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Comments from (1) David Trimble, (2) Bríd Rodgers and (3) David Jones, Portadown Orange Order
BBC Radio Ulster - 6 October 1998

pa Drumcree

(1) David Trimble

Interviewer: Question re allowing the Order to walk down the Garvaghy Road.

Mr Trimble: Well, I'm sure that the Orangemen of Portadown will join me in condemning this murder and condemning it without reservation and I'm sure that they are also appalled at the way in which their protests have been used by people to create this sort of violence. We don't know exactly who did it but I think I would distinguish it from those who are protesting peacefully. But I do also have to say that it is a clear warning about how even peaceful protests can be exploited by evil people. I think anyone organising protests has to do their utmost to ensure that sort of thing doesn't happen.

Interviewer: The only way that that can be ensured surely Mr Trimble is by calling off the continued stand-off at Drumcree?

Mr Trimble: Well I certainly don't want to see more violence of this nature. I don't want to see the sort of civic disorder of near riot situations that have developed in the town on a number of recent occasions. We all know and all the people of the town know the way in which this has done damage. There is an unresolved problem and the problem does

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have to be resolved and it must be resolved on a fair and equitable basis.

Interviewer: After the deaths of the little Quinn boys in Ballymoney, in July, the Rev William Bingham said "no protest, no point of principle was worth a life, let alone three lives". Now we have another life tragically lost under not dissimilar circumstances and yet the message doesn't seem to get through to some people.

Mr Trimble: Well, I commented myself on not dissimilar terms, in the summer. Of course we are all appalled at what has happened and of course we want to see the difficulty that there is in the town, the problem there and a very real problem, resolved as soon as possible. We want to see it resolved in an equitable way. Now, I believe that there have been some contacts and that the indirect dialogue that had been in existence in the summer is on the point of being resumed. Of course I, and many others too, are ready to see what we can do to advance that dialogue and let us hope that we can get the problem resolved. But that problem should be kept separate from this appalling tragedy and this act of violence and I think we have to focus on those who committed this act of violence. The individuals, whether of an organisation or not, and I have to appeal to all the people of the town and elsewhere, because we are by no means certain that the killer came from the town, that anybody who has any information, that will lead to the police apprehending those responsible for Constable O'Reilly's death, should give the police all the help they can so that we don't see this situation again.

Interviewer: The bottom line is, is it not Mr Trimble, that when organisations bring individuals out onto the streets, this kind of thing happens? You lose control and lives can and have been lost.

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Mr Trimble: As I said, the people who are organising demonstrations have a responsibility to try and avoid this, but I think we have to be clear about the fact that the protests are one thing. A handful of people, in the dead of night, coming out to create a riot and throwing blast bombs is another thing and of course we condemn that without reservation.

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(2) Bríd Rodgers (SDLP)

Interviewer: David Trimble said there "we thought we'd left this all behind us". I'm sure that's the thought that many people are considering this evening?

Ms Rodgers: Indeed we did and I think that I would have, first of all, like Mr Trimble, I would like to express my deepest sympathy to particularly the young widow and her baby child and two other children, who are left now without a father. I think it is an appalling futile loss of life and when one thinks that these protests had been going on on a nightly basis in Portadown, since July right through August and this particular, what now turns out to be murder, was the culmination. I think that those who are organising the stand-off, the demonstrations and the protests, however peaceful they may say they are, I think we all realise that these type of protest have led, in Northern Ireland, particularly in the present climate, to loss of life. They cannot pretend that it has nothing to do with those who are protesting. They have made their point. They now need to sit down and to try and resolve the deadlock.

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Interviewer: Does it help when you hear a man like David Trimble saying that he has no doubt that Orangemen in Portadown and elsewhere would condemn, without equivocation, the murder of Constable O'Reilly and to hear him saying, very clearly, that those who want to protest peacefully have to take on board what has happened and ensure that their protest is not hijacked?

Ms Rodgers: I think it is very clear that there are people within the Orange Order who were appalled at the deaths of the three young Quinn children. I think of the words of the Rev William Bingham. I know there were numbers who made that clear by not turning up at recent protests. I know that there is a groundswell within and many of the decent Orangemen are appalled at what is happening. But what needs to happen now in particular in relation to even the march that is organised I understand for Saturday, which is march organised by women in support of the protest, I think that should be called off. It will be passing the very spot where that young policeman was so brutally cut down. I think it is time to end all of these protests. Everybody knows what the problem is. I accept that the people within the Unionist or Loyalist community in Portadown, have a problem with the situation they are in . Everyone accepts that. The nationalist community in Portadown have a big problem as well. It is time to stop all the confrontation. We know what it leads to. Sit down and enter into dialogue because there isn't any other way of resolving this.

Interviewer: We know that of course. We know that there has to be some sort of dialogue. What is your assessment about how likely that is to reconvene? You heard David Trimble saying there that he believed that talks were due to get under way again sooner rather than later. What is your assessment of the mood music on the streets in Portadown?

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Ms Rodgers: Well, I know that the people in Portadown and I have both Unionists and nationalists talking to me and I know that they want dialogue to begin. They certainly don't want a continuation. Who is paying the price for what is happening in Portadown. The nationalist community, the Unionist community, now a young man and his family with his life. Even those who are protesting are not gaining from it. So I think that there is a mood there now for this thing to be resolved. It is pointless to go on with it and we know where it can lead. We saw in the summer the deaths of the three young Quinn children, we've seen now the death of the young policeman. That is the only thing that can come out of it. The one thing that cannot come out of continued protest and continued confrontation is a resolution and what people desperately want is a resolution which will be, as David Trimble said, fair and equitable to everyone. Nobody is looking for victory and certainly the nationalist community in Portadown are not looking for victory, they are looking for a fair and equitable resolution.

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(3) David Jones (Portadown Orange Order)

Interviewer: What are your thoughts at this tragedy?

Mr Jones: Well obviously, our sympathies are with the policeman's family at this point in time and our thoughts and prayers are with them as they have been during the time that he was in hospital.

Interviewer: Isn't it time to call off the Drumcree protest?

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Mr Jones: No. That is not our determination at this point in time. Whenever we started out in this protest, we were aware that it was going to be very difficult. We actually cautioned the Parades Commission at that particular time, that whatever decisions that they would need to make, that they needed to be aware of just how strong Orangeism was within Portadown. Now that doesn't make any excuses for anything that may have happened, but the protests will still go on.

Interviewer: Isn't it the case that the only way you can guarantee that there will not be a further loss of life in Portadown or elsewhere is to call the protest off and to continue to argue that there is no connection between the stand-off at Drumcree and your argument that you can walk down the Garvaghy Road? What happened to the Quinn children, what happened to Constable O'Reilly is to ignore the reality.

Mr Jones: No I think that you are ignoring the reality. If we were to walk off Drumcree hill at this time today, that gives no guarantee that Portadown would remain peaceful. In fact the opposite could possibly be true. A lot of people don't realise that those who are really of a moderate nature are the people in the Orange Order who are at Drumcree Hill. If we leave it, if we go back to our own homes and attempt to ignore the situation, the whole situation has gotten to such a height now around Portadown that you would have absolutely no guarantee that you would have a peaceful situation.

Interviewer: That is a frightening vista that you paint there.

Mr Jones: This was a very frightening episode which we entered into and that is why we cautioned Alistair Graham and the Parades Commission at that particular time that they needed to be very very sure of the decision that they were going to make. Regrettably, for everyone concerned, they made the wrong decision.

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Interviewer: Well the made a decision and everybody else has accepted that decision. Could you not call of your protest at Drumcree and engage in whatever kind of dialogue you want to have with whoever you want to have to try to resolve it? The problem is that as long as you continue to say that your protest is happening at Drumcree, there will be those who will resort to violence in support of your protest. You might not like that but they are the people who are going out on the streets and throwing the blast bombs.

Mr Jones: I have heard Brid Rodgers talking about dialogue. It must be borne in mind that we have taken part in dialogue, in proximity talks and also bilateral talks. Now, during those particular talks, if the people in Garvaghy Road had the same determination to try and resolve the situation, we may not be in the place that we are now.

Interviewer: But a policeman is dead though. William Bingham said after the death of the Quinn boys that no principle is worth a life let alone three lives. We have now had four lives taken, are you saying that the point of principle is worth all of this suffering? It would be very hard to justify that to the widow and the family of Constable O'Reilly tonight.

Mr Jones: What I would take issue on is that the three Quinn children are being brought into this particular debate at the moment because it has been shown and the Chief Constable has admitted himself that what happened at Ballymoney, regrettable and terrible thought it was, wasn't directly connected to Drumcree. The Policeman was carrying out his duty in Portadown, yes it was a horrendous attack, yes it should not have occurred, regrettably it did occur but that is due to the situation that we are in at the moment and a lot of people are just playing lip service too.

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