

Attack on BBC: The official truth is a lie

During the war against Iraq, the BBC's Today programme sent Andrew Gilligan to Baghdad. Gilligan's reports were unlike anything the BBC had broadcast. They contradicted the official Anglo-American line about "liberation" and made clear that, for a great many Iraqis, the invasion and occupation were at least as bad as life under Saddam Hussein.

This was heresy, prompting Alastair Campbell to move Gilligan to the top of his list of "rants", as Greg Dyke has described them. "Gullible Gilligan" was Campbell's term of abuse, which meant that the reporter was on to something. Like his subsequent report that the government had "sexed up" its Iraq dossier, Gilligan's conclusion was right, and has since been repeatedly proven right. There is no liberation in Iraq. There is a vicious colonial occupation. The government "sexed up" not one, but two dossiers.

Campbell's attacks were reminiscent of those orchestrated against other journalists who have distinguished themselves by departing from the script. For telling the truth about the carnage of Queen Victoria's favourite war, in the Crimea, the Times correspondent William Howard Russell was damned as a traitor. For revealing the human cost of the American bombing of North Vietnam in 1965, James Cameron was smeared as a "dupe of communism".

"When they call you a dupe," Cameron told me, "what they are really complaining about is that you are not their dupe." The BBC bought the exclusive rights to Cameron's film, then suppressed it; just as it suppressed *The War Game*, Peter Watkins's brilliant recreation of Britain under nuclear attack; just as it suppressed or doctored countless works that sought to explain the British war in Northern Ireland, such as *Article 5*, Brian Phelan's play about torture, and Colin Thomas's film *City on the Border*. Thomas was ordered by BBC chiefs to cut a scene which showed a gravestone that read, "Murdered by British soldiers on Bloody Sunday." He refused, and resigned.

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A barrister called Brian Hutton, representing the Ministry of Defence, is remembered from the Bloody Sunday inquest in 1973 for his tirade at the coroner, who had dared suggest that the soldiers had no justification for shooting 13 people dead. "It is not for you or the jury," said Hutton, "to express such wide-ranging views, particularly when a most eminent judge has spent 20 days hearing evidence and come to a very different conclusion." The eminent judge was Lord Widgery who, as we now know, oversaw yet another gross miscarriage of justice. In the obsequious Hutton, Blair had the right man.

The parallel of Iraq with Ireland is instructive. Among those currently mentioned as a new BBC chairman is John Birt, the former director general made a lord by Blair. During the late 1980s, Birt decreed that the views of Irish Republican representatives could be broadcast only if an actor mimed their words. This was finally abandoned after a group of journalists (myself included) took such an abuse of freedom of speech all the way to the European Court.

The current exhumation of Birt may be a joke, but I doubt it. For in many ways Birt was an authentic voice of the BBC. He was a champion of what the more pompous at the BBC call "rigour". He demanded corporate discipline and built a Kafka-like bureaucracy to order. Will Wyatt, one of Birt's executives, has written the following about the current acting director-general, Mark Byford, another Birt man: "I expect him... to restore the level of rigour that existed under John Birt."

Ah, the "rigour". Not once was Blair called to account for the human cost of his sanctions policy in Iraq, let alone his invasion. Alastair Campbell was allowed to walk away from Newsnight without serious challenge to his preposterous "vindication" by Hutton. How is this "rigour" viewed from afar? In the Australian Financial Review on 31 January, Brian Toohey, his country's most distinguished investigative journalist, recalled that Panorama on 23 September 2002 claimed to have "hard evidence" about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. "It did no such thing," wrote Toohey. "Instead, it presented a load of nonsense which bolstered the case for subsequent invasion. One of the programme's prime sources was an Iraqi, whom it described as "credible". The programme fell hook, line and sinker for his claim to know that a secret biological weapons laboratory existed under a major hospital in Baghdad [and] Panorama had the gall earlier this month to attack a BBC radio news item (Gilligan's), which correctly reported concerns among officials about the accuracy of British government dossiers on Iraq's WMDs."

That edition of Panorama was not untypical of the BBC's coverage of the build-

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up to the invasion, and the "war on terror", or indeed any war fought or supported by the British establishment in living memory. None of this is conspiratorial; it is a venerable tradition. Following the example set by the BBC's founder John Reith, who secretly wrote propaganda for Stanley Baldwin's Tory government during the General Strike, the hallowed principle of impartiality is invariably suspended when the establishment is threatened, especially when it decides to pursue its imperial tradition and join the United States in subverting other nations by violent or other means. By channelling and amplifying established agendas, devoted practitioners of "impartiality" minimise the culpability of governments, prime ministers and their allies.

It was hardly surprising that a recent German survey of the world's leading broadcasters' coverage of Iraq found that the BBC gave just 2 per cent to demonstrations of anti-war dissent - less than even American broadcasters - even though the demonstrators probably represented a majority of the British people.

This is the "rigour" whose recent lapse Wyatt and Byford lament. It is the rigour, as Robert Louis Stevenson put it, of "your sham impartialists, wolves in sheep's clothing, simpering honestly as they suppress". It is the rigour of false respect for a corrupt elite, of "that combination of mediocrity and ambition: death to the spirit", as the historian Norman Stone wrote.

There have always been honourable exceptions, and the emergence of one of them explains why the Blair gang became hysterical when Andrew Gilligan told the truth about their "liberation" of Iraq and a deception intended to cover their violence - a violence that took up to 55,000 lives, including 9,600 civilians: a violence that kills or injures 1,000 Iraqi children every month as a result of unexploded cluster bombs that the British military scattered in urban areas: a violence which has again contaminated much of Iraq with uranium. This crime, and this alone, is the single issue crying out to be reported with genuine rigour, not "inquired into" by yet another establishment panel clearing an exit for those responsible. **JP**