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Local & National

Robinson in 'dealt with' Wright claim

Wednesday, February 06, 2008

By Chris Thornton

Billy Wright claimed the late PUP leader David Ervine told John Major that he had to be "dealt with", Finance Minister Peter Robinson told the inquiry into the LVF leader's murder today.

The DUP deputy leader appeared before the inquiry in Banbridge this morning to give evidence about four occasions on which he met the high profile loyalist gunman.

Mr Robinson told the inquiry that one of those meetings happened in passing at Drumcree and two others were about threats to Wright's life.

The East Belfast MP said Wright came to see him at his constituency office in the summer of 1996 and claimed his name had come up in a July meeting at Downing Street involving two PUP members and two members of the UDA-aligned Ulster Democratic Party (UDP).

"He indicated that he had been informed by someone who was present at the meeting that reference was made to the Prime Minister about the difficulties he was causing and something needed to be done about it. He needed to be dealt with," Mr Robinson said.

Shortly after the Downing Street meeting, the Combined Loyalist Military Command, encompassing the UVF and UDA, threatened Wright with "summary justice" if he did not leave Northern Ireland immediately.

The murder of taxi driver Michael McGoldrick, which was blamed on Wright and his LVF associates, had threatened to disrupt the peace process.

Wright was subsequently arrested in January 1997 and convicted of making threats to a Portadown woman in March that year.

While serving his eight-year sentence, Wright was shot dead in the top security Maze Prison by INLA inmates. The inquiry is examining allegations of collusion in the murder.

Mr Robinson - who gave evidence for around one hour and 15 minutes - told the inquiry he met Wright in Maghaberry Prison days after he had been sentenced.

"He was very angry about it," Mr Robinson said. "It was the first time he admitted to me that he had done many things in his life that he should not have, but this was not one of them."

Mr Robinson said Wright claimed at that stage he had information that republicans were trying to kill him in the prison.

The inquiry later heard that Wright was told David Ervine was the loyalist politician who had raised concerns about the LVF leader with John Major in Downing Street during the July 22, 1996 meeting.

Mr Robinson told the inquiry that from his conversation with Wright he "didn't get the impression that it was a legal exercise being sought".

Derek Batchelor QC, the counsel for the inquiry, asked Mr Robinson if Wright was "acute politically".

"He was very complex and very intelligent," Mr Robinson replied.

The DUP deputy leader told the inquiry that he had been sent a police file on Wright's murder several

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weeks before he obtained a June 2003 debate in Parliament about Wright's death.

He told the inquiry that he shredded the file, "as I do with all confidential files after I have taken what I need from them".

Mr Batchelor also asked if Billy Wright had a higher profile than DUP leader Ian Paisley at the time of the 1996 Drumcree standoff.

"I don't think anybody has a higher profile than Dr Paisley," Mr Robinson said.

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