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Prime MinisterINTERVIEW WITH DAVID ERVINE, PUP AND GARY McMICHAEL, UDP
RADIO ULSTER - MONDAY 22 JULY 1996With swimming
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The Prime Minister will this afternoon meet and speak to the political representatives of loyalist paramilitaries. The leaders of the Ulster Democratic and Progressive Unionist Parties are going to No 10 Downing Street while inter-party talks begin again in Belfast. What will they be saying? And on what do they expect to be questioned? David Ervine of the PUP joins us by telephone while our radio car is at the UDP's headquarters with Gary McMichael.

Wendy Austin: Good morning gentlemen.

Gary McMichael: Good morning.

Wendy Austin: You're meeting with the Prime Minister today. What, Gary McMichael, will you be saying to him?

Gary McMichael: Well, I think there are a number of issues which need to be addressed. First of all, the talks process, we need to see movement. We have to build upon the process to give people confidence, that the way forward is the democratic way. And secondly we have to see the British Government deal effectively with the IRA threat which threatens to bring the whole house down.

Wendy Austin: How, David Ervine, would you like to think that the Prime Minister will answer the questions that you'll be putting to him. How, for instance, could he reassure you that he was prepared to deal effectively with the IRA threat?

David Ervine: Well, I don't think he'll tell us a whole lot about what he might do about an IRA threat. I'm sure he'll say well everything that can be done will be done. But essentially there are other arguments as

well that I think everybody last week looked into the abyss and didn't like what they saw. The vast majority of people, and I imagine the Prime Minister was one of those, and I'm sure that the whole basis of meeting us is to say, or to look at how we might move the talks process forward, because I think Gary has made this point publicly quite a lot that the whole process in Northern Ireland is hanging by a thread, and the only glimmer of hope is the talks process at Stormont, so that's where all the energies and all the effort has to be placed. We've prevaricated and played games for 7 weeks when the people of Northern Ireland expected better and frankly now I think it's time we get on with some real work. I'm sure that that's what the Prime Minister is wanting to meet, not just us, but he's not and he's says he's going to meet all delegations at the talks.

Wendy Austin:

What if, Gary McMichael, the Prime Minister's idea on how things might be moved forward, was that he would meet you, representatives of the loyalist paramilitaries in some way if you like, and that then that would be an excuse whereby he would be able to meet with Sinn Fein as his next step along.

Gary McMichael:

Well, I don't think that is a sensible way forward, nor do I think it's likely. Sinn Fein are precluded from the negotiations and from meetings with Ministers in legislation and I think it would be very difficult for the situation to arise where Ministers were not allowed to talk to Sinn Fein but the Prime Minister decided to do so. There are certainly those out there who will seek to portray this historic meeting as merely a subterfuge, as an opportunity to open the door for Sinn Fein. That's certainly not the case. And what I'd have to say

is that if this, if it did turn out there was an attempt to do so, to engage with Sinn Fein without an IRA ceasefire, then loyalists would find it very difficult to reconcile maintaining a place within the negotiations.

Wendy Austin:

You could see David Ervine though how people might feel if this was a possible scenario. Here we have the Prime Minister meeting and shaking hands, one assumes, for the first time with people who have terrorist convictions and that is one of the problems which apparently exists with some of the representatives of Sinn Fein. Might this be the situation as you see it?

David Ervine:

Well, I think Gary has alluded to that. I think, as well, you know you can, there will be all kinds of people who will read all kinds of things into it. There is no way that the Prime Minister can be in a position to meet Sinn Fein until there is a ceasefire. I only wish he could. I only wish that they could enter the process. He's meeting us and it's as simple as that. I think it's also in recognition of the maintenance of the loyalist ceasefire that he's meeting us, and therefore is in direct contravention to any notion that he should meet Sinn Fein.

Wendy Austin:

On the subject of ceasefires, he will doubtless be looking for reassurance from both of you as to the situation regarding the ceasefire by the Combined Loyalist Military Command. Will you be able to give him those assurances?

David Ervine:

I think what we will try and do is give the Prime Minister an absolute up-to-date definitive circumstance in relation to the loyalist ceasefire.

It's something that I've been unable to do publicly, for what, almost a week now, and I think he'll be grateful for that analysis. It will of course place him in a position where he's in the knowledge of that. But by the same token, there are some things that we want to say to him, that can benefit those within the loyalist community who are genuinely striving for peace.

Wendy Austin

Are there things Gary McMichael that you want to say to the Prime Minister, that you couldn't tell me about, that you couldn't tell your own constituency about, if you like?

Gary McMichael:

Well, I think that it would be naive of me to be going to speak to the Prime Minister without having first consulted my constituency, and certainly we will be making it very clear to the Prime Minister, who has this opportunity to hear for the first time, at first hand, the views of the loyalist community, the anger, frustration and alienation which is felt, about the manner in which loyalism has been addressed in the peace process, the lack of recognition for the positivity and constructive approach which loyalism has taken over the last 2 years under severe provocation, and the anxiety which is being felt about the potential for the IRA to run rough shod over this whole process and to bring it to its knees.

Wendy Austin:

Well that meeting takes place later today. David Ervine and Gary McMichael, thank you both for joining us.