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BBC refuses to back down in row over Iraq

Governors set broadcaster on collision course with government over bias claim

By Tim Burt and Jean Eaglesham

The BBC last night set itself on a collision course with the government by rejecting Downing Street allegations of bias in the broadcaster's coverage of the Iraq war.

The BBC board of governors, after a two and a half hour emergency meeting, called on Alastair Campbell, the prime minister's communications director, to withdraw accusations that the corporation unfairly accused the government of "sexing up" the case for war.

In a statement, described by one governor as "about as far from an apology as it's possible to get", the governors said "The BBC's overall coverage of the war, and the political issues surrounding it, has been entirely impartial."

Tony Blair, however, is confident that a Commons inquiry report today will partly vindicate Downing Street and maintain pressure on the BBC for suggesting that the intelligence services were uneasy about claims that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes of an invasion.

was "as serious an attack on my integrity as there could possibly be".

The BBC's 12 governors, however, endorsed the corporation's coverage after briefings from Greg Dyke, director general, and Richard Sambrook, head of News.

Mr Dyke told governors that Downing Street was threatening the BBC's independence and could put its public service charter at risk. A colleague said "Greg's position is that unless we take these kind of stands the charter is not worth anything."

Downing Street last night claimed the BBC had failed to address the central issue over so-called "dodgy dossiers", adding it was "saddened that the BBC continues to defend the indefensible".

Today's report by the Commons foreign affairs committee is unlikely to settle the row. The MPs are expected to say there is no evidence to show that Mr Campbell ordered the inclusion of the "45-minute claim" in a government dossier issued in September.

But the report will not entirely back the government's line

the inquiry lacked sufficient evidence to make a definitive judgment on BBC claims. The MPs are also expected to lambast Downing Street over the second "dodgy dossier" it issued in February, quoting, with approval, the admission by Jack Straw the foreign secretary, that the government made a "complete Horlicks" of it.

Downing Street said yesterday "We will continue to press for the BBC to recognise what is patently obvious - there is no evidence to support their claims."

The prime minister is taking a hardline stance in a week designed to relaunch the government after a few months that he admits were "a bit ragged".

The BBC urged Mr Campbell to withdraw bias claims. But governors admitted the *Today* programme should have kept better records of dealings with the Ministry of Defence.

The government, meanwhile, insisted it would not use its power to decide the BBC's future funding when the charter expires in 2006 to force an apology.

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