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PRIME MINISTER - INTERVIEW - PANORAMA - 15 JULY 1996

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FROM FOX FOR COI RADIO TECHNICAL SERVICES

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR JOHN MAJOR,

IN LONDON

ON MONDAY, 15 JULY 1996

INTERVIEWER: DAVID DIMBLEBY, PANORAMA

INTERVIEWER:

Prime Minister, is it true the government gave no advice, no direction, throughout last week to the Chief Constable?

PRIME MINISTER:

No. it was an operational matter. The government are responsible for broad policy of course, but the Chief Constable is responsible for operational matters. The belief that Ministers at some distance can give detailed instructions on how to handle a street order or disorder I think is fatuous. So the answer is no instructions were given at all.

INTERVIEWER:

And no help at all in reaching a decision about what you knew in advance was sensitive, political action?

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PRIME MINISTER:

It depends what you mean by help. If Sir Hugh Annesley had asked for the government's advice, if he had asked us to assist, if he had asked us to comment then of course we would have discussed the matter with him. But it is not for Ministers to instruct the Chief Constable how to handle a matter dealing with control on the streets. He is the professional at that, not the Secretary of State or any other Minister.

INTERVIEWER:

Did he not ask you for any advice?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, he didn't ask for any advice and he has made that clear. It was an operational decision by him to ban the march in the first place. As events changed he sensibly considered the matter and decided in the interests of order that he would make a change to his original decision, and that he did. Both decisions were his and his alone, as he has made clear repeatedly.

INTERVIEWER:

Was it the right decision that he made?

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PRIME MINISTER:

I think he did make the right decision. I am not going to second-guess the Chief Constable or criticise the Chief Constable. He has an immensely difficult task in Northern Ireland. He needs to retain the confidence of both communities. He didn't just make these decisions on the day. I think it is worth remembering he had been discussing the matter with the Garvaghy Road residents and with the Orange Lodge for some months past, there had been a whole series of meetings to try and reach an accommodation. The problem he faced was that neither side, neither the marchers nor the residents were prepared to reach a compromise to make matters at all easy either for the public at large or for the Chief Constable.

INTERVIEWER:

Isn't that a matter for the government when you have that degree of conflict in the United Kingdom over something that has been banned by law? Isn't that something the government should be directly involved in?

PRIME MINISTER:

If you mean should the government override the Chief Constable - emphatically no.

INTERVIEWER:

Should it be discussed with the Chief Constable and reach a decision with him?

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PRIME MINISTER:

The Chief Constable must make the judgment. He is the professional. Let me put the point to you the other way round. If Sir Patrick Mayhew, or any other Minister, had intervened in this and instructed the Chief Constable, I wonder precisely what you would be saying to me about political control of the police. You would be saying this is unprecedented, it is unconstitutional, where does it stop? And you would be right to ask those questions. We have a very clear constitutional distinction in this country. The government sets the law, it is available to be consulted, but operational decisions, decisions concerning the maintenance of law and order, are properly for the police. And we have full confidence in Hugh Annesley and he has our full support.

INTERVIEWER:

What is your reaction to the Irish Prime Minister's comment that you made a serious mistake breaching three canons of democracy, and Cardinal Dalay saying that he felt betrayed by the British government?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't want to traipse over old ground, that will do no good to the future which is where we must look. But I think if mistakes were made, the mistakes that were made were in making those comments.

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INTERVIEWER:

So you are critical of the Roman Catholic Cardinal and the Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

Both those comments would have been better not made. We have to look forward. The Chief Constable has an immensely difficult job. The RUC need to retain the confidence of both communities. It is not helpful to have had critical comments of that sort and our views are well known about that. But that is behind us now. What I am concerned about is looking forward to see how we can deal with future problems and how we can reconstitute the talks process.

INTERVIEWER:

You say it is behind you but it is not exactly behind you, is it? Because the consequence of it is that the Unionists are seeing, and indeed claim once again, to have had a victory in Northern Ireland?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think anyone sees this as a victory. I don't think anyone who is sensible in any way can see what has happened as a victory. What happened in Northern Ireland over the last few days was a defeat for common sense, a defeat for the peace process and a defeat for both communities. Anybody claiming a victory out of that I think frankly ought to go away and think again.

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It was a bad week for Northern Ireland. What we have to do is put that bad week behind us and see how we can move forward to better weeks in the future.

INTERVIEWER:

But the truth of the matter is that it was seen as a victory, and claimed as a victory, by those Unionists who were involved at Drumcree and it is not the first time that Unionists have been able to flout the law with impunity in Northern Ireland?

PRIME MINISTER:

You see I don't see it in the way you do. It might equally have been claimed as a victory by nationalists when the original march was stopped. People had a right to peacefully march in the United Kingdom, and yet it was decided, for reasons of law and order, to stop the march. Nobody claimed then that it was a defeat for the Unionists, yet now people are saying it is a victory for the Unionists. Both these terms - defeat/victory - this is just a further illustration of the intemperate way in which so much of the debate in Northern Ireland is carried out. If both sides will there never to be an agreement, an agreement cannot be reached. What I am seeking, what I have been seeking for the last 5 years consistently, is to try and ensure that in the politics of Northern Ireland reason and goodwill prevail.

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So don't expect me to start criticising lavishly one side or the other. I want them all to sit down together and talk. What concerns me is not the position of the Orange Order, not the position of the Garvaghy Road residents, what I am primarily concerned about is the position of the overwhelming majority of law abiding citizens of Northern Ireland who do not want to go back to where they were over the last 25 years. They want the talks to proceed, they want peace, they want the political leaders to give a proper political lead in returning to the talks table, staying in the forum and seeing how we can deal with the real problems that exist and advancing the process, and that is what the government will be seeking.

INTERVIEWER:

I will ask you about that of course in just a moment. But coming back to Drumcree, you say that the Unionists didn't claim it as a defeat when they were told the march wouldn't be going ahead, but they did claim it as a defeat in the sense that they weren't prepared to go to court to contest the court order, they were prepared to bring out according to the Chief Constable between 60, 70, even perhaps 100,000 people and they won the day by sheer force?

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PRIME MINISTER:

What you are seeking me to do is to take sides. Well I will take sides, both sides were wrong. The Orange Lodge were wrong in seeking to proceed in the way that they did, and I think the Garvaghy Road residents were unreasonable in the way they refused to discuss and to compromise for a long time on how a peaceful march, a peaceful march, could have been passed through the Garvaghy Road Estate. So there is ample blame on both sides. I have made that clear in the past, Paddy Mayhew has made that clear. That absolutely is the case. If you get bigotry on both sides you won't get a conclusion. Now what I have to try and do is to make sure that that bigotry doesn't grow and then place a further impediment in progress from now onwards. So what I want to talk about is what happens now.

INTERVIEWER:

But isn't the trouble that from the point of view of the Roman Catholic community in Northern Ireland, they see something that looks like exactly what happened in 1974 with the ... workers strike, that when they choose, Unionists can go on the street and there is nothing that the forces of law and order can do about it. That is the message, isn't it?

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PRIME MINISTER:

I don't believe that that is the right message to take. Over the past 5 years there have been unprecedented moves by the British government to try and find a way that will preserve the natural way of life and the peace and security of all the citizens of Northern Ireland. No government previously has given this matter such priority or devoted so much time and interest in it.

And I invite everyone in Northern Ireland, whether Protestant or Catholic, it doesn't matter, to actually look at that record and say are the government genuinely concerned at reaching an accommodation satisfactory to everybody? And the only honest and logical answer to that is yes they are, for they had no reason necessarily to take up this issue as one of the priorities of this administration, but we did so and we will continue to do so. And I hope in that, the ordinary resident, whether Protestant or Catholic, can take some comfort because it was a priority before, it is a priority for me today and it will remain a priority for me to see a satisfactory peace in Northern Ireland for so long as I sit in Downing Street.

INTERVIEWER:

Were you dismayed to see the actions of the political leaders of the Ulster Unionists at Drumcree?

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PRIME MINISTER:

It depends which particular actions you have in mind. I was delighted that they urged people to be restrained. I was delighted that the political leaders all urged the Loyalists not to respond.

INTERVIEWER:

They put their weight on letting the march go through ...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we have a right of free assembly and free marching in this country.

INTERVIEWER:

So you consider that was legitimate?

(END OF TRANSCRIPT A. CONTINUED ON TRANSCRIPT B)