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**HEADLINE:** Why a meal has been made of a lunchtime chat

**BYLINE:** Tom Baldwin, Michael Evans and Andrew Pierce

**BODY:**

The BBC defence correspondent was carrying neither pen nor paper when he turned up at a London hotel for lunch with a "source of long standing". Andrew Gilligan had not expected to get a story and his notes of the conversation were made on a PalmPilot", a gadget not often associated with ground-breaking journalism.

The reports that he has filed on the basis of this single meeting have dominated the headlines for more than a month. Mr Gilligan quoted his source saying that Downing Street "sexed up" last September's dossier on Iraq. He alleged that Alastair Campbell forced the intelligence services to include claims that Saddam Hussein could deploy weapons of mass destruction (WMD) within 45 minutes, despite the Government's knowing that this information was probably wrong.

The ensuing row will have baffled and bored large sections of the public. Mr Campbell is, of course, terribly cross because the BBC refuses to back down despite its story's being denied by just about everyone -including the intelligence services -involved in writing that dossier. But voters probably trust the BBC before any politician, spin-doctor or spy -and this makes Mr Campbell even crosser.

So what really happened when Mr Gilligan entered that Central London hotel? He says that his lunch guest was a credible, senior figure in the intelligence community who helped to write the September dossier.

Richard Sambrook, the director of news, has been told the name, while the post held by this source is known also to Greg Dyke, the corporation's Director-General, and Kevin Marsh, the Editor of the Today programme on BBC Radio 4. They are said to have been reassured by this knowledge, with one executive boasting that disclosure of his identity would "transform the debate".

But No 10 is "99 per cent convinced" that Mr Gilligan's source was David Kelly, a government adviser who has come forward to admit that he had lunch with the BBC journalist in the Charing Cross Hotel on May 22, a week before the story was first broadcast.

Mr Gilligan has admitted relying on a single source for his report, whom he describes as someone he has known for years, an expert on weapons of mass destruction who helped to draft the September dossier.

Dr Kelly, who has been interviewed by Ministry of Defence officials for several days, did indeed help to draft part of the dossier, but only a section

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dealing with the history of UN inspections in Iraq. He is not a member of the intelligence services but a technical expert, having worked as a weapons inspector before moving to Whitehall three years ago

Crucially, Dr Kelly says that he did not see material on the "45 minutes" claim and was not involved in writing the intelligence sections of the dossier. And, he says, it was Mr Gilligan who asked him about why this information was included and replied only that it was "probably for impact"

The BBC claims that this is all a Downing Street "trick" to root out their source.

It says that the Government's description of Dr Kelly as working for the MoD and knowing Mr Gilligan for months does not match their source, who is employed elsewhere and has known the 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

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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 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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#### CORPORATION'S NAMES IN THE FRAME

Andrew Gilligan, defence correspondent for Radio 4's Today programme who first broadcast the "sexing up" allegations on the basis of a meeting with an anonymous source. He has given his notes of this meeting -made on a PalmPilot - and disclosed the identity of his informant to his bosses.

Kevin Marsh, Editor of the Today programme who decided to broadcast the report. He knows the job title of the source, but not the name. He also approved a newspaper article in which Mr Gilligan first alleged that Alastair Campbell was responsible for changing last September's dossier.

Steve Mitchell, the head of Radio 4, and Mark Damazar, the deputy director of BBC News. Both are thought to have been involved in the decision to go ahead with Mr Gilligan's report.

Richard Sambrook, director of BBC News. The only executive who knows the name of Mr Gilligan's source. He has told friends that "heads may roll" - including his own -if the story is proved to be wrong but has been prominent and vocal in the BBC's defence.

Greg Dyke, Director-General. Former Labour donor who sees this row as a test of his independence. His insistence last weekend that the corporation should not buckle to Downing Street "bullying" was a key factor in stabilising the wobbles of some senior executives.

Gavyn Davies, Chairman of the Board of Governors, another Labour supporter and a friend of Gordon Brown. He is incensed by Downing Street's claims that the BBC was biased in its coverage of the war.

The Governors: a collection of the great, the good and the simply worthy. Includes Lord Ryder of Wensum, a former Tory Chief Whip, and Dame Pauline Neville Jones, a former diplomat who once chaired the Joint Intelligence Committee. They have backed Mr Dyke and Mr Davies, but their statement last weekend significantly did not claim that the story was right, merely that the BBC had been right to broadcast it.

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