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EXTRACTS OF EVIDENCE GIVEN BY  
ALASTAIR CAMPBELL TO THE ISC

17 JULY 2003

**JOYCE QUIN:** Following on from the conclusions to all this – despite the problems that have arisen actually ultimately more sensible to be more open with the public and perhaps more relevant for this discussion with the press as possible, on intelligence matters.

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** I think this is a really difficult one and I think, the trouble is, (and this is why I sometimes get angry with our media is that they operate it as a one-way street) so your committee, for example, is a huge development on what went before, even just a few years ago. And yet, for example, when I allegedly stormed the *Channel 4 News Studio* to do an interview about the BBC's handling of this, you know, if you get a transcript of that interview and just hear Jon Snow describing your committee as 'the Prime Minister's personal appointment for a "hole in the corner"' operation. In other words unless it's transparency, completely and totally on their terms, which means 'everything we want to know, we should know, and what's more we should be the sole interpreters of it, then it doesn't count'. Now I actually think in relation to not just intelligence but in relation to a lot of things that government is involved in, freedom of information has to be a two-way street. There has to be an understanding on our part, that we should be as open and transparent as possible, but then there has to be sort of sense of responsibility about the way that these things are covered. And you know, the reason why I found this whole episode so awful in relation to the way that the media, and particularly the BBC have handled it, is actually the complete and total irresponsibility of the way that they've covered it. I mean let's be honest, one of the reasons I'm here and one of the reasons I was at the FAC was because of one particular story that was completely and totally wrong, and they cannot bring themselves to admit well maybe just now and then we get things wrong. So we've had literally weeks where people like myself, people like John Scarlett, many others in senior positions in government have been doing nothing else but literally pick up the pieces from a story that was wrong. Now how you deal with that, I don't know, but I think there has to be some understanding within the media that there is a two-way street here. The openness, the greater openness, the greater access, the greater transparency has got to be matched by a sense of responsibility about how they cover these issues.

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**JOYCE QUIN:** Has the Foreign Affairs Committee itself rather misunderstood the way that these things are done as well, I mean in paragraph 13 of it's report it says that, no it's not para 13 it's 12, that 'it was wrong for Alastair Campbell or any Special Adviser to have chaired a meeting on an intelligence matter and we recommend that this practice should cease', is this actually a mis-understanding of the CIC?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Well I think I would argue that those meetings were not meetings "on intelligence issues". They were meetings on presentational issues at which intelligence experts were present. So yes, I think they have slightly mis-understood that point. Look I spend most of my time trying to avoid paper coming over my desk. I do not go around looking for more and more paper to read and I'm very conscious because, as I say, I think the intelligence agencies do understand how important this interface with this sort of public communication is. But one of the reasons why, and again I've said this in evidence to the FAC, right from the word go when I became involved in the process in relation to the September dossier I made clear and the word went round the system, you know, this is John Scarlett's operation. Nothing should be published that they are not 100% happy with, because otherwise the creditability of a document like that (I mean I'm well aware of how we are seen in parts of the media and parts of the political process, I'm not without some self-knowledge, and self-awareness) and I think it was hugely important that that was how this was seen, and that was how we handled it. That is why in relation to the sorts of comments that I made, and the points that I made, I was very conscious of the need for this to be their work. So I wasn't sitting there at this meeting with, you know, lots of members of the intelligence agencies with their folders on this and their files on that, saying 'well can we have this, and can we have that?' it just didn't work like that. It was much more that they were there because they had an expertise in the field on an issue which was the most important public communication issue at that point. So I chaired that group, but it wasn't an intelligence group. .(section ends)

**ALAN HOWARTH:** Can we just go back to the two-way street and you, of all people, about the media and appealing to their sense of responsibility is a bit aspirational and if material was going to be published in either dossier it was liable to be hi-jacked and trivialised and personalised and restricted to these sort of exploitations that we've seen. Did you consider, I mean I fully appreciate that the need for the government to use the best information it can, in the best ways it can to influence public opinion, but did you appreciate the dangers that there would

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be, that can arise from publication which affects the standing of the Agencies, their reputations, and, even more importantly, affects the way in which they can work, I mean I think we've entered a new world since the publication of the September 24<sup>th</sup> dossier and the public will expect similar publication next time we tragically we have a Bali or an Iraq conflict or whatever, but this does alter things, quite radically and fundamentally I think in terms of the world in which the Agencies have to operate. Was that consideration among the ones that you reflected on?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Yes, I mean just on the September dossier I always have tried to separate the two I know they have become sort of conflated probably, in the public mind, but the September dossier, if you remember, followed weeks of really high-profile debate about Iraq in which the Prime Minister was constantly being reduced to explain his concern by saying, 'you know this stuff comes over my desk the whole time and it really worries me and if I could share it with people they would share my concern and dah, de, dah de dah'. Now I think you're right, I don't think it's the dossier that took us into a new age. I think we are in that new age, whether we like it or not. You know, sometimes we do and a lot of times we don't, but I think that is the world that we are in. It is a world where sadly the word of public figures is not always taken at face value. It is a world where the automatic respect, if you like, that was given to certain bodies and institutions is no longer there. Therefore the demands are far greater. Now another point that you raise about the potential impact on the effectiveness and the standing of the Agencies, that is certainly something that was discussed and taken into account. And it's why, and I say right the way through from the Prime Minister down, on the political side of things, if you like, there was an absolute understanding that this had to be their operation, seen to be their operation and it's why ultimately the February thing, which you know has been as damaging as it has, because that is where, I think in relation to the September dossier, I think that document does, despite the BBC's best efforts, and despite that story in May that was so wrong, I still think actually it stands the test of time and I think it is a very strong thorough piece of work, and it's a pity that the other one which wasn't as strong a piece of work, has, in a sense, been allowed to contaminate the general. But I think they're serious questions that you raise, I think we are conscious of them and I think actually we did handle pretty well

**ALAN HOWARTH:** One of the things that struck me, reading through all this stuff, and listening to all our witnesses is that there were very many stages and some rather large leaps in the whole sequence of processes from the continuous and tentative suggestiveness of original intelligence material, raw material, through to assessment, and I'm quite struck by the

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confidence, the courage in a way, of the underlings who produce this sort of extremely patterned – if you wish – assessment out of this disseminated material and then a further large leap to, as it were, a language of political leader seeking to rally people to a cause, if you like, in the way the Prime Minister was in an extent seeking to do in the foreword to the September 24<sup>th</sup> dossier and then a further large leap to newspaper style reportings, storylines on all of this, do you think there was a problem that the September 24<sup>th</sup> dossier, particularly the Prime Minister's foreword was trying to do too much altogether?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** No I don't and again I think these things are often viewed through a post-facto prism that isn't necessarily there at the time. It was, if you go back, at the time, some of those parts of the media who are now saying that there was this massive prominence given to the forty-five minutes, well there's actually nothing much new here, and it's very dry and it's actually quite dull considering, and dah de dah de dah, and I don't think the Prime Minister's foreword was inconsistent with the body of the document and I think the reason why it was felt important that he had a forward was the fact that he was to be presenting it to Parliament. Also I'm not sure it was set at that stage that he was, as it were, rallying to a cause, I think ultimately once, I think, he had reached the view and the government had reached the view that it was unlikely that Iraq was going to co-operate with the UN properly and disarm peacefully, but at that stage I think the September dossier was seen very much as actually trying to get as much of the information out into the public domain. I don't think at that stage he was, as it were, rallying to a cause. It's routinely described now, you know, as the document that "made the case for war" I don't think that's how we saw it at the time.

**ALAN BEITH:** Were you reading JIC papers at the time?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** No.

**ALAN BEITH:** You didn't seem them at all?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** No. Post-September 10<sup>th</sup> when I first saw the dossier, the draft of this John Scarlett dossier, I'd have been at meetings at which they were, the JIC assessments as it were, were there and being discussed but I'm not routinely sent JIC assessments.

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**ALAN BEITH:** So the picture you had of the intelligence material and judgements that were available to you in the form of material that you were responsible for, seen through, that picture was given to you by inferences and John Scarlett

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Yes.

**ALAN BEITH:** In digested form?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Yes.

**ALAN BEITH:** Either as material what was said in the meetings?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Yes.

**ALAN BEITH:** So you couldn't really be accused of even unconsciously looking in the material for those things which strengthened the public appreciation of the Prime Minister's view and this is you doing, as I understand it, that this was a very serious threat, and beginning to understand, somehow why you took it so seriously.

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Yes In a sense the sort of strategic starting point for this was the Prime Minister constantly saying in public, you know, 'oh I see this stuff, this is pretty worrying, the worries are getting greater not lesser' but in relation to my job within that I would rely entirely on John Scarlett and the Agencies to decide what, if anything, they thought I should see

**ALAN BEITH:** Were you aware of the potential difficulty around the Al Qa'ida issue given that, and I think it's probably the point about why intelligence does not input any significant Al Qa'ida link with the Saddam regime, there are other aspects that matter. Were you conscious of a problem, because if that got a bit out of hand you'd finish up with a story that you'd have to correct later, if there was over-interpretation, would it make people think that September 11<sup>th</sup>, Al Qa'ida and all the rest was deeply bound up in all this.

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** I, you see again I don't, it's often said that we over-sold that point, I don't think, I think we were very conscious of pulling the other way but equally there was a communications tension with part of the American debate which I think we had to be conscious

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of as well. You were in a sense trying to avoid unnecessary fissures between our own and the American positions, some of them did come down to presentational issues, but I think the Americans probably made more of that in public than we did.

**ALAN BEITH:** Were you aware at the time of what the Americans were putting out ie counter-parts?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Yes..... / (Section ends)

**KEVIN BARRON:** Now your specific role, you saw the JIC reports that led to the September dossier?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** No, not .

**KEVIN BARRON:** Well when you gave evidence to the FAC in relation to the first dossier which I assume you mean September, in general terms you said 'quite clearly I'm not sure how much or how little of this I'm supposed to divulge but I certainly saw the Joint Intelligence Committee assessments on which the September report was based'.

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Yes.

**ALAN BEITH:** Was that before or after the September report?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** After, it could only have been after.

**KEVIN BARRON:** I understand

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** The point I'm making about that is that the first I saw the, I mean again bear in mind why I was at the FAC, it was because I had been accused of inserting false intelligence into the dossier. Once I was out there I had obviously been through some pretty heavy detail, I was certainly at meetings post-September 10<sup>th</sup> where the assessments were there, but I did not receive the assessments in advance.

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**KEVIN BARRON:** So when you used the phrase of 'months and months of detailed work with the intelligence agencies' you don't say that you as an individual but, but what was your role in this, did you discuss with them the shape of the September dossier at all?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Well I had, once, [if you'd rung me] about August where there was just this sort of sense of things building up and boiling up and Vice President Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld were both making speeches and there was a real sense that this thing was about to take off and the Prime Minister came back and said, look you know we've, the work on this dossier was accelerated, I had I think two meetings with John Scarlett and some of his colleagues early September and that was to agree the process by which the thing was going to be produced, the overall structure, but in terms of the editorial, that was...

**KEVIN BARRON:** The contents were nothing to do with you?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** No, beyond the drafting points that are now in the public domain. ... /(Section ends)

**GAVIN STRANG:** That brings me to the question I really wanted to, and that is, I mean we ought to look fundamentally, it seems to me again at this question of whether in fact this is the right road it may have been right at the time to release intelligence material but it's a question of whether in fact there is another case for say tempting as it is it's better not to use intelligence this way, obviously it's all available including telecommunications and soon but not to actually present, for example in the way that we do, particularly with the September dossier in the long run

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** I can see why people might think, I just think going back to Alan Howarth's point I think, I just fear that we are in different era. I think it's very difficult to do that and bear in mind, if you take the recent conflict where you had situations where material that was being gathered by Special Forces and what have you out in Iraq who were suddenly being stumbled upon by TV crews, and I think it's quite a difficult thing to deal with this. So you find yourself if you have a sort of blanket view- right intelligence kind of separate from any other part of the public domain, - I think it would be very difficult to put the 'genie back in the bottle'.

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**KEVIN BARRON:** But if the press are irresponsible in their handling of it, they feel it's all one way anyway as you described earlier, they want more and more and more and they will use it or not use as they think fit, you know, isn't there an issue there about whether or not that what you are going to end up doing is doing internal damage to the intelligence agencies and so that they can't function, and you know, if you are just satisfying, or can't satisfy the journalist's need for 24-hour media, isn't there something that should say 'well maybe we should go back to ...'

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** No, I don't think something like the September dossier was being done as it were for the media, I think it was being done for the public. Now my point is that, subsequent to that, I think in relation to the public, I think large parts of the public in the last few weeks, will just have thought 'what on earth's going on, I don't understand all this, why are they still blabbering on about this?' But, I still think that was a good proper exercise and it was the right thing to do, I think it was a really important piece of public communication. I think, this point about the way the media treat these things, I honestly don't have the answers to this, it's one of the reasons why I ultimately felt that the FAC, I think there was a really important point that had to be made, and has to be addressed in relation to public confidence in institutions and the political process and what have you. If you have a situation where lies can be told and then there is no sense of redress or accountability in relation to the most important media organisation in the world, which is pretty much, what the BBC is, then I think we are in a really bad place. Now I don't know how you address that.

**KEVIN BARRON:** I was going to say is that for regulation or is that.. ?

**ANN TAYLOR:** I don't know, but it's not for this meeting, I don't think of this, it's a point, but I don't think we are going to resolve it.

**KEVIN BARRON:** The agencies behind this have got something to lose haven't they? I mean their sources are potentially are their life tools?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** I think there are incredible double standards that journalists can say - oh fundamental principles about the protection of their sources and all the rest of it - when it's some bloke who has whispered a load of old nonsense in a pub, compared to blokes who are literally risking their lives as if it's the same thing. I think with the public, I think they get it, the

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public completely understand this, I think they understand why it's important, but it's difficult and I think, and it's a point I made to the FAC and maybe it isn't for us here but I think there's a real thing going on at the moment about this sort of systematic corrosive attack upon politicians and the political process, I think it's bad news

**LORD ARCHER:** I'd like to explore the forty-five minutes business, if I may? But obviously it is difficult at this stage to distinguish in one's mind what you knew at the time with hindsight, but it seems clear now that the intelligence relating to this was about tactical battlefield weapons, particularly chemical and biological weapons, useable in a fairly confined space, very nasty things with limited capacity. If you aren't very careful when you talk about this publicly, people who aren't accustomed to talking about these matters could very easily think that it relates to something very much bigger, major nuclear attacks on cities. The September dossier is perfectly clear that it's talking about biological and chemical weapons but doesn't actually say, or at least if it does it doesn't say it very specifically, we're talking about weapons on a battlefield. First of all is that a distinction which you appreciated at the time when the dossier was published?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** To be honest I can't remember exactly what I thought about it in the context that I saw it at the time, I thought it was interesting, certainly, I think I did get the difference and I don't think it was oversold within the dossier as a whole, I mean people made reference to this fact that this has been mentioned three or four times, well all sorts of issues are mentioned three or four or five or six times in what is a very detailed piece of work and again I think if you go and look at the Prime Minister's statement to the House, when Parliament was recalled and the dossier was published. I don't think it's something that as it were he was straining at the leash to really oversell.

**LORD ARCHER:** That isn't what I'm putting to you, whether it was oversell, we would applaud you on that but it's the facts that are troubling me at the moment. To sell one, reading the dossier without a background knowledge of these matters they could easily take the view, couldn't they, that they were being told about bombs raining down on major cities?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** But you could say that really about anything in which a member of the public is absorbing information that's being put out through Parliament, through the media, whichever way it might be, and unless they're expert there's the possibility that they'll mis-understand the point. That's why I think the issue of over or under selling or trying to put

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things in a straight and informative way is important, and as I say the whole approach of that dossier in terms of it's overall presentation, it's tone, you know right down to the sort of typeface of the front cover of the rest of it, was to be a sober piece of work and I would defend it on that basis.

**LORD ARCHER:** I understand, your expertise is precisely trying to avoid these misunderstandings isn't it? That's your responsibility.

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** When the dossier was first sent to me on the 10<sup>th</sup> September it was certainly, asking me to read it, as it were, from the presentational stand point, and that's why as I say I think the overall tone of it, I was looking for inconsistencies in the text, I was looking for things where one point is described in the text in a way that it could be interpreted in one way and elsewhere in another way, I was looking for issues that could lead to threads being exposed that you didn't necessarily, you weren't confident about where they might lead to, and that sort of thing, but that's what I do but in the end it was a pretty dry piece of work and therefore things are always liable to mis-interpretation and mis-understanding but I don't think the responsibility for that can necessarily be laid at our door.

**LORD ARCHER:** I understand that if you had to look at every possible detail with every possible option of construction, you'd have an impossible job, but this was a fairly major one wasn't it, looking back now, do you think that distinction might somehow have made clear to the reading public?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** What that it only applies to CBW.

**LORD ARCHER:** Yes that you were not talking about major nuclear attacks, we are talking about a battlefield situation

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Again I think you can go back and look at the coverage at the time and was it really, was it that huge, was taken as being the central part of the argument, I don't think it was.

**LORD ARCHER:** Isn't the whole point that the people who reported this in the press didn't make that distinction at all, because they probably never noticed it, never saw it as a distinction.

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**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** But they wouldn't, you see I think again if you go back to the totality of the government's communications at the time, and I can remember the Prime Minister saying on literally dozens of occasions 'look nobody is saying that Saddam Hussein is about to launch an attack on Peterborough' [I don't know why he always picked Peterborough!] and it was, so I think there may be other parts of the public discourse where that point was being made, but I'd have to go back and look at it, but it wasn't a point that I felt at the time had to be addressed in the way that you say.

**MICHAEL MATES:** I'm absolutely certain from what John Scarlett and others have said that you didn't interfere in any way with this and I hope the committee will say so in terms, as far as the body of it is concerned What about the foreword, did you draft that?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** The foreword, again the process is that it would normally be that there would be I, Jonathan Powell, others would have ideas and we'd probably have a discussion with the Prime Minister, on that one the Prime Minister was very 'hands on' in terms of what was produced and what was sent over to John Scarlett

**MICHAEL MATES:** But you played a part in that? Okay. There's one bit that worries me about it, and it's the statement 'what I believe the assessed intelligence has established beyond doubt is that Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological weapons' because the text doesn't actually say that, it says 'has continued to produce chemical and biological agents' and the Prime Minister has been at pains to say since that what we are going to find are 'programmes', this is what all the furore is about. With hindsight do you wish you hadn't used the word 'weapons' that you had used 'programmes' or 'agents', is that slightly overstating it?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** I don't think so. I think the Prime Minister, I know people make a really great play on what he said in the Commons the other day but I think the Prime Minister remains confident that there will be programmes and there will be products found by the Iraq Survey Group

**MICHAEL MATES:** Weapons?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Products.

**MICHAEL MATES:** There's a fourth word you see.

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** But you know, he believes that the Iraqi Survey Group are beginning to make progress and will continue to do so, but again I think, I wouldn't have seen that as misleading, based upon what was given, the foreword as it were based on the dossier.

**MICHAEL MATES:** Are you happy about the prominence in foreword of the forty-five minutes pulling that out from page 27 or whatever it was?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Yes.

**MICHAEL MATES:** It's caused you a lot of trouble!

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** Well again, sorry to keep banging on about it. It's caused us a lot of trouble because of the trouble it's been causing us which has been caused by a totally false allegation that's been made in relation to it. So there's not a lot we can do about that, I suspect if it hadn't been that it would have been something else.

**MICHAEL MATES:** But of itself, are you confident that we will find the weapons that could have been used in forty-five minutes? Probably not?

**ALASTAIR CAMPBELL:** That is a question above my pay-grade.

**MICHAEL MATES:** Yes, it's above mine too!