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THIS WEEK PROGRAMME - SIR JOHN HERMON, RUC, CHIEF
CONSTABLE

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This week in the North loyalist anger over the Anglo-Irish Agreement spilled over on to the streets. What had been billed as an orderly and dignified 12 hour protest on Monday was abruptly extended to 24 hours and fears that the hard men had out-franked the politicians throughout the preparations for the strike were amply borne out on the day. After a peaceful start the day of action quickly became a day of intimidation. Motorists were harassed, shopkeepers threatened, there were clashes with the RUC and as the day wore on areas of Belfast fell victim to mob rule as premises were burned and cars wrecked. Throughout all this the police, it was claimed, had stood back from the conflict. T.V. pictures showed them taking a relaxed view of loyalist road blocks and in one memorable confrontation facing the ire of a young motorist who voiced the widespread view that the RUC were doing nothing to help them through a road block into work. The police were deluged with complaints about intimidation and many nationalist spokesmen castigated them for the easy treatment of loyalist protesters. So what was the reaction of Chief Constable Sir John Hermon to these claims? For This Week our Northern correspondent, Jim Dougal, spoke to him at Police Headquarters this weekend.

Chief Constable
Sir John Hermon

You mentioned criticism on Monday, the RUC will inevitably always be under criticism because of a grievously divided society, polarised society, politically and social and in so many other ways, so that conflict is not unusual. In relation to the events of Monday we must realise that this was notified as a peaceful day of protest and that we received notification within the law of very, very many parades and cavalcades and we were told that it would be peaceful and we extended a very warm offer of assistance with those people to ensure that it was kept within the law. But it evolved and changed in some quite sinister way, first of all it was extended from 12 hours to a 24 hour demonstration at the last minute. We realised that it was going to be very premeditated throughout the six counties. We became aware that there was a sinister paramilitary involvement also and that some of them were intent on implementing strife. We were aware that the Provisional IRA might, in fact we were aware that it was their intention if possible to, take advantage of the situation. We were aware that this could have resulted in very serious communal conflict, particularly between Catholic and Protestant interfaces which are throughout the six counties. I mentioned the paramilitaries and we knew that some of them would wish

to provoke violence so with keeping the roads open what a relevantly straight forward matter and we decided to keep a series of roads open but we had the overall responsibility to maintain the public peace in all sense and that predominated our efforts because this 12 hours extended to a 24 hour demonstrated could have been escalated by sectarian conflict, by a breakdown in public disorder, by the involvement of paramilitaries and almost inevitably the terrorists on top of that could have gone on indefinitely and there were hidden hands who would not have been unhappy to see that occur. In relation to the complaints against the ^{police,} I think that they should be put against that perspective which I have now given you. Beyond that I will say that there were statements made not by the police and to which I would never have subscribed which unfortunately raised community expectations in a rather simplistic way and certainly without consultation with us.

Jim Dougal:

You're saying that people in charge politically suggested that roads would be kept open, that the RUC would ensure that people who wanted to go to work would get to work, that was not your perception?

Sir John Hermon: Not at all. I have identified the scenario which we were dealing with and we knew that it was going to be very difficult and may I say that from 8 p.m. on the Sunday preceding the day before we kept the roads open, we removed literally hundreds of road blocks, and at 7 a.m. the situation was very stable, from 7 a.m. until way after 10 a.m., 11 o'clock, 12 o'clock, there were literally thousands of protesters who came out, in some places peacefully, other places blocking roads with vehicles, sometimes aggressively. The police were not always in strength to deal with particular situations in the way that they would have wished and this was an inevitability against the background which I have now painted for you.

Jim Dougal: Are you saying that the people in charge politically raised expectations up to which the RUC were not capable for various reasons of coming?

Sir John Hermon: Now I confined my remarks to certain statements that had been made and I'm not going to get into the political side.

Jim Dougal: Could I suggest to you that while in some areas the RUC were seen to confront strikers in many areas the television pictures showed them as onlookers and to particularly the nationalist community that would appear to be a police force which was unwilling to confront loyalist strikers, now whether you like it or not that

is a perception which came through.

Sir John Hermon: If the protest had been by the nationalists similar allegations would have been made against the RUC. We will be criticised any way because there are always factors in the community who would do it. We did not get this 100% right but we got it very right indeed and I'm amazed that before midnight on the Monday peace was restored and I'm very happy to say that there were no deaths, certainly no murders, no grievous injuries except to police officers, I know there were a fair number of police officers injured. Nobody had been intimidated out of their homes except about 15 police officers who had their homes attacked. The stability which emerged immediately at the end of the day was extraordinary. On the Tuesday it was almost as though, except for the debris, it had never been. How many people would have sought to have it otherwise.

Jim Dougal: What do you say to people who looked at the pictures and, indeed, people who went to road blocks and saw the police apparently doing nothing, to those people who now say that they can have no confidence in that kind of a police force?

Sir John Hermon: I would suspect that quite a few of the people who said this didn't have much before hand anyway because of their attitudes. I said we didn't get it right, we did make some mistakes but we had done a very indepth

investigation, examination, that is continuing by the way but I'm satisfied that we got it surprisingly right and this community, Protestant and Catholic, all law abiding people, if they looked at this rationally and look at the stability which exists at this moment, have a great deal to be thankful for and that thanks is due to the efforts generally of the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Jim Dougal: You would obviously disagree with those who say that the RUC is there to uphold some kind of unionist right to strike and to protest and to intimidate but...

Sir John Hermon: People must disabuse themselves of this. I would refer them to my annual reports over six years and look at the attrition rate against so called loyalists and so called republican terrorists and paramilitaries and criminals and the evidence there is overwhelming. Our attrition rate against so called loyalists is infinitely higher than our attrition rate against republicians despite the fact that the level of violence from so called republicians is 8 or 10 times as high as that, I'm speaking in terrorist and security terms, than that of the loyalists. It is a nonsense. These are perceptions which are too blithely prompted by people whose aims is to denigrate the police.

Jim Dougal: Indeed, but perhaps if you look at it and take the two events the strike and then you take the tape recordings which were released which showed policemen opposing the Anglo-Irish Agreement and being applauded for it, there is in all of that a perception of a police force that doesn't want to have anything to do with the implementation of this deal.

Sir John Hermon: There is stupendous pressure in this community at the moment, that's self-evident, there is no need to identify that to you. The policemen are human beings, some of them may speak in an ill-advised way. I can't speak for them nor am I informed specifically what was said and I'm not terribly impressed by the source of the information anyway but I will say that the history, the performance of this force, I speak only for my tenure of office though it could refer well beyond that, well before that, since 1980 until now and the way that we have gone about our duties, and the success with which we have achieved a massive reduction in terrorist activities and my annual report about to come out will identify how successful we were in 1985. I totally refute allegations about a prejudice or biased police force, the evidence is there. The fact that last year we had 23 police officers murdered and you know the circumstances as well as I do and yet we continue to serve this community impartially

surely is evidence that we are professional and a sensitive police force.

Jim Dougal: But how do you answer the fact, that there appears to be a fact that there are a lot of people in your police force who do not want to go and confront this situation because they do not support what the two Governments have done together?

Sir John Hermon: But I don't accept that, I'm talking of a vote of 11,000 people, over 3,000 civilians, a part time reserve of almost 3,000. I'm talking in terms of 15,000 people plus who are loyal and support and that's a lot of people. We're talking about a fractional number who are apparently allegedly involved in discussing some matters which are not their business to discuss. I don't want to take it any further.

Jim Dougal Your federation with the strike does appear to be unhappy with some of the aspects of quality and some of the aspects of your direction and some of them appear to be unhappy with the way that they are being told to do their job if you like.

Sir John Hermon: Well there were Commissioners, Chief Constables in England, Wales, Scotland, not everyone is always happy with command and it would be a funny situation if it were.

Jim Dougal: I know that this one, this Northern Ireland Police Federation is more unhappy with its Chief Constable than.....

Sir John Hermon: Oh I wouldn't believe so, in fact I'm satisfied that's not, so let me say this, that the Chairman of the Police Federation has put that matter of which you've just spoken in a proper perspective. I couldn't have put it better myself and I'd let it rest that way.

Jim Dougal: Perhaps. Could I just go on a bit Sir John because I think there is the perception that perhaps, may be from the British side as well, can the British Government depend on the RUC?

Sir John Hermon: The law can depend on the Royal Ulster Constabulary. I, as Chief Constable, the police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary we are accountable to the police authority for an adequate, sufficient police force. We are accountable to the law for its proper application. My statement which has just gone out says that and its as simple as that. I have got no doubt whatsoever I know this force very well and we would not be found lacking in the performance of our proper duty within the law.

Jim Dougal: And whether or not individual policemen support or do not support this Anglo-Irish Agreement, you are convinced that they will continue to do their duty?

Sir John Dougal: Politics is not our business. Our business is the maintenance of the role of law and we will enforce that to the best of our ability.

Jim Dougal: What do you say to politicians on the unionist side who would appear to be suggesting to RUC men that in some way they should not be a party to the implementation of the Anglo-Irish deal if it means doing their duty as you would see it on the streets against people who would go outside the law in

demonstrating against it?

Sir John Hermon: I will not comment on that question other than to say that the actions and the intent of those people must be very abundantly clear to sensible people.

Jim Dougal: What then do you say to the criticism from the other side of your force from the SDLP of a force that doesn't administrate properly?

Sir John Hermon? You would be very and very pleasantly surprised at the messages of support and appreciation which have come to us including many members of the SDLP and other political parties. This is not a case of the police failing in their duties. We made mistakes and I've admitted that but the overwhelming thrust of our effort was totally successful as is evident by the stability on late on the night and the succeeding day and since.

Jim Dougal: Is there an effort, do you think, amongst the political people generally to try and bring the RUC to a point where moral is very low, are they actually in some way lowering the moral of your force?

Sir John Hermon: No they are not. The moral of this force is high and this force is visited very frequently by myself, formally and informally, and the police authority, and members of the police authority visit the force and consistently find that moral is sky high. I don't want to emphasise that unduly. That is the position and no one is going to erode it.

Jim Dougal: I suppose I would be going a bit too far in asking you if you supported the Agreement yourself?

Sir John Hermon: You're going too far, read my statements. I have made a statement on the 29th of November which I commend to you and all your listeners which states

the continuing position of the Chief Constable and the Royal Ulster Constabulary in relation to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and I will give you a copy of the statement before you leave.

Jim Dougal: Do you accept any political direction?

Sir John Hermon: No I do not and will not and not only will I not but I will make it abundantly clear to my police authority and if necessary the public if I come under any sort of political crisis.

Jim Dougal: And you haven't? Is that true to say?

Sir John Hermon: It's clear that as yet I haven't nor have I any need to.

Jim Dougal: Could I finally ask you about the relationship between the police force of North and South because it has been said over recent years particularly that there is a very bad and poor relationship between yourself and the Garda Commissioner Mr. Wren and that that poor relationship leads to a poor relationship between the two forces generally?

Sir John Hermon: I have 36 years in the RUC and with all of these years and particularly when I served in the border and I have on numerable occasions that relationship has always been first class. There is no difference between myself and the Commissioner of the Garda. I do reassure you we are working very closely, harmoniously towards a common goal which must be the eradication of terrorism and paramilitarism from whatever source.

Jim Dougal: And there are no question of difficulties?

Sir John Hermon: There never were. So far as I am concerned there never were. It is in professional policing those little things can have no relevance nor have any place value.

Jim Dougal: Are you saying that the relationship is good?

Sir John Hermon: Of course it is good.

The end.