

- 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 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 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 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 'Minecor', was a routine exercise. He