

My statement

Since the death of Dr. David Kelly, and the announcement of the Hutton Inquiry, my public and private view has been that the family should be left to grieve and the Inquiry left to complete its investigation.

Despite the continuing media focus on these issues and the many demands for briefings that we have faced, we have sought to keep briefing to a minimum in accordance with the Prime Minister's wishes.

I deeply regret, therefore, that what I thought was a private conversation with a journalist last week has led to further public controversy.

That was not my intention, nor, most emphatically, was I signalling a government strategy aimed at discrediting Dr. Kelly, as I have explained to the Deputy Prime Minister.

What I was trying to do, at the request of several journalists, was to outline the questions facing all parties that the Hutton inquiry would have to address, but to do so in a way that made it clear that it was for the inquiry to reach its judgement on the conflicting evidence before it, not me, or the government.

It was in that context that the phrase "Walter Mitty" was used, but it was meant as one of several questions facing all parties, not as a definitive statement of my view, or that of the government. We were discussing questions, not answers.

I now recognize that even that limited form of communication was a mistake, given the current climate.

I, therefore, unreservedly apologize to Dr Kelly's widow and her family for having intruded on their grief.

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