

24 June 2003

IRAQ INVESTIGATION

Campbell faces WMD 'dodgy dossier' probe

By James Blitz and Krishna Guha

Alastair Campbell has agreed to submit to cross-examination by a Commons committee over two dossiers on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction in what amounted to an embarrassing U-turn by the prime minister's media chief.

Downing Street said Mr Campbell had reversed his decision, announced only last week, not to appear before the foreign affairs select committee investigating the government's motives for publishing the dossiers in the months leading up to the Iraq war.

Explaining the about turn, Downing Street cited a letter from Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, to the committee, which states that Mr Campbell will want to deny allegations that the second dossier - known as the "dodgy dossier" - and published in February - was produced by four people, three of whom worked for him at No 10.

"Mr Campbell will want to tell the committee that this was not the case and would like to explain the background," Mr Straw wrote in the letter.

He stated that Mr Campbell "has wanted to appear before the committee" all along, but that the government had long been opposed to ministerial special advisers appearing before select committees. But Mr Straw said Mr Campbell's appearance tomorrow would not set a precedent because he was chairman of the cross-

destruction in what amounted to an embarrassing U-turn by the prime minister's media chief.

Alastair Campbell had wanted to appear before the committee all along, Jack Straw stated

partmental Iraq communications group and thus had already appeared before a committee.

John Maples, a Conservative member of the committee, was pleased with the change. "I think without the presence of Alastair Campbell and his evidence, it was going to be extremely difficult to get to the bottom of several of these allegations," he told BBC radio. "His fingerprints have been all over the so-called dodgy dossier."

But Mr Maples indicated that much of the committee's questioning was likely to focus on the first dossier published by the government last September and outlining intelligence evidence on Mr Hussein's WMD. He said witnesses appearing before the committee last week alleged that Mr Campbell had requested changes to this dossier to make it more newsworthy.

The role of special advisers in government also drew criticism from a Whitehall watchdog yesterday.

The recruitment of outsiders - including known Labour party supporters - to sensitive official positions could undermine the impartiality of the civil service, it was claimed.

In her annual report, Baroness Prashar, the senior Civil Service Commissioner, said there were good reasons for bringing people with professional experience into government service.

But she added that there was a "real concern" that not enough attention was being paid to the impact this was having on the civil service ethos.

Baroness Prashar said "At a time of change there is a need more than ever to

ensure that core values are not eroded."

Although Baroness Prashar did not refer to individuals, her comments will focus fresh attention on appointments to press offices.

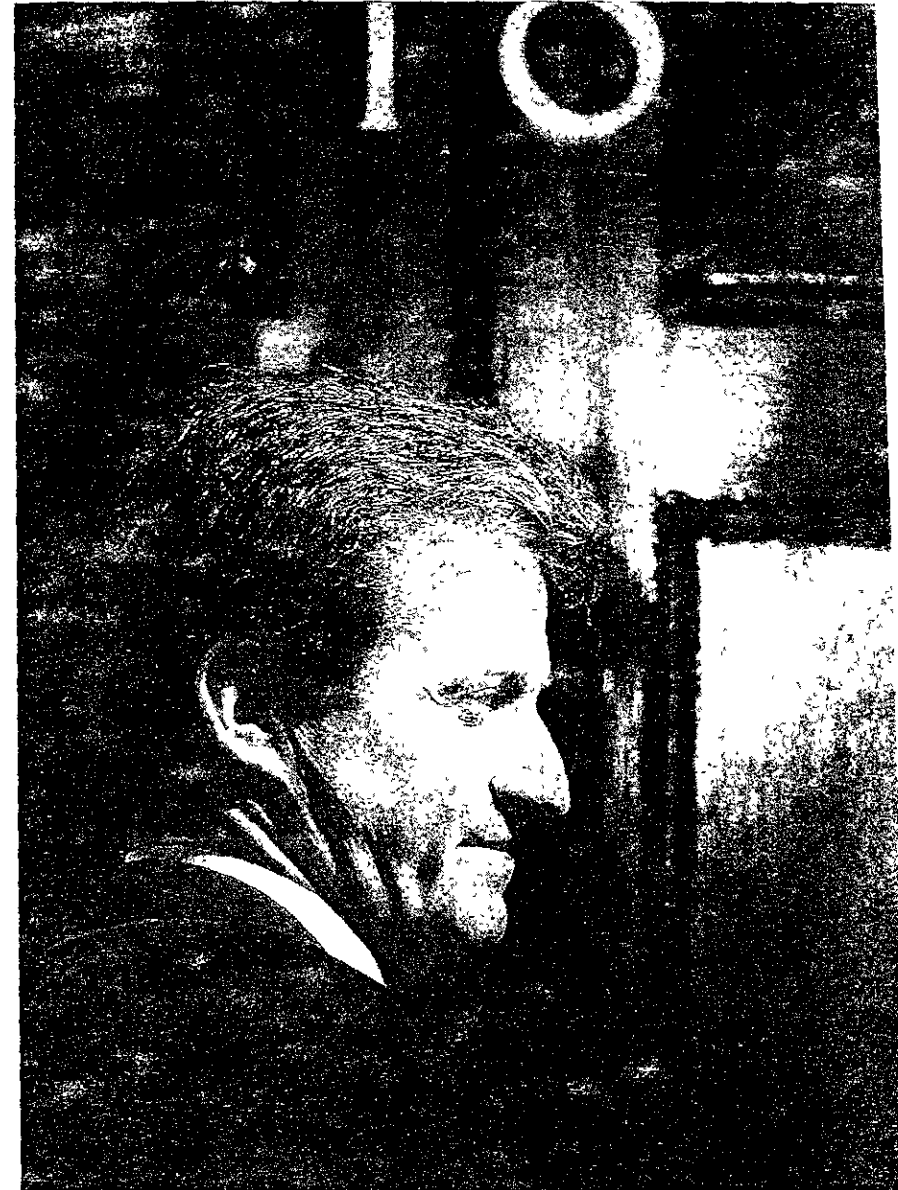
Since Labour came to power in 1997 a string of Labour supporting journalists and activists have been appointed to senior positions in the government communications service - including John Williams, head of communications at the foreign office, Sheree Dodd, head of communications at the Department of Trade and Industry and DJ Collins, head of press at the education department.

While their expertise is widely acknowledged, the appointments remain controversial.

In a separate submission Baroness Prashar said ministers should stop using special advisers to give off-the-record press briefings.

She warned that public trust was undermined when the government was seen to be putting out information for party political purposes.

She called for the government to put more effort into strengthening the civil service communications service instead.



High profile Alastair Campbell's U-turn means he will face a Commons committee tomorrow

Re 101

FIN 11/0034 18