

Campbell accuses BBC of lying

By Philip Webster
and David Charter

ALASTAIR CAMPBELL unleashed an extraordinary onslaught on the BBC yesterday for lying, bad journalism and having a hidden agenda against the war with Iraq. Tony Blair's communications director turned a rare public appearance intended to defend government handling of Iraq intelligence into a ferocious attack that started the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.

He said that he and Tony Blair had demanded an apology — and would go on demanding it — over persistent BBC reports suggesting that the Government had asked the intelligence services to "sex up" their report last September on the threat posed by Iraq's weapons — particularly by suggesting that they could be deployed at 45 minutes notice.

Mr Campbell's appearance came after the Commons voted in sympathy for the families of the six British soldiers killed in Iraq. Anticipating that the tragedy would prompt fresh criticism of the war, the Prime Minister said that going to war was the right thing for the country, the region and the world.

Throughout the session Mr Campbell returned to the essential official intelligence dossier whenever he could in a clear attempt to move attention away from the so-called "doxy dossier" drawn up by a communications group under his command. He admitted mistakes over the second paper, described as a "notelet" by Jack Straw, and said that he wished it had never been published. He regretted that it contained material from an article by a Californian student without attribution.

Conservative MPs seized on his admission in a statement to the committee that he had been involved in making "presentational" amendments to the official dossier and had made "dramatic suggestions" as it evolved. Sir John Stanley, a former Tory defence minister, said that this seriously compromised the integrity of future documents from the Joint Intelligence Committee.

The BBC said last night: "We do not feel the BBC has anything to apologise for."

It regretted that Mr Campbell had chosen to accuse it of lying. "We have always been clear in our reporting. Our senior and credible source told us that he and others in the intelligence community were unhappy that real intelligence based on a single source was given undue prominence in the dossier of September 2002."

The statement added: "It remains unclear why

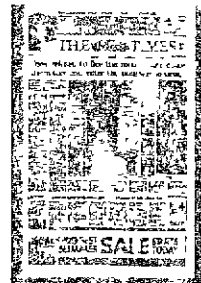
the assertion that Iraq weapons of mass destruction could be ready within 45 minutes, based on a single source, was given such prominence."

In what was generally a controlled performance, Mr Campbell became passionate whenever the BBC was mentioned.

"I simply say in relation to the BBC story — it is a lie," he said, adding that in the run up to the conflict "there was an agenda in large parts of the BBC... there was a disproportionate focus upon the dissent, the opposition to our position."

"In the conflict itself the prism that many were creating within the BBC was one... it's all going wrong — and what is happening now, the conflict not having led to the Middle East going up in flames, to us getting bogged down for month 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."

Earlier Sir John, the MP for Tonbridge and Malling, accused him of "a very grave failure of briefing the Prime Minister" which led to Mr Blair inadvertently misleading the House about the second dossier. Mr Campbell retorted: "That is a very, very grave charge and it is one I must act."



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