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Interview with David Trimble
Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party

BBC Radio Ulster Inside Politics Saturday, 9 September, 1995

Interviewer: Jim Dougal

Interviewer: David Trimble, congratulations. Was this a lifetime s ambition, for you to lead the Ulster Unionist party?

Trimble: I can t really describe it as a lifetime s ambition. This may be self deception but I don t regard myself as having been driven by ambition and it was more out of a sense of duty and obligation to the delegates that I allowed my name to go forward.

Interviewer: It is a surprise, isn t it, because in the past you have been a member of Vanguard, a member of the Ulster Clubs as well, groups which I would suggest to you would have been anathema to the party you now lead. Yet they chose you.

Trimble: Well Vanguard actually grew out of the Ulster Unionist party and it was rather, I mean if you want to do that it is rather amusing that two former deputy leaders of Vanguard were among the five contenders last night because I share that honour with Martin Smyth. So I don t regard it as being significantly out of the mainstream of the party. And when you describe that as being hardline I m not quite sure again that that s accurate. I see one of the newspapers this

morning refers to me as having achieved a hardline reputation in the 1975 Convention. I was expelled from the UUUC in 1975 because along with Bill Craig I was prepared to convenance a form of what the other members of the UUUC regarded as power sharing and that I think is not what this paper would regard as hardline. So I think there is a little blurring of the memories here.

Interviewer: That was voluntary coalition?

Trimble: Indeed.

Interviewer: You are not a closet power sharer, are you?

Trimble: Well I don't actually, I didn't then and I don't now, regard a voluntary coalition in the terms as we understood it as actually been power sharing precisely defined and I do like to be precise about these things. Clarity isn't hardness but it is important to be precise and it is something that I am quite comfortable with and quite willing to stand over and regard it as not being significantly different from the current policies of the Ulster Unionist party which are to adopt a system of proportionality in any future Assembly. Indeed in theory you could argue that our policies of proportionality are closer to power sharing than the coalition proposal that Bill and I espoused in 1975.

Interviewer: Indeed, but a coalition suggests that you would be prepared to sit in Cabinet at Stormont in a new arrangement with nationalists?

Trimble: Well I was in 1975 provided there was prior agreement on policies and on the framework within which we would be operating - yes.

Interviewer: So you would in fact be prepared to operate some kind of a power sharing arrangement at the highest level?

Trimble: Well if you call that power sharing, I don't actually find that. Power sharing has a specific and very precise meaning and the same... Look there is the policy of the Ulster Unionist party at the moment, and has been for several years, that any future Assembly should operate on a system of proportionality which means that all parties including obviously nationalists would participate at all levels, at all levels in proportion to party strengths. Now that again is as you say sitting down together with nationalists. That has been Ulster Unionist party policy for many years.

Interviewer: But you are suggesting that you could actually have a Cabinet sitting taking decisions?

Trimble: That was the position that I adopted in 1975 and as I say am comfortable with it. But the policy of the Ulster Unionist party at present is to have a differently structured Assembly which is one based on the principle of proportionality. That is actually more appropriate for the sort of Assembly that we envisage, which would not be a return to the old Parliament. Now cabinets are appropriate for Parliaments whereas for the Assembly that we envisage the different form of administration through Committees on the principle of proportionality is more appropriate.

Interviewer: Indeed, but it is interesting, I would put it to you that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party would have no difficulty sitting in Cabinet in Northern Ireland with nationalists?

Trimble: If we had a parliament. But of course we are not talking about going back to the old Stormont model. Now if John Hume turns around to me tomorrow and says let's go back to the old Stormont model, then we will look seriously at that.

Interviewer: In power sharing?

Trimble: I don't regard it as power sharing. Again let's have these terms properly defined. It is very confusing to people when we are not using the words properly defined and I do like to have them.

Interviewer: Okay, well did you have difficulty in reading the signs over the past couple of weeks that you would be elected? Because at the beginning of the campaign you said I'm David Trimble, I am not seeking the leadership, and then you entered the race and you won it?

Trimble: I said on Monday a week ago that it was not my intention to seek the leadership. It has to be said that there was only one journalist in Northern Ireland who then had the wit to ask the obvious questions: What happens if people ask you to run? and I have to give credit where credit is due to the Portadown Times whose journalist had the sense to ask that question and consequently has been running different stories over the last few weeks to the press in Belfast.

Interviewer: How big a part did those pictures of you at Drumcree and in Portadown with Ian Paisley play, do you think, in your success?

Trimble: I don't think they helped me in any significant way. Because I don't think that the people who voted for me were going to be influenced by that. They are not going to be influenced by the emotion of the moment. Those pictures played against me, certainly as far as the media were concerned and maybe also to some extent with the delegates but again I don't think they had any significant impact.

Interviewer: Where are you going to lead the Unionist party?

Trimble: I am going to lead the Unionist party as a party committed firmly to the Union, to the maintenance of the Union, to telling other people about the virtues of the Union and how it is the best possible solution for everybody in

Northern Ireland and the Unionist party under my leadership will be a party of the Union.

Interviewer: You say everybody in Northern Ireland. Does that include members of the Catholic community?

Trimble: Absolutely. It is the best solution, as so many members of the Catholic community know. Look, the most recent opinion poll on this matter shows that only 17% of the entire population of NI actually want a United Ireland. The time the Framework Document was published there was an opinion poll which asked the question how would you vote tomorrow if there was a border poll on whether Northern Ireland should be part of the UK or part of an all-Ireland state and that opinion poll was analysed in terms of religion and 23% of Catholics said they would vote for the Union and only 53 or 55% said they would vote for an all-Ireland state. A significant proportion and a growing proportion know that the Union is the best solution. Because the United Kingdom is a pluralist state and it is only within the UK and only within a pluralist state such as the UK that the diverse strands of life in NI can actually live together. //

Interviewer: But wouldn't your party be more attractive to Catholics if you moved to sever the link with the Orange Order and I say that in full memory of what happened in Portadown?

Trimble: Well we are looking at the structure of the party and it is likely that the nature of the link will change but I don't see it being severed and I don't think, we are not certainly looking at it in its terms that you suggest. There was a time, unfortunately a long time ago, when we did have a Catholic Member of Parliament representing the Ulster Unionist Party. He wasn't put off by the fact that the Orange Order was associated with the party as it was then.

Interviewer: So you don't see any change?

Trimble: As I say, no. What I did say was that we are looking at the structures of the party and I expect that the nature of the relationship will change, the nature of the link will change but the association will continue.

Interviewer: Now the two Governments are having a problem. They want to begin all-party talks. They are having a difficulty with this whole area of decommissioning weapons. What s your advice to them?

Trimble: Well what I have said and what I continue to say is to go back to the Downing St Declaration and the principle that is stated there which was the policy and should still be the policy of both the British and Irish Governments namely that parties hitherto associated with paramilitarism before they can move fully into the political process have to establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods. That s the principle. That has to be sorted out. I am not fully aware of what actually has happened in the course of the last week where it appears the Irish Government has reversed itself under pressure from Sinn Fein/IRA. I would like to know exactly what has happened.

Interviewer: Can I just make one point there. Because I didn t know that you were a supporter of the Downing St Declaration?

Trimble: What I said in the House of Commons, the day that the Downing Street Declaration was published, was that we will suspend judgement on it until, in the hope that it will help to lead us out of the impasse. I have also said, at that time and since, that the Downing St Declaration has good things and bad things in it and there are principles in the Downing St Declaration which we will support. Certainly the principle of consent and also this principle with regard to involvement in politics that you have to accept peace and democracy. That is a principle I am quite happy to endorse.

Interviewer: Okay well how is that acceptance of democracy going to be established to your satisfaction with regard to Sinn Fein?

Trimble: I don't think it is helpful for me to speculate in advance on that. I have stated the principle that you have got to establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods. I also say that being committed to exclusively peaceful methods is incompatible with the existence of private armies (plural) and stocks of weapons and it is certainly incompatible with constant threats of renewed violence which is what we are getting at the moment from Sinn Fein/IRA.

Interviewer: You said on radio this morning that the Government might have to find some way other than decommissioning weapons to establish Sinn Fein's good faith. What exactly did you mean?

Trimble: I don't think that the Government might have to... What I said was that the principle is that you establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods. The Government at the moment has focussed on decommissioning of weapons as though the way, and unfortunately focussed on it as apparently the only way, and all that is necessary to establish that commitment. In theory if there were other ways, you know, it might be possible to establish that commitment in other ways, but I have to say and I repeat it again that having a private army with a huge stock of weapons is incompatible with a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods.

Interviewer: But are you suggesting that they may not have to decommission to establish that

Trimble: We don't want to get involved in the technicalities of how that weapon stockpile is dealt with. It will have to be dealt with and it is because of this, it involves quite a bit of complexity and technicality, it was because of that the Ulster Unionist Party a long time ago suggested that we call

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on the help of experts in this field and suggested that a commission of experts, international experts, should assist with dealing with the details of it.

Interviewer: But what I am trying to get at is: are you suggesting that Sinn Fein could become involved fully in the political process without.....

Trimble: I am not. Indeed actually if you look at the principle of establishing a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods you would have to conclude that it wouldn't be met by a purely symbolic gesture with regard to a couple of weapons.

Interviewer: But you are calling for full decommissioning before you talk to them?

Trimble: I am calling for the principles stated in the Downing St Declaration to be met. And I am not dictating in advance the means by which it be met but I am saying that the principle must be met.

Interviewer: But for you it also includes some decommissioning?

Trimble: I don't see how it could be met without that.

Interviewer: But not complete decommissioning

Trimble: Well again I am not going to go into the details of it because we see that those details involve complexities and there is where we feel that a commission of experts would be helpful.

Interviewer: Are you trying to help the Government here? Are you trying to get them off the hook?

Trimble: Well we were trying to help the Government when many months ago we proposed the creation of this commission.

Whether the commission that the two Governments are talking about is the same as the Commission that we proposed remains to be seen because we have not yet been, as far as I am aware, involved in the detail of those discussions and that is something that I want to find out about and that is why that over the course of the next few days and weeks I will want to meet as many people as I can in order to make sure that I am fully aware of these details.

Interviewer: But if these conditions if you like were met to your satisfaction and there was some decommissioning involved as well, could you sit down with Sinn Fein?

Trimble: If Sinn Fein have established a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and by established of course you mean that word means, to show and to demonstrate. If they have shown that and if they have shown that in a way that satisfies me and my party and people that we represent, yes.

Interviewer: Now you have said you want to talk to John Bruton. When are you going to do that?

Trimble: I was only elected last night. This interview is being recorded on Saturday morning. I have glanced at the paper. I am told that an invitation is coming my way from the White House. I have to meet obviously my colleagues in the party. I have to meet, I want to meet, the leaders of other constitutional parties in NI. I also want to meet the PM and other major players in the rest of the UK. I also want to meet major players in the Irish Republic and elsewhere.

Interviewer: I am pretty sure that John Bruton would want to meet you as soon as possible. I am enquiring into how soon you would be able to do it.

Trimble: Well we will have to see.

Interviewer: But you intend to do it quite soon?

Trimble: Well, sooner rather than later. There is a lot of things going on.

Interviewer: Okay, say the two Governments decided that they wanted to engage in talks with all the parties jointly including Sinn Fein. Would your party go?

Trimble: I will draw their attention again to the principles they have stated in the Downing Street Declaration.

Interviewer: But would you go?

Trimble: I will draw their attention to the principles in the Downing Street Declaration and by saying that what I meant was that I will draw their attention to the need to satisfy the principles that they stated and we would not be prepared to move into all-party talks until we were satisfied that those conditions had been met.

Interviewer: But you would be prepared to move into all-party talks which included Dublin?

Trimble: Well when we have got the details right. Now look, we have got to, moving into.. Now let s just deal with this. Moving into any form of formal talks is not something that you do lightly. It is not something that you do at the drop of a hat. Do remember the difficulties we had with the Brooke and Mayhew talks. Before you have talks you have got to get the details right and you have also got to be sure that there is likely to be a successful outcome. When the conditions are right and if the conditions are right, yes. But there is a lot of work to be done beforehand.

Interviewer: But the principle you have not difficulty with?

Trimble: I am quite happy to talk to people in the right circumstances and provided we have got the prospect of a

satisfactory fruitful outcome.

Interviewer: Now you, it seems to me, or your party has a fairly cold relationship at the moment with the Democratic Unionist party of Ian Paisley. You were with Ian Paisley in Portadown in July. Does that mean that there could be a renewed relationship?

Trimble: I was in Portadown because I was the Member of Parliament for that constituency attending a Church service which I do every year which is part of the normal life in that area. Dr Paisley came to help and I was glad of his assistance, as were we all. That perhaps might be good precedent.

Interviewer: Well indeed, but they have attempted to establish a Commission in which they want your party to participate fully, a Unionist Commission. Would you participate fully in that?

Trimble: I think our party has an involvement in it.

Interviewer: But the involvement which you have at the moment....

Trimble: I might look again at the details of that. I haven't personally been involved in that at this stage. I am a little bit sceptical, I must say honestly, about the value of such exercises. I am all in favour of doing good hard thought about the situation and I am all in favour of the greatest degree of unionist unity that can be achieved. But what I am sceptical about is that I don't want to waste my time just talking for the sake of talking. I would like to see things happening in a more positive way. Now I haven't personally been involved in that Commission to date. I will obviously have to be more fully briefed about it and so I am not going to commit myself at this stage.

Interviewer: But would you like to establish a closer relationship with the DUP? The kind of relationship which Mr Molyneaux and Mr Paisley had after the Anglo Irish Agreement?

Trimble: Well that sort of quasi coalition relationship has disadvantages as well as advantages and our experience at the end of the day leads me to say, as I have said before, that the best form and the desirable form of reflecting unionist unity in the future would be through a single united unionist party. That would be my objective.

Interviewer: Under your leadership?

Trimble: Well under the leadership of whoever that party selects democratically.

Interviewer: You don't think that's going to happen do you?

Trimble: Oh it will happen and it may happen sooner than people realise. And I would like to see it happen as soon as it can.

END.