

Asked if the Government was accusing the BBC of deliberately lying, the PMOS said that he was not accusing the BBC of anything apart from broadcasting a story which we knew to be false - which even the BBC themselves were refusing to say was accurate. The only people who knew whether the BBC's source was the same person as the one named last night were people inside the BBC. For whatever reason, they had chosen not to say that this person was not their source. Evidently it was not a question of source protection, because the individual's identity was known. Put to him that the source had been identified by newspapers through a process of elimination, the PMOS pointed out that the person had come forward voluntarily. He queried how likely it was for a succession of Government officials to come forward and say that they had met Andrew Gilligan in a London hotel on May 22. The BBC had said that Mr Gilligan had met his source on May 22 in a central London hotel - the same day that the person who had come forward had met Mr Gilligan.

Asked if it was possible that the source had lied to the Government about what he had said to Mr Gilligan, the PMOS said that the question that mattered was whether this person was in a position to have made the judgements he was reported to have made in the light of the fact we knew he was not a senior intelligence source. Asked if our main bone of contention was really the seniority or otherwise of the person, the PMOS said that it was the issue which went to the very heart of this matter. He pointed out that the BBC Board of Governors themselves, defending producer guidelines on single sources, had talked about stories coming from senior intelligence sources being a case in point. The individual concerned had stated, for example, that he had made no comment on the role of Alastair Campbell with regard to the 45-minute issue and had explained that he was not involved in the process of drawing up the intelligence parts of the dossier. Now that this person's identity had been revealed, people could make up their own minds about him. Our main bone of contention was that the allegations were completely false.

Asked if the Government was intending to take further action against the BBC, the PMOS said that the BBC was a public service broadcaster. It was up to them to make their own decisions. Everyone in public service had to do what they thought was right. It wasn't up to us to tell the BBC what to do - that was a decision for them. There were, however, legitimate questions in terms of whether they stood by their view that their source was a senior intelligence source and how that affected the story if they were not prepared to do that. Asked to what lengths the Government would go to get these questions answered, the PMOS said that, unlike the BBC, he had to answer questions from the media. If the BBC decided not to comment, that was a decision for them to take. Asked if that meant that the Government would let the issue drop, the PMOS said that this issue was of fundamental importance because it was about trust and integrity.

CAB | 1 | 0227