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*Hermon
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Transcript of interview with Sir John Hermon on UTV's
Counterpoint Programme - 7 May, 1987

Interview: Sir John. Arising out of the debate in the House of Commons yesterday you have promised more recruits, better back-up facilities, now the point I want to make is that the public are increasingly cynical about this cycle - an atrocity that is followed by a security review, another atrocity and so on. To what extent, and this is the question, to what extent is this review a significant development as opposed to yet another cosmetic exercise.

Mr. Hermon: For some time we in the RUC have been concerned about this upsurge in terrorist activity by the Provisional IRA and this was before the recent deaths and we have been studying it very carefully. This culminated last week in my meeting with my chief officers and Divisional Commander and indeed, the ~~national head of our crime investigation department, and we have~~ announced yesterday in the House of Commons are part of our proposals and I am very pleased with them. But you will note that the Secretary of State did mention other matters including those of law, which he said would have to be carefully considered and he identified that there was rather more to our proposals than that which were capable of being announced yesterday.

Interviewer: Now you're not giving many details. What is new in this package.

Mr. Hermon: We are asking that the law dealing with the terrorists and the procedures leading to their appearance in court be examined very carefully. We have made and will be making further very, very carefully considered proposals.

Interviewer: Can I go into the judicial aspect later in this interview. Right now, I would like to talk about effects on the ground. What will we see as a result of yesterday's initiatives?

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Mr. Hermon: As the result of yesterday's initiatives you certainly, it will take a little bit of time, but we already have set in trend as of today, our recruiting procedures which will be accelerated. You will see men coming on the ground rather more quickly than people might believe. You have heard it said that the UDR are being restructured and we will be involving those resources immediately also.

Interviewer: Will the SAS be used?

Mr. Hermon: The SAS will never be ruled out. That will always be a factor and we do have that resource to call on. If we need it, we'll use it.

Interviewer: What about this speculation that the RUC will actually be flying their own helicopters.

Mr. Hermon: The RUC will not be flying their own helicopters. There is an enhanced availability in helicopters and this has been accepted by the Ministry of Defence and are now available to us.

Interviewer: The thought occurs to me arising out of all this, if you were so advanced in your thinking, why did it take another atrocity to precipitate this initiative. Why could you not have actually had it implemented beforehand.

Mr. Hermon: These matters which are under discussion, some of them, quite a few of them, have already been before the Secretary of State and were being processed quite quickly. Obviously the situation, the escalation of murder in the Community and the atrocities being committed by the terrorists have brought this to the forefront of the public's mind and the politician's mind, the Secretary of State, certainly we have agreed new initiatives but quite a few of these things were already in the pipeline.

Interviewer: Tell me, do you share the view that was expressed frequently in the commons yesterday that what's needed is not a security review but an entirely new security policy?

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Mr. Hermon: The present policy has been in existence for quite a long time and it means that the security thrust will be within the law and the police cannot act other than within the law and the military are in support. What we've got constantly to do is to revise our strategies and our tactics to meet the new thrust coming from the terrorists.

Interviewer: But what I'm asking you is would you like a new security policy?

Mr. Hermon: Within the present policy I would wish to see improvements made and we have asked for those improvements.

Interviewer: You are aware of the feelings of the force. Are you angry, as policemen I've spoken to are angry, that despite the ongoing attacks on your men it took the deaths of two prominent people to get the establishment to sit up and take notice.

Mr. Hermon: I think it's unfortunate that the politicians and to a degree the media, have emphasised this and it was they who emphasised this. Of course we are deeply concerned at the deaths of our officers and not least more recently with them murdered in the most callous, vicious and cowardly way. That causes a deep concern and we have again to look at our protection, as in fact we had last year when extreme loyalists were attacking the homes of members of the force and individual members.

Interviewer: Yes, but do you feel there are two different reactions, one for prominent people and a lesser one for your own force.

Mr. Hermon: Obviously, any prominent person who dies, for instance the frightening death of the Dowager Duchess of Westminister elicited a very considerable public response, which would not have been related to a normal member of the community. There are comparisons to be drawn on that.

Interviewer: So you accept that as a fact of war.

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Mr. Hermon: I think that the fact that the deaths of so many of the security forces have been, to a degree, ignored and I am referring to politicians as well as the media, though the community feel that deeply. I think that that's sad but that's not in any way to draw comparison between that of an eminent judge in the community.

Interviewer: Now a guerilla war, by its very nature, allows the terrorist to hold the initiative. You've heard again and again the calls for the security forces to take the gloves off. Now what in your view is the reality here? What more can you do to get tough with terrorists?

Mr. Hermon: The nature of our stance must be altered to meet the threat that's coming from them now, which is really, their policy is to terrorise the community, that is what they are, terrorists, and their intention is more than, for quite some time even, to terrorise this community into subjection into their war, that includes the security forces and they will not succeed in that.

Interviewer: Now what more could you do, but that's the point.

Mr. Hermon: Well, I can't say clearly, in clear terms what we are going to do. I left a meeting of my security people this morning before I came here and our very firm initiatives are already under way.

Interviewer: But the thrust of all this is have you the capacity to get tougher than you are at the moment?

Mr. Hermon: Yes.

Interviewer: Much? How much?

Mr. Hermon: Our stance will be different and sharper and the army and ourselves, coordinated by the police, will be enhanced very considerably. These attacks which have taken place have

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been the most cowardly ones in peaceful areas, Policemen doing their normal duties, serving the community in seaside resorts etc., we will sharpen our protection of those officers and we will sharpen our capacity in a covert way, something which will not be easily seen, but also in an overt way. I would prefer not to go into details and not to be pressed too much on that point, you will see the effect.

Interviewer: Indeed, I appreciate the sensitivity of the security nature, but what I'm really getting at is the public going to be aware of your hardened approach in the fight against terrorism?

Mr. Hermon: I have said before generally in other places that this will be the year of the terrorist because that is their intent, we must put ourselves in a position to frustrate their endeavours. The last two years, most unfortunately, we were involved with public disorder and contentious parades, that detracted from our ability to deal with the terrorist and I think that should not be under-estimated. The massive resources of the police which were directed towards public order situations, that did erode our capacity. Thankfully we are getting very very considerable cooperation from the organisers of parades and from the public.

Interviewer: Now, we'll go into parades right now, in fact, the question arose last night when we saw more violence that followed another IRA funeral, is there not a way for you to uphold the law without providing the IRA with that propaganda opportunity which exploits such a spectacle of riot police escorting mourners at a paramilitary funeral, that being the perception.

Mr. Hermon: It's difficult. We have to maintain the law, the Provisional IRA in particular, though other paramilitary organisations are equally guilty, of manipulating a scene for propaganda purposes. This is difficult, for instance the funeral yesterday, we know that provisional Sinn Fein and

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Provisional IRA had carefully structured that, very carefully structured it and had structured the violence behind it. We saw stones being dropped, breeze-blocks being dropped from behind stone walls where police were standing. Their preparation was very considered. We took a purely defensive position, you may have seen on your cameras that they were police officers wearing normal uniform with caps. We, of course, were ready to move in with the protective riot gear. It was a carefully orchestrated funeral. Where was the cortege, where was the hearse carrying the coffin, where were the family mourners. Where was the integrity, respect and dignity which becomes any funeral, the burial of any person, it was totally absent.

Interviewer: But we also saw police attacking people who appeared to be mourners. This gave rise to allegations last night and in the morning press of police brutality, now what's your response to that?

Mr. Hermon: My response to that is, and I was discussing this with the Chief Officer this morning, they had made every effort with clergy and local people to have that a peaceful funeral. Their efforts were quite stupendous. We did put policemen there in normal police uniform in the hope that the people who were attending that funeral would respect our endeavours. In fact, the few people who orchestrated the violence, and we only reacted to violence we didn't provoke any violence, were intent on causing trouble and on this I would say the police generally abhor those situations. The gallantry which they show, the steadiness which they show, and have shown anyone with any reasonably approach must see the sacrifice and the commitment of this force.

Interviewer: You know as well as I do that a propaganda opportunity like this is well and truly exploited. On the one hand it serves the international purposes of the IRA very well and at the same time domestically it creates a recruiting opportunity for them. Now the question is this, can you not be a little more streetwise and avoid presenting them with this opportunity on a plate.

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Mr. Hermon: You will recollect that the three funerals in greatest contention was the Lawrence Marley funeral, remember that Lawrence Marley was a terrorist murdered by terrorists, the Marchant funeral, he was a member of the UVF murdered by PIRA, and the last funeral was of a terrorist recently released from jail who had blown himself up with his own bomb in the process of attacking a police station. They were not normal funerals. The people who would endeavour to orchestrate those funerals are not law abiding people. The families essentially were brushed to one side. There's a limit to what we can do if we are to maintain the law and these terrorists using guns and uniforms in relation to funerals, they use the same guns to murder people, have done and will continue to do so. The law cannot be breached in that way.

Interviewer: No-one's suggesting it should be, but what one wonders is this why have you decided to take a stand on paramilitary funerals at this stage when you could be, let's say, a bit more discreet about handling the affair and in that way prevent them being given this opportunity of exploiting the situation.

Mr. Hermon: The discretion, if we retire too far from the funeral, will be breached by the production of weapons and the wearing of uniform. And you've seen this again and again. If there was an understanding that the family would control the funerals that the church, who have a great influence here and a function to perform, if they would influence the behaviour and of those paramilitaries who would respect the dignity of the dead and the church and the family there would be no problem. That has been totally absent in the first and third of the funerals to which I referred.

Interviewer: Now we heard Father Reeve of Clonard, I think, saying that surely there is room for compromise. Is this what you are getting at?

Mr. Hermon: Of course, this is what I am getting at, but you

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cannot compromise with terrorism. Bishop Cathal Daly made a public statement about funerals and I have already commented on it as being an articulate and intellectual definition of the funeral and what should happen and I respect that and indeed I'm studying it very carefully and unfortunately, these murders of one terrorist by another or by their own hand came quickly. I will shortly be issuing instructions to the force which I will make public as to our stance on funerals for the future.

Interviewer: Will you go public on it?

Mr. Hermon: Yes, of course I will.

Interviewer: What is the nature of your thinking at the moment.

Mr. Hermon: I have essentially said that in a recent interview with the Belfast Telegraph and it's all there for people to read. It will be consolidated in a direction to the force which I will make available to the community.

Interviewer: Now, Bishop Daly has made a statement which you consider helpful. Have you noticed the benefit of that on the ground?

Mr. Hermon: I see a very high degree of responsibility in the church's, and not least the catholic church, so far as Bishop Cathal Daly is concerned, a very responsible and a very aware view and an understanding of the problem. I appreciate their very deep concern for the families, for the bereaved and for the church's position.

Interviewer: But have you noticed that working it's way through to the ground. Has it affected attitudes on the ground?

Mr. Hermon: To the extent that it's possible because the paramilitaries and let's look at the funeral yesterday, there were Adams, McGuinness and Morrisson, they're not unknown to the police, their reputations' are not unknown to this community and

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their intentions are widely known. I will put it no further than that. They were not friends of the family, they were not mourners in that sense.

Interviewer: What would have happened, do you think, if prominent catholic clergymen had made utterances like this in the past number of years? Would it have made your job any better, would it have helped normalise the situation?

Mr. Hermon: I think we need these utterances from all responsible sections of the community and they will always be helpful and I will say this that we need responsibility from the community itself who are looking for something better. This population of ours, whatever their persuasion, whatever their aspiration, 99% of them want to live in peace and to the benefit of their children and their families.

Interviewer: Let's turn from the street troubles in nationalist areas to the violence that's been associated with the Protestant marching season. Now, how does this summer look to you, how is it shaping up?

Mr. Hermon: We had a difficult 1985 and in 1984/85 we decided the parades and demonstrations had, some of them, not many, had got something out of hand, had become very defiant, and indeed the behaviour of many of the bands was provocative in the extreme to those people of another persuasion and we did take very firm action in '85 and '86 despite the violence emanating from the Anglo-Irish Agreement. I am happy to say that the responsible organisations are working very closely on this and are anxious that those few parades which were contentious that they would be defused and the stability restored.

Interviewer: Is there a change in attitudes now?

Mr. Hermon: I am very happy with the way the community, generally, is showing a degree of responsibility and particularly

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the leaders of organisations. I am immensely impressed in their efforts to control bands and their own people.

Interviewer: Now what have you actually gained by all this, by applying the letter of the law, when you consider the hostility that's now being generated against the police in loyalist areas. What are the figures? 500 of your men attacked, 120 RUC families forced out of their homes? Where's the benefit?

Mr. Hermon: I'm not quite sure that I understand what you mean by applying the letter of the law. We endeavour to apply the law with sensitivity and discretion and with respect for people and we encourage them to co-operate with it. Where you get defiant insistence that the law would be defied it is our function to maintain the rule of law.

Interviewer: I'm getting at this question of gain. What did you benefit by enforcing the law as a result of Portadown '85?

Mr. Hermon: I think that if you take 1986 and you are concentrating on the attacks on policemen's homes and police families and individual police, remember also that the minority, the catholic community were attacked. Their homes, their churches, their schools, as individuals. Moderate, loyalist protestants who didn't conform to the extremism which is being shown were also attacked and intimidated as were the police. This created, I believe, an understanding throughout the community that we were there to defend them and we did defend them and we made very many people amenable through the court. We've got a great degree of understanding, appreciation and support for what we did in '85 and '86.

Interviewer: Do you regard that as a net gain for the force being perceived now, perhaps, more fairly more openly by both communities.

Mr. Hermon: What I'm saying is that the vast bulk of this community deeply appreciated what the RUC did, so gallantly

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against vicious attack, their courage was stupendous. People must not misunderstand that. Some people who might not like the RUC, and I would like to make this point, some people, and it's a minority I do promise you, extremists on both sides of the spectrum, I would ask these people and this community generally if we weren't here, would they like to leave policing to Provisional Sinn Féin, Provisional IRA, the UVF, the UDA, Ulster Volunteer Force where would they be if they were depending on those people to police this community. We have an essential function to perform.

Interviewer: Alright Chief Constable, can we change gear, we have a lot to cover and the interview is running out. Last week we saw Tom King doing his walkabout in bandit country along the border. What did that prove except to say that to be safe he needed the security of an entire company of soldiers.

Mr. Hermon: The Secretary of State, and I was aware that he was going there, went firstly, to see the scene for himself and to understand the problem and he goes about the community very, very widely and endeavours to understand the problems with which the security forces are faced. I say no more than that, but we are referring to the murder, the very vile murder of Judge Gibson and his wife, people who were approaching retirement.

Interviewer: Could we go into that separately in just a moment. I'm more concerned about this question of the publicity stunt. For instance, why would you not engage, or why are you not associated with that kind of activity in terms of a publicity stunt.

Mr. Hermon: Well, I mean I make these visits as a matter of routine in Kinawley and Ballygally and Enniskillen and wherever and I have been down to Newry, of course, on Saturday. The Secretary of State wanted to see for himself.

Interviewer: Alright, well let's get down to the fundamental questions here which really is not about a publicity stunt or

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otherwise but whether border security is the work of a police force or of an army. Now what's your view?

Mr. Hermon: Well, I've heard some rather simplistic views by some armchair and indeed one or two Westminster armchair generals, I have too many Chief Constables who don't have the responsibility of the authority. It is not as simple as that. We are charged with maintaining the law in all of Northern Ireland, whether it's from Bangor to Belcoo, or from Portrush to Pettigo or from Newry to Coleraine, we are responsible for all of Northern Ireland. It is simplistic to talk about the border because we must police the border but we must utilise the army and our support in a sensible way and we do that.

Interviewer: So you don't find yourself in conflict with this situation?

Mr. Hermon: No, I don't find myself in conflict because the police and army are working together and on the border we will task the army in greater numbers and in many different ways to ensure that that border, as far as is possible with about 280 cross-border roads and 313 miles of frontier, it's very difficult for the army and for ourselves.

Interviewer: Now without challenging your position as Chief Constable, but the question goes even deeper than that because as you are aware, there is a growing resentment within the force about the way

Mr. Hermon: I'm sorry I'm not aware of that

(Interruptions)

Mr. Hermon: I know my force and they are stupendous people, dedicated to serving this community. I cannot accept that supposition on your part.

Interviewer: Let me put a perception to you and if you would

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be good enough just to let me complete the sentiment. It is this that the question of border security goes even deeper because policemen are growing in their resentment, in the way they are being involved in this Ulsterisation process which they perceive the RUC, which they perceive being turning the RUC into a paramilitary force, now what's your response to that perception?

Mr. Hermon: Well, the first thing, I'll say this very carefully, this word Ulsterisation, this is a misnomer and it is a word which is dragged out again and again, the policy is the rule of law for which the police are responsible with whatever military aid is necessary for as long and wherever necessary. That's what we are talking about. This is not Ulsterisation. It happens to be that the Royal Ulster Constabulary is the police force of this community and we are responsible for applying the law. If you wish to call that in political terms Ulsterisation, so be it.

Interviewer: And the prospect of being turned into a paramilitary force?

Mr. Hermon: You must differentiate between the concept and philosophy of a police force and the equipment which they require to deal with the problem with which they are faced and again, it's a rather simplistic interpretation. Our concept and philosophy of policing is exactly the same as in any other police force in the United Kingdom. Our problems are different, therefore our equipment is different. But the philosophy is the same.

Interviewer: But policemen I've spoken to are saying that they are not doing the job they joined the force to do.

Mr. Hermon: I would say that the vast majority of the force has joined it in this past 18 years. We have recruited such a great degree, the vast majority of them knew what they were joining and have been doing that job since they joined. I

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cannot accept your comment and we are accepting at the moment one candidate, one recruit for about every 12 or 15 applicants.

Interviewer: How many of those are catholics?

Mr. Hermon: We don't record the religion of our members and as a matter of policy. A policeman is a policeman, but so far as I'm aware, it's certainly no lower than it was and I think it's getting higher. But we don't ask specifically the religion of policemen. That's another political point. A policeman does his duty. No-one's interested in his religion. If he doesn't do his duty, then they'll look for the reason. In Northern Ireland it's an obvious one.

Interviewer: Could we change the ground again perhaps to examine the Judge Gibson incident a little further. Now first of all, this talk about relations between the two police forces. How is it in this day and age, 18 months on from the Anglo-Irish Agreement, how is it that the Gardai and the RUC don't even have direct radio contact in an area where one assumes closer co-operation against terrorists would be automatic.

Mr. Hermon: Of course we have good direct radio contact in almost every part of the border. In relation to Judge Gibson and I think it's rather sad the way this has been represented, we must recognise that he was a member of our judiciary, a public spirited man who was vilely murdered. I want to make that point. First of all, in relation to the manner of his escort, I can tell you that I am having, there's a murder investigation going on and it was a vile murder of two people, the other thing that I'm doing, as always we do, we constantly review our procedures. That is underway also.

Interviewer: But the issue is, did the Gardai call you by radio to alert you that he was about to transfer

Mr. Hermon: I'm not making any comment on the details. I'm having it examined and at the moment, I've got not deep concerns, but we are reviewing the system as we always do.

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Interviewer: This leaves a serious reserve on the public mind that there is no effective communication between the two forces at this critical point.

Mr. Hermon: There is very effective contact between the RUC and the Gardai at all points and I want to make that very clear. What you are talking about is something which has appeared in the media. (Interruptions)

Interviewer: Was there a lapse in security?

Mr. Hermon: Certainly, I'm not saying there was any lapse, nor would I have it said. I would ask you not please to put those points to me. It's unjustified.

Interviewer: Well, alright I don't think you've satisfied the point, but I respect your position on that. Could we talk about crime and punishment. As Chief Constable, and you referred to it at the start of this interview, you're fighting a war against terrorism, how satisfied are you that the penalties for terrorist offences are a sufficient deterrent?

Mr. Hermon: I say this that we have had a very successful year in 1986 and a very high detection rate, higher I believe than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, but what is being concealed is that our very success is hiding the fact that our attrition rate against the terrorist is not as high as we would like it to be. The terrorist is using the legal process and the democratic process to destroy those two very things, the judicial structure, the legal structure, and the democratic process. We feel that there must be further enhancement of the procedures and that law to raise the level of attrition against the terrorist.

Interviewer: In what areas? Are we talking about the remission of sentences, does that worry you?

Mr. Hermon: I think that's something which needs review.

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Interviewer: What would you like to see?

Mr. Hermon: I wouldn't comment on that. But I do think that this 50% remission for terrorists is rather too generous.

Interviewer: What about selected internments?

Mr. Hermon: That's a matter which certainly the authority exists and was retained recently in the debate in the Commons. I would not wish to discuss that at the moment. It's always something that's there, but I wouldn't want to go into detail.

Interviewer: And the right to remain silent? Do you think that should be abolished?

Mr. Hermon: I think that's something which must be looked at very seriously. That and the onus of proof and some other aspects of law. But those are matters which we've identified and I would say that the Secretary of State has said in the House of Commons that these things must be approached with a very responsible attitude or it could become counter-productive.

Interviewer: Now, we're near the end of the interview. I must refer to the appearance, the perception that relations are strained between you and the Police Federation. What is the public to make of a situation where a Chief Constable and members of his own force are at odds. How can they have the confidence in you that you would want?

Mr. Hermon: I want to make it quite clear that I see the Federation as an integral part, an essential part of good management of the Force. I'd prefer to see it within the Force particularly in this contentious time in the community where politics, constitution, many other things are the subject of serious debate. I think the police should make no comment about those things at all. In relation to the Federation, our Federation, at all levels and all committees, is totally integrated and they are a very responsible body of people, an

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essential part of good management. I'm not at odds with the Federation and indeed throughout the divisions and sub-divisions in all regions they are playing a very full part as professional, operational police officers and as good representatives of their members.

Interviewer: Very near the end Chief Constable. What is your reaction to Eldon Griffiths in the Commons last night when he said it was time for you to go gracefully, that it was time for new men and new measures.

Mr. Hermon: Well, I gathered he said that, I think it's not the first time and probably not the last. Eldon Griffiths is employed by the Federation as their spokesman in the House of Commons and I think he makes some of these statements rather casually. Let me say, I have now been Chief Constable for over seven years. I am still younger than four of the immediate five predecessors and their collective service only equals mine and my immediate past predecessor, I have twice his service already, but I'm younger than most of them there still than when they were appointed. I think that we mustn't take retirement too seriously.

Interviewer: But you've got eight years run in one of the most testing security jobs in Europe.