

BBC accused of cowardice as No 10 radio satire is dropped

By Matt Born

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The BBC was accused last night of "editorial cowardice" after it cancelled a satirical radio programme about the Hutton report in which Tony Blair is referred to as a liar.

Mark Tavener, the writer of the comedy Absolute Power, said Radio 4 bosses halted this week's episode because they were worried about upsetting No 10. In the show, which stars Stephen Fry and John Bird as spin doctors, one character refers to Alastair Campbell as "Alas, it's a shambles".

Among disparaging references to Mr Blair, Fry's character, Charles Prentiss, says there is nothing he could "teach this prime minister about deception, manipulation and lying. Except how to do it properly".

This first episode in the fourth and final series of the critically acclaimed comedy, was due to be broadcast on Thursday night. But Mr Tavener said he was told by the BBC yesterday that it had been axed.

He said: "I was told, 'It has been pulled because you can't call Tony Blair a liar in the current climate'."

Mr Tavener wrote the episode some months ago and it was recorded in front of a live audience in December. The plot revolves around the Government and the BBC trying to build bridges following the Hutton inquiry.

The spin doctors, however, decide there is more money to be made out of having the two at loggerheads and set about trying to poison relations.

Radio 4 last night denied the broadcast had been cancelled for fear of antagonising the Government. The story had been "overtaken by events", said a spokesman. "This was the writer's view of what the outcomes of the Hutton report might be. Now we know what those outcomes are.

"The references to the Hutton report don't sound right any more. There's is nothing sinister in this."

However, Tavener said the show was not out of date. "I was told I couldn't refer to Blair as a liar because Hutton said he wasn't. Quite clearly this is nonsense. I'm making a much wider point about the culture of spin.

"In any case this is a fictional, light comedy - and a very balanced one at that. It's equally rude - if not ruder - about the BBC. They are chickening out because they are worried about upsetting the Government. It's sickening."

The BBC spokesman said Radio 4 had decided to bring forward the second episode to Thursday evening and was considering re-editing the contentious episode for later broadcast.

After its successful run on radio, Absolute Power has been adapted for a television series which also stars Fry and Bird.

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