

The corporation has already begun internal inquiries into whether it gave Downing Street sufficient time to respond to the allegations. It will also tighten rules on its journalists writing for newspapers after acknowledging that its case has been damaged by Mr Gilligan's article for a tabloid newspaper blaming Mr Campbell specifically for "sexing up" the dossier.

At the same time the BBC's Board of Governors is said to be investigating the "chain of command" which led to Mr Gilligan's report being broadcast on May 29.

The role of Mr Marsh, Mr Sambrook and Mr Dyke, as well as Steve Mitchell, the head of Radio 4, and Mark Damazar, the deputy director of news, are all coming under scrutiny.

Mr Sambrook and Mr Damazar yesterday toured the Today programme's newsroom in an apparent attempt to boost morale after reports in The Times that "heads will roll" over the row with Downing Street.

Mr Campbell yesterday insisted that he respected the BBC as an institution, indicating that his problem was with a minority of its journalists and executives.

He will press on with his attack against the corporation unless he receives an apology next week.

No 10 does not want a clash with the intelligence services, with Mr Campbell pointing out that their integrity has also been put on the line by the BBC's allegations.

In a sign of the Establishment closing ranks in recent days, Downing Street has highlighted the support that it has received during this row from senior Tory MPs.

They include Nicholas Soames, a former Armed Forces Minister, Sir Patrick Cormack, who resigned from the Foreign Affairs Committee last month partly because he thought an inquiry into intelligence material was inappropriate, and Robert Jackson, another former minister.

However, earlier comments by John Reid, the Health Secretary, suggesting that there are "rogue elements" within the intelligence services trying to undermine the Government are widely supported within the Labour Party.

In evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr Gilligan stated that his anonymous source was "one of the senior officials in charge of drafting up the dossier", and was "closely connected with the question of Iraq's WMD, easily sufficiently senior and credible to be worth reporting".

He also suggested that the source was an "expert in the field" who had a precise analysis of Iraq's chemical or biological weapons capability in the build-up to war.

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