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ON POLITICS

Dossier row is a question of trust

Downing Street is not giving up. It will not surrender in the fight with the BBC over allegations that the prime minister's staff doctored last September's dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The public are bored by it. MPs complain that the real issue - why the coalition has not found Iraq's weapons of mass destruction - is sidelined. But Mr Blair knows this BBC row runs to the heart of the question of whether people trust New Labour.

At the centre of attention is Andrew Gilligan, defence correspondent for the *Today* programme. On May 29, the same day that Tony Blair was paying a one-day visit to British troops in Basra, he broadcast that an unnamed official told him the September dossier "was transformed in the week before it was published to make it sexier".

The unnamed official said "The classic example was the statement that weapons of mass destruction were ready for use within 45 minutes." Mr Gilligan told listeners in his own words that "the transformation took place at the behest of Downing Street". In a Mail on Sunday article, he later reported that the official who made the change was Alastair Campbell, Mr Blair's media chief.

Mr Campbell says the story is a lie. The BBC reports that it stands by Mr Gilligan's reporting of his source, so Downing Street is seeking to establish the

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... yesterday, the government gave the BBC the name of an official who met Mr Gilligan at a central London hotel on May 22. This may well have been Mr Gilligan's source. The Daily Telegraph reported yesterday that the BBC had privately confirmed that May 22 was the same day on which Mr Gilligan met what he recently called the "specific source for this specific story, which is single-source".

But the government says this official is not "one of the senior officials in charge of drawing up the dossier" as Mr Gilligan reported. And the official has stated that he made no comment at the May 22 meeting about the role played by Mr Campbell.

Downing Street is not innocent. Serious questions have been raised about a claim in the September dossier that Iraq was seeking to import uranium from Africa. Mr Blair's officials are happy to talk about the BBC row, but when asked about the uranium claim they stonewall, refusing to reveal the information on which it is based.

The Gilligan story cannot be ignored. Ian Duncan Smith is turning "trust in Blair" into a core political issue for the next election ("you cannot believe a single word he says"). Mr Gilligan's story eroded a lot of trust.

Inside the BBC, people know whether the Ministry of Defence official and Mr Gilligan's unnamed source are one and the same person. And they will know in their consciences anyway – whether it was right for this story to undermine Mr Blair in the way it did.

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