



10 DOWNING STREET

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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.

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?
- Why had the BBC's journalist not checked the story with us before broadcast? Was this now normal BBC practice for all stories?

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