

The Chilcot Iraq Inquiry: Campbell Defends Blair in Emotional Interview

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Former prime minister Tony Blair did not mislead Parliament in the run-up to the Iraq War, Alastair Campbell insisted today.

In an emotionally charged interview Mr Blair's former communications chief said the former leader was a "totally honourable man. A clearly upset Mr Campbell paused several times to gather his thoughts as he was questioned on BBC 1's Andrew Marr Show.

Mr Campbell gave evidence to Sir John Chilcot's Iraq Inquiry last month but later issued a clarification about his answer to one of the key questions.

He said he had "misunderstood" a question and in a memo to the inquiry said he feared he had given the wrong impression that the then prime minister could have claimed Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction "beyond doubt" even if intelligence chiefs disagreed.

Mr Marr asked him: "If beyond doubt is not established in the intelligence when this inquiry looks at the intelligence, does it then follow, yes or no, the [prime minister](#) misled Parliament?"

Mr Campbell replied: "The prime minister did not mislead Parliament."

But he was pressed on whether that was the case even if the intelligence did not confirm the assertion. Mr Campbell began to reply before pausing, breathing heavily.

"Yes, because I said ... forgive me for this, I've ..."

Mr Marr told him "people say you can't answer this question".

The former spin doctor again gave a reply interrupted by several pauses, saying: "I've been through a lot of this Andrew. And I've been through a lot of that inquiry ... and, er ... Tony Blair, I think is a totally honourable man."

Mr Campbell, who was on the show to promote his latest book, hit out at the "vilification" he had received along with Mr Blair over the conflict and the controversial dossier of intelligence .

“You did it again this morning, which is probably why I’m a bit upset, this constant sort of vilification.

“You compared the novel to the dossier, that it was all fiction and all the rest of it. It’s not.”

He added: “I don’t think people are interested in the truth any more.”

Mr Campbell said the media was obsessed with “settling your scores and setting your own agenda”.

He added: “I’m sorry if I do get upset about this but I was there alongside Tony, I know how that decision weighed on him, I know the care that we took.”

Mr Campbell said he understood why people were “upset” about the decision to become involved in the conflict.

But he said: “Tony Blair and the [government](#) made a decision. He has to stand by that decision.”

He added: “The reason people are going over it again and again and again is because those who do disagree with the judgment that Tony Blair made actually don’t want to see the other side of the story.”

The judgment “wasn’t just about the dossier, it was also about the history of the regime, it was also about the importance of the transatlantic relationship”.

Mr Campbell said the original intelligence was the basis of the September 2002 dossier which Mr Blair “in very good faith” put before Parliament.

“He was not misleading Parliament. And I also saw the care, and the meticulousness that not just he but everybody involved in that process presented their case.

“It wasn’t the case for war, it was the case for why he was more concerned.”

Mr Campbell, who has a history of depression, said he was upset by Mr Marr describing his novel Maya as his “latest” work of fiction – a thinly-veiled reference to his role in presenting the intelligence dossier.

He told Sky News’ Sunday Live programme: “One of the portrayals of the media in the book is this kind of slightly glib approach they take to really serious issues.

“I think [the thing](#) that touched a nerve was him talking about this really as my latest piece of fiction.”

He said it did “get under my skin” and added: “I have been with Tony Blair when he has been given news about the death of British [soldiers](#) or terrible incidents that have happened.

“I know how deeply it weighs on him.”

Mr Campbell said: “There won’t be a day in the rest of his (Mr Blair’s) life when he doesn’t think about the deaths of soldiers and the deaths of Iraqis.

“I guess one of the reasons why I did get quite upset with Andrew this morning was I feel sometimes we are treated in this media bubble that sometimes you are in ... like actually you are somehow devoid of humanity, you don’t really have feelings, you don’t really care about things.”

Appearing on the programme immediately after Mr Campbell, shadow foreign secretary William Hague insisted questions still had to be asked even if the former spin doctor found them uncomfortable.

“I am sorry that Alastair Campbell was upset to be asked questions about the inquiry,” he said. “We are all upset by what happened in Iraq. I am very upset that it seems our soldiers were often sent into action without the necessary equipment because of poor political decision making, that there was no plan for the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq.

“We are all upset. I am upset about the fact that in a debate in which I supported Tony Blair at the time of the Iraq war, we were told that the intelligence was authoritative and extensive and beyond doubt, and it seems listening to the Chilcot inquiry, that that was not the case.

“I think many people are upset in different ways about it, and that must not stop us learning the lessons.

“We know, although we don’t know all the lessons because the inquiry is not over yet, we know that intelligence must be presented more honestly in the future, that decisions must be made with proper consultation and that there must always be a proper plan before we send our forces into action.”

Asked whether he would still have supported the war knowing what he does now, Mr Hague replied it was too early to tell.

“On that I would say I feel that increasingly on many aspects of the case that parliament was misled,” he said.

“But I think to come to an overall judgment on that question we have to see the inquiry result as a whole...

“Of course I do not regret that Saddam Hussein has been removed, that our friends in Iraq are trying to build a working democracy there. Hopefully there will be a lasting benefit from that.

“But enormous mistakes were clearly made along the way and we have to learn from that.”

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