

journalist for years.

Downing Street comes back, saying that the adviser works in the MoD but is paid by the Foreign Office. He has had personal contact with Mr Gilligan for months but came across him in previous years when conducting briefings for defence journalists on WMD.

One report yesterday said that the BBC had privately confirmed that Mr Gilligan had met his source on May 22. "How many more people could he have met in a Central London hotel who happened to have drawn up parts of the dossier?" a Downing Street spokesman said.

Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, has now written to the BBC naming Dr Kelly and challenging it to confirm or deny that he was the source.

MoD officials confirmed last night that it was Dr Kelly who had met Mr Gilligan, but only after The Times had put his name to them. They also said that at no stage had Dr Kelly been involved in drawing up the contested sections of the September dossier.

The BBC is reconciled to Dr Kelly's name being put in the public domain to undermine the credibility of its story, but will not - perhaps cannot - respond.

Mr Sambrook, the only man other than Mr Gilligan who knows the name of the source, said "The barrier is down and it is going to stay down. They are trying to engage us in a dance and we don't want to do that."

The BBC had hoped to draw a line under this extraordinary, tangled row after this week's report by the Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee which cleared Alastair Campbell of interference, though only by a majority verdict.

Lord Barnett, a former vice-chairman of the BBC, urged the corporation last night to apologise, and Robert Jackson, a senior Tory MP, wants the committee to reopen its inquiry to question Mr Gilligan again and to question Dr Kelly.

A number of theories are still possible. Mr Gilligan may have another source and when he met Dr Kelly he was simply trying to confirm his story. If the adviser is his informant, Mr Gilligan may have exaggerated or even been misled about his status. Dr Kelly may also have told Mr Gilligan everything which has been reported but, for good reason, be reluctant to admit it now.

Mr Campbell believes that Dr Kelly was the source and whatever was said over lunch does not really matter. "He did not know about intelligence or the 45-minute claim when the dossier was being drafted. Whatever gossip he may have heard...he was not party to these decisions, he is not a credible source," said a senior government figure last night.

The BBC now faces a test of nerve. Mr Dyke and Gavyn Davies, Chairman of the Board of Governors, have staked their credibility on the judgment of Mr Sambrook. He, in turn, has risked his job on the journalism of Mr Gilligan and the wisdom of Mark Damazar, the deputy director of news, Kevin Marsh, the Today programme editor, and Steve Mitchell, the head of Radio 4, all of whom are said to have been involved in the decision to broadcast the story.

Mr Campbell will not let go. But even if he has flushed out Mr Gilligan's source, the BBC has to blink again. He is trying to divide them, break their resistance, make them all fear for their futures. "I want to put the finger on the (Greg) Dyke for this," he was heard to growl recently.

Downing Street may yet have to be content with more junior scalps. The BBC is a deeply hierarchical organisation, and when things go wrong, it is usually a case of saying: "Deputy heads may have to roll."

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