mainly in the context of this morning's deal on CAP reform. Asked to confirm reports that the Prime Minister would be speaking to a group of Ministers about the issue, the PMOS said that as he had pointed out yesterday, the meeting of junior Ministers, entitled 'Minacor', was a routine exercise. He was due to address them today and would underline how engagement in Europe produced results, such as today's CAP deal. Questioned about a report in today's FT which claimed that a special European Strategy Committee was being set up, the PMOS said that a PQ was being answered this afternoon which would set out the position on this matter.

SIR DENIS THATCHER

Asked if the Prime Minister would be releasing a statement following the news of the death of Sir Denis Thatcher, the PMOS said that the Prime Minister had been informed of, and saddened by, the news. He would express his condolences to Baroness Thatcher in his own way.

EL/TK

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PRESS BRIEFING: 3.45PM THURSDAY 26 JUNE 2003

PLEASE CIRCULATE URGENTLY TO MINISTERS' OFFICES, SENIOR OFFICIALS, SPECIAL ADVISERS AND PRESS OFFICERS

IRAQ/BBC

The Prime Minister's Official Spokesman (PMOS) distributed copies of a letter from the Prime Minister's Director of Communications and Strategy, Alastair Campbell, to the BBC's Director of News, Richard Sambrook, setting out questions which we wanted answered by the end of today.

Asked to explain what 'the end of the day' actually meant in terms of timing, the PMOS said that we were not as pedantic as some would like to believe. We wanted to see a response by the end of the day. Asked what action Downing Street would take if the questions were not answered by the end of today, the PMOS said we hoped that the BBC would answer the serious questions we were posing and apologise for what we believed to be a very serious and untrue allegation. Pressed as to what action might be taken if the BBC declined to respond, the PMOS said that people should be patient and take things one step at a time. We had stated clearly both yesterday and today why we believed that the statements made on the Today Programme were untrue. Today we had asked the BBC a series of questions. We hoped that they would respond. Asked why it was so important for the BBC to respond by the end of the day, the PMOS said that the Director of News had made his comments in his Today Programme interview this morning based, presumably, on a very careful consideration of all the evidence, including remarks made by Andrew Gilligan and Today. If he was able to speak so confidently on that basis in the morning, surely he was able to answer the questions we had posed by this evening - in the same way we had been willing to answer questions throughout this whole regrettable affair.

Put to him that the matter could be cleared up easily by publishing the first draft of the September dossier, the PMOS said that the FAC had made certain requests yesterday which had been confirmed by the Clerk last night. It was not for him to detail what those requests were. However, we would be responding to the Committee after consulting the JIC. When we did so, the material would become the possession of the Committee and it would then be up to them to decide what to do with it. Asked if he was saying that the first draft of the dossier might be published at some point, the PMOS said he did not think it would be helpful to engage in speculation. The FAC had outlined certain questions in open session

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yesterday. Those had been translated into questions which the Clerk had put to us last night. We would respond to the Committee within the specified timetable with the caveats set out by Mr Campbell yesterday. However, we had no intention of providing a running commentary on the information which had been requested and that which would be supplied, in consultation with the JIC, because it would be disrespectful to the Committee to do so.

Asked if any thought had been given to the possibility of taking legal action against the BBC, the PMOS said we hoped that the BBC would respond positively to our very serious request to consider whether what it had said, based on one anonymous source, had been accurate when the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, the head of the JIC, the intelligence and security co-ordinator and the heads of the intelligence agencies had all agreed that it was not. Asked what would happen if the BBC refused to do so, the PMOS repeated that it would not be helpful to engage in speculation about the future.

Asked if an inquiry was being launched into who Andrew Gilligan's source might be since he - or she - would have broken the Official Secrets Act by revealing information to him, the PMOS said that that was a matter for others to consider, not him. Asked if the Prime Minister believed that Mr Gilligan should be sacked given the seriousness of the issue, the PMOS said that BBC personnel policy was entirely a matter for the BBC, not anyone else.

Asked if the Prime Minister continued to stand by his claim that every detail of the two documents was accurate, the PMOS said yes. We had freely admitted that a mistake had been made in the second document inasmuch as we had failed to attribute part of it to Dr al-Marashi. Nevertheless, the substance of that document remained accurate, as was the substance of the September dossier.

Asked why Mr Campbell, in his letter, had singled out BBC journalists who boosted their incomes by writing for national papers given this appeared to have nothing to do with anything and that other broadcast journalists did the same thing, the PMOS said that as Mr Campbell had underlined yesterday, he had a high regard for most BBC journalism and believed that some of the finest reporting during the Iraq conflict had come from the BBC. Equally, he believed that the BBC, as a deservedly world-renowned organisation, was one of the biggest selling points for this country. By reason of its special position, different standards applied to it in terms of impartiality than applied to other news organisations. It therefore followed that different standards applied to its journalists as well. It was in that context, that he had referred to BBC journalists

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who wrote for national papers. Asked to explain the different standards relating to impartiality which applied to the BBC but seemingly not to other broadcasters, the PMOS said that rules of impartiality applied in equal measure to other broadcast organisations too. His point was that given the size and presence on the world broadcast stage of the BBC, the issue of impartiality was even more important for the BBC than it was for others.

Asked if the Prime Minister was aware of the high-stakes game he was playing given the last time we had 'pushed the nuclear button' with a media organisation (re: the PCC, Spectator and Mail on Sunday) Downing Street had ended up with 'egg all over its face', the PMOS said that what we were aware of was that a highly damaging and untrue allegation had been made, based on one anonymous source, which had questioned the integrity of the Government on a very important international issue. We had tried to set the record straight within an hour of the allegation first being made, but we had failed to convince the BBC that what they had said was wrong, despite the backing of the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, the Chairman of the JIC, the intelligence and security co-ordinator and the heads of the intelligence agencies.

Asked the point of writing the letter to Mr Sambrook when the BBC was likely to maintain that it stood by its story and would refuse to answer what Downing Street would call the 'processology' questions that had been put, the PMOS said that the letter illustrated the difficulty we had in understanding why the BBC had not checked the story with us in the first place. Was that normal BBC practice, especially in relation to such a serious matter and allegation? The letter also asked for an explanation as to why, when we had made it clear that our denial of the story was supported by the Chairman of the JIC, the BBC had persisted in running the story. Put to him that when he had been a BBC journalist he would not have bothered to ring up Downing Street to ask them to deny an allegation that they had done something wrong, the PMOS said he would reject the suggestion in the strongest possible terms. When he had been a BBC journalist, he would not have run a story of such serious consequence on the basis of one source.

Asked if he could give a guarantee to the BBC that Downing Street would not take punitive action by refusing to put up Ministers for interview for example, the PMOS said that this was not about petty manoeuvring or petty actions. It was much more than that. He could not emphasise enough the seriousness of the allegation that had been made, the seriousness with which we had refuted it and the seriousness of our efforts to convince the BBC of our view. Asked if he was

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speaking on behalf of the Prime Minister, Alastair Campbell or himself, the PMOS said that he was the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman. As the Prime Minister had made clear, the allegation was untrue. That view had been echoed by the entire Cabinet this morning. Asked to explain why, if we were not into petty actions, the Prime Minister had appeared to snub the BBC during his press conference with President Putin this afternoon by inviting ITN, Sky and the Washington Post to pose questions, the PMOS said that no one had a right by nature of their organisation to ask a question. Unfortunately, there had been time pressures this afternoon so the number of questions had had to be limited. Put to him that, according to convention, a question was taken by each of the national broadcasters and that it was surely not coincidental that the BBC had been ignored in favour of the Washington Post which was a foreign newspaper, the PMOS said he was not aware that when Moses came down from the mount, one of the rules was that he had had to take a question from the BBC. Put to him that it was 'quite extraordinary' for an American newspaper to be invited to ask a question instead of a host broadcasting organisation, the PMOS said everyone would agree that the correspondent on the Washington Post was a highly respected journalist, and as anyone who had been listening this afternoon would recognise, he had asked a very serious, hard-headed question which had been worth answering. Put to him that the Sky correspondent had actually asked the Prime Minister if he wanted to take a question from the BBC but that the Prime Minister had simply turned his back and walked off, the PMOS repeated that time had been short and the cars were waiting for the Prime Minister and President. No snub had been intended.

In answer to further questions, the PMOS said that the way for the issue to be resolved was for the BBC to do what we had done in relation to the second document where we had put up our hand, admitted a mistake had been made and apologised for it. We had faced a lot of criticism for that error, some of it justified, some of it not. Yet, within twenty four hours of it coming to light, we had been honest enough to admit openly that there had been a mistake and that lessons had been learned.

Asked to give a guarantee that this whole affair would not affect the commercial and editorial freedoms of the BBC contained in the Communications Bill, the PMOS said he could give a categorical guarantee that that would not happen.

Asked how many letters Alastair Campbell had written to the BBC about this matter, the PMOS said that he hadn't counted them but he had seen the file - and it was very thick.

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