

Questioned as to whether Geoff Hoon had written his letter to the BBC in green ink given Downing Street's apparent obsession with the whole issue, the PMOS said that on the day Mr Gilligan had made his charge, people had said that the allegation went right to heart of the integrity of the Government. The claim was the most serious that could be made against any Government. We therefore hoped that it had not been made lightly or falsely and that the claims made about the status of the person who had made the charge were correct. If not, it was surely the duty of any journalist, particularly a public service broadcaster, to make it clear that a mistake had been made. We recognised that people were bored with this story. So were we. However, because such a serious allegation had been made and because, in the end, it all boiled down to journalistic standards, it was clearly important for the record to be set straight.

Asked why the news that someone had come forward had been kept under wraps by the MoD for five days, the PMOS said that the MoD had wanted to make sure that the person was treated properly in accordance with MoD personnel procedures. We had also wanted to be certain that we were on sure ground. Consequently, we believed the timescale had been right. It had been suggested cynically last night that we had delayed the announcement until 6.03pm in order to get the foundation hospital vote out of the way. That was completely untrue. The real reason for the delay was because the person concerned had been travelling on a motorway and had wanted to get to a service station so that the MoD could read out the statement to him and make sure that he was happy with it. We hoped that gave some indication of the care with which we had approached this issue so as to ensure that the proper procedures had been followed and that we were not saying anything which we could not stand up. Put to him that the service station story did not explain why the news of the person's existence had been delayed for five days, the PMOS said that the person had been closely involved all the way through with the preparation of the statement. It had been only right that he should have had the final version read out to him. This was an indication of the care the MoD had taken in approaching this matter.

Asked to respond to reports that the person had not come forward voluntarily but had been reported to a line manager by a colleague who had seen him reading Mr Gilligan's stories in the papers with rather too much interest, the PMOS said that as he understood it, the person had come forward voluntarily. He had no intention of getting drawn into the precise circumstances in which he had decided to come forward. That was entirely a matter for the person himself.

Asked if the person who had come forward was a man, the PMOS said that journalists had a 50% chance of being right. Asked whether he had been suspended from his job, the PMOS declined to get into MoD personnel matters. Put to him that the person did not work for the MoD, the PMOS said that the

CAB/1/0220