

Simon Milner-SEC

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GBCW

From: Gavyn Davies  
Sent: 27 June 2003 11:52  
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Subject: The Campbell Row

Dear Governors

I thought that you might like a quick up-date on the row which Alastair Campbell has caused in the last two days about the BBC's Iraq coverage. This has not been a pleasant couple of days, as you may well imagine!

Stripped of all the surrounding rhetoric, Campbell has made two separate accusations against the BBC. These are that:

1. The BBC's overall coverage of the war was biased against the government, and was tilted in favour of those who opposed the war. During the conflict itself, the BBC over-emphasised stories which suggested that the war was going badly. Following the success of the military campaign, the BBC then attempted to show that the Prime Minister had taken the nation into the war on false pretences.

2. The BBC, mainly in the guise of Andrew Gilligan, has accused No 10 of "sexing up" the first dossier on Iraqi weapons published last year. This is a lie by the BBC and by Andrew Gilligan. By repeating these stories, the BBC is in effect accusing the Prime Minister and others of lying.

These two accusations are currently being handled by Greg, Richard Sambrook and others in the management team. I have been in close contact with them to ensure that they are handling the matter appropriately, while leaving room for the Governors to adjudicate on the matter later if necessary.

In my mind, the two accusations need to be viewed separately from the Governors' point of view. The first is an accusation of general bias. We have already in effect refuted this claim in our conclusions about the war coverage in recent board meetings, and in the Annual Report. I therefore feel comfortable in saying that the Governors have already rejected this blanket assault on the BBC's impartiality.

On the second accusation, the Governors have not formed a specific opinion. In the first instance, it is up to management to reply to the critique as they see fit. I have told Greg and Richard to take great care to ensure that in any reply they give, they can completely substantiate everything they say, and must not justify the BBC's earlier actions unless they are on firm ground. They fully accept this, and are aware that a subsequent complaint by Campbell, or a general enquiry, could result in the Governors forming a judgment on whether they have acted appropriately. I am very optimistic that they will indeed act appropriately, but I am also aware that I need, on your behalf, to keep some distance from this at the present time.

I believe that Greg and Richard are likely to reply to Campbell today. I will send you their reply as soon as it is available.

No 10 is currently launching a full frontal assault against the BBC's impartiality and independence. I hope you will agree that the big picture indicates that the Governors must reject this attempt to bully the BBC. However, we must leave some room for reaching an independent judgment on the behaviour of the news division, should this become necessary at a later date.

Please ring or e-mail me if you would like to do so on any aspect of this matter.

Best wishes

Gavyn

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