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Interview with Secretary of State Prior on BBC Radio Four
14 August 1984. (several reporters)

Mr. Prior: Well, obviously it's a serious situation and that's why I've been keeping in very close touch with both the Chief Constable and my officials and my Ministers in Northern Ireland.

Reporter: What about the claim that it amounted to a police riot?

Mr. Prior: Well, I think that we'd want to get this thing in the right proportion. It's a measure, in a way, of the great improvement that there's been in Northern Ireland in recent years, that this serious event has attracted the publicity that it has. Those events, which were dreadful scenes on television, were commonplace three years ago in Northern Ireland, and I think that one wants to get these things in the right perspective. I know that it's a very important issue, it's an enormous setback for me personally in my efforts to try and improve relations between the communities, it's also a great setback for the Royal Ulster Constabulary who have done so much under the leadership of Sir Jack Hermon to improve matters. Now, let us accept that this has been a setback, let us see how we can now quieten things down and then move forward again.

Reporter: But there has been very great concern about what the RUC did.

Mr. Prior: Well, of course, there's always concern about what policemen may do, but also the provocation to which they were subjected, the fact that if Galvin had not been banned from coming, what that might have done; I mean in retrospect, of course the decision to ban Galvin's entry looks a bad, a bad mistake. But at the time it didn't look that way, and if things had worked out differently we might have been under just as much criticism if we had not banned him from coming. Here was a man who openly supported murder, violence - collected

money for arms to kill soldiers, to kill policemen. Now, when you know all that, do you just sit idly by and say "let this man come, let him do what he wants to do"? The answer is you have to take a judgement on these matters. Sometimes your judgement is correct and borne out by events, other times it goes wrong. I have to say that in this case some mistakes have been made for which I take full responsibility; full responsibility myself; but my intention now is to see that we get this thing behind us as quickly as we can, and we move forward again. I think this is a matter which will have to be enquired into, of course, and the Chief Constable wishes to do that. He's done more than anyone perhaps in Northern Ireland and else where to try and get relationships right. I can tell you the Chief Constable gets more criticism from the Unionist side of the population than he does from the Nationalist side.

Reporter: How much damage do you think has been done to the RUC's reputation as an impartial force as a result of this incident?

Mr. Prior: Well, I think long term damage - probably none. Short term damage - whilst the immediate publicity is there, obviously some. But the fact of the matter is that we mustn't allow ourselves to fall into the propoganda of the IRA and Provisional Sinn Fein, and that is what we're tending to do. We're making their case for them. What we have to do is to make a sensible case which shows quite clearly that Galvin was provocative, that Provisional Sinn Fein were provocative, they are supporting violence. Two policemen died yesterday as a result of violence in Northern Ireland (interruptions) - you must try to get these things into the right perspective.

Reporter: (unclear).....do you accept (?) that the RUC did overreact?

Mr. Prior: Well I think, this is a matter for the Chief Constable to inquire into and he will. I mean, the scenes on television were of course dreadful scenes from the point of

view of the public, but we know that there was a lot of stone-throwing, a lot of provocation, leading up to those scenes. Now, all these matters have to be enquired into, and if I can come to the question of plastic baton rounds, the number of baton rounds being fired now is infinitesimal compared to three years ago. Every baton round that is fired is reported to me personally - the reasons for it and what happened. Now that would have been impossible three years ago because in one month, twelve thousand were fired. And so, we've got to get these things, however serious they are, into the right perspective.

Reporter: Would an outside enquiry help to clear the air?

Mr. Prior: I don't know. This is a matter of course which I'm going to consider. But again, one has a feeling that these enquiries had to rake over the ashes again people take up fixed positions I just want to consider these things very carefully indeed.

Reporter: But the damage to all your efforts in the past few years to repair relations between the two communities is very serious isn't it?

Mr. Prior: No, I don't think so. I really don't think so. I think that if we go on saying that the damage is very serious, it will become very serious. But otherwise I think that there is a much greater understanding on the ground, a much greater stability in Northern Ireland than perhaps would have been possible.

Reporter: A personal disaster for you almost at the end of your term?

Mr. Prior: No I don't think - I've had so many disasters, that one more, if it's construed in that way by the press, will make no difference. But no, I don't think so, I think that one obviously regrets very deeply these things that happen, they're

bad for Northern Ireland, they're bad for the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland who want to lead ordinary decent lives. But let's not get it out of perspective.

Reporter: What about relations with the Republic? They do seem to be very upset about what happened.

Mr. Prior: Well, of course they're upset. I'm upset. They're upset. But the basic relations between ourselves and the Republic will continue to improve.

Presenter: The Northern Ireland Secretary, Jim Prior, this morning.

Press Section
14 August 1984

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