[GB] Official Inquiry Leads to Resignation of Chairman and Director-General of the BBC

IRIS 2004-4:1/21

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The UK has had a major crisis in public service broadcasting as a result of the publication of the Hutton Report dealing with the death of Dr. David Kelly, the expert on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (see also IRIS 2003-9: 8). He had been interviewed by Andrew Gilligan, a BBC reporter, in relation to Government claims that such weapons were available for use within 45 minutes. The BBC had then broadcast the allegation that the dossier prepared for Government by the security services had been doctored to make the threat seem more immediate than it had originally appeared; the Government spokesman vigorously denied that this had taken place.

The Hutton Report comprehensively cleared the Government of allegations that it had "sexed-up" the dossier. Thus "the allegation reported by Mr Gilligan on 29 May 2003 that the Government probably knew that the 45 minutes claim was wrong before the Government decided to put it in the dossier, was an allegation which was unfounded." The Government had merely made drafting suggestions, which were accepted by the security services.

According to the Report, "the right to communicate [information on matters of public interest] is subject to the qualification (which itself exists for the benefit of a democratic society) that false allegations of fact impugning the integrity of others, including politicians, should not be made by the media." An editorial system should be in place to give careful consideration to such allegations before they are broadcast, and, given the gravity of the allegations, the BBC was at fault in permitting them to be broadcast without editors having seen and approved a script in advance.

The BBC's management was also at fault for failing to investigate properly the Government's complaints about the broadcast, for example by examining Andrew Gilligan's notes. The BBC Board of Governors was correct to consider it their duty to protect the independence of the BBC against attacks by the Government, but should have recognised that this was not incompatible with giving proper consideration to the validity of the Government's complaints. In particular, they should have undertaken an independent investigation into the complaints, for example examining the reporter's notes, rather than relying on assurances from BBC management.

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Shortly after the report was published the Chairman of the Governors, Gavyn Davies, resigned, followed the next day by the Director-General, Greg Dyke and shortly afterwards by Andrew Gilligan. The future governance of the BBC is one of the issues currently being examined by the Charter Review, which is due to result in a new Charter in 2006. This may propose fundamental changes in the role of the Board of Governors and suggest that some more independent system of regulation is established.

BBC Charter Review

http://www.bbccharterreview.org.uk/

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