

The Thing

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The decision of the British government, led by prime minister Tony Blair, to support the United States's preparations to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was extremely controversial in the country. There was massive popular protest and bitter criticism in the press and broadcasting media.

The government actively tried to win public opinion to its argument that the Iraqi regime – through its remaining weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and active programmes to develop those weapons – was a clear and present danger to Britain as well as to its region.

In September 2002, the government published a dossier on Iraq's WMD. In a foreword, Tony Blair wrote: "What I believe the assessed intelligence has established beyond doubt is that Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological weapons, that he continues in his efforts to develop nuclear weapons."

Before, during and after the war of March-April 2003, the reliability and use of this "intelligence" (secret information) lay at the heart of debate about the war's justification, purpose and legality. The political atmosphere in Britain became more tense, public opinion more animated, media coverage more frenzied.

"What name to give such a government it is difficult to say. It is like nothing that ever was heard of before. It is neither a monarchy, an aristocracy, nor a democracy...Such is the government of England; such is the *thing* which has been able to bribe one half of Europe to oppress the other half." [William Cobbett, *Register* 33 (1818)]

One of the British government's most respected advisers on Iraq's WMD, an experienced weapons scientist who had worked with the United Nations to disarm Iraq during the 1990s, was the microbiologist David Kelly. As part of his job with the ministry of defence, he had regularly briefed journalists on an unattributable basis. On 22 May, he met and talked to a BBC radio journalist called Andrew Gilligan in a London hotel.

On 29 May, Andrew Gilligan alleged on the BBC's flagship morning radio programme that the British government knew that a key piece of intelligence information presented to the public in the September 2002 dossier – that Saddam possessed WMD that could be launched within 45 minutes – was false. Gilligan sourced this allegation to "one of the senior officials in charge of drawing up that dossier".

On 1 June, a newspaper hostile to the government published an article by Gilligan accusing Alastair Campbell, the prime minister's chief of communications, of "sexing up" (embellishing) the dossier.

Campbell expressed outrage at the accusation of deceit, and was publicly scathing in criticism of the BBC's coverage of the issue. Over the next month, both government officials and media engaged in strenuous efforts to identify the source of Gilligan's allegations.

David Kelly confided to his superiors that he had spoken to Gilligan, but disputed the latter's version of their conversation. Kelly's name gradually became known to senior government, civil service, and intelligence officials, and to BBC executives.

After his name entered the public domain, Kelly was interviewed on 15 July by the foreign affairs committee of the lower house of parliament. In a strained, televised encounter, he denied being the source of Andrew Gilligan's claim about Alastair Campbell's role in the September 2002 dossier.

"Their reactions are invariably ones of disbelief, dismay and, occasionally disgust... Their overwhelming view is that no press is as intrusive, offensive, quasi-pornographic, arrogant, inaccurate, salacious and unprincipled." [non-British journalism students at London's City University on the British press, quoted in Hugh Stephenson and Michael Bromley, eds., *Sex, Lies and Democracy: the press and the public* (1998)]

On 17 July, David Kelly left his home in the village of Southmoor, Oxfordshire to go for a walk. The next day his body was found, the cause of death loss of blood from a wound on his left wrist.

The government announced an independent public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding David Kelly's death. It was led by a senior judge, Lord (Brian) Hutton, and lasted from 1 August to 25 September 2003.

Hutton published his report on 28 January 2004. It substantially exonerated Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell, and senior civil service and intelligence officials from blame; it was severely critical of Andrew Gilligan, and of the BBC's management and editorial procedures.

After the Hutton report, the BBC's chairman (Gavyn Davies) and director-general (Greg Dyke) resigned, followed by Gilligan. Most newspapers, and a large section of British public opinion, remained censorious of Tony Blair's government, and regarded the report as a "whitewash" of its role.

As the public argument continued, the British government announced a further inquiry into the pre-war use of intelligence about Saddam's WMD. Its chair is Lord (Robin) Butler, formerly head of the civil service and adviser to several prime ministers.

Sources:

- The [Hutton Inquiry](#) [1] website
- BBC in-depth [report](#) [2], including timeline of main events, 24 September 2002-29 January 2004
- **openDemocracy** [analysis](#) [3] from Tom Bentley, John Lloyd, David Elstein, David Marquand, Anthony Barnett
- The *Guardian's* [special feature](#) [4]

- *Deadbrain satire* [5] for those without *Dominic Hilton* [6]
- The Butler *intelligence review* [7] announced

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[1] <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/> target=_blank

[2] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/uk/2003/david_kelly_inquiry/default.stm target=_blank

[3] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/debate.jsp?debateId=92&id=8> target=_blank

[4] <http://media.guardian.co.uk/huttoninquiry/> target=_blank

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