JAMES LANDALE:
Petrol bombs and rubber bullets, death threats and injured policemen. In recent years, we might have thought that was the language of Northern Ireland’s past, but we were wrong. The decision in December by Belfast City Council to stop flying the union flag every day has sparked violent riots that are now spreading, with loyalists and police clashing across the city and beyond. Children as young as eleven have been arrested for violence, local politicians have been attacked, and the dispute over the flag shows no sign of going away. I’m joined now live from Belfast by the First Minister of Northern Ireland and the Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, Peter Robinson. Welcome, Peter Robinson.

PETER ROBINSON:
Good morning.
You are meeting Martin McGuinness later this week along with the British and Irish governments. What do you hope to get out of those talks? Are you hopeful of some kind of resolution?

PETER ROBINSON:
Well I think first of all it’s important to be saying that we have come through decades, some would say centuries, of conflict and division, and the politicians of this generation determined that they weren’t going to shove down the line trying to get a resolution to those difficulties. We took very difficult decisions, some might say historic decisions, and we agreed to move forward to build a shared society in Northern Ireland. And I think it’s important to tell the wider community in Northern Ireland, indeed our friends in the rest of the United Kingdom, that we are not giving up on that. We’re very much of the view that we are determined that we will build a kind of society where everybody can have a peaceful and stable existence. Of course there are people who are against what we are doing. There are people on the Republican side, dissidents, who are attempting to undermine the process here in Northern Ireland, and there are those who are using the present flag’s process in order to try and undermine the stability of the Stormont system. They won’t succeed because we’re absolutely determined that we’re going ahead. We’re absolutely determined because the people have supported what we are doing at Stormont.

JAMES LANDALE:
But just …

PETER ROBINSON:
We had an election and that’s the only way you can determine the future direction of Northern Ireland.

JAMES LANDALE:  
(over) But just to get back to the question …

PETER ROBINSON:
… over 99 per cent of the elected representatives who will return are in support of the system.
JAMES LANDALE:
But just to get back to the question. What do you expect to achieve at the meetings this week?

PETER ROBINSON:
Well in the meetings this week, we have regular meetings with the United Kingdom Government and with the Irish Government. We’ll deal with all of the outstanding issues. We’ll discuss all of the issues and not just the violence on the streets because we’re not going to lose our focus on moving forward. But we will deal with those issues and we’ll make it very clear the condemnation that exists in the wider community for anybody …

JAMES LANDALE:
But it is …

PETER ROBINSON:
… who thinks the way forward is to throw petrol bombs or stones at the police.

JAMES LANDALE:
But these sound like talks just to explore the issue. You don’t sound like a man with a plan.

PETER ROBINSON:
Well we’ve already set up a Unionist forum and the purpose of that is to draw away from the protest those who want to deal with the actual issue, and the only way you can deal with that issue is through the political process. The flag in Belfast City Council is not going to go up because somebody throws a petrol bomb at a policeman. The only way forward is through the political process and we’re trying to encourage people to engage in that and we’re trying to bring forward channels, so that we can talk to people on the ground, so the sense of that way forward is heard by everyone.

JAMES LANDALE:
Do you take any responsibility for what’s taken place because you know some of your supporters have been on the streets, your party has very vocally opposed this decision
over the flag? Do you take responsibility yourself?

**PETER ROBINSON:**
Well I think it was a big mistake of Sinn Fein, the SDLP and the Alliance Party to change the status quo at Belfast. It was a bad decision. But bad decision or not, the only way of addressing bad decisions that are taken within the democratic process is through the democratic process. Of course we have no responsibility because the people who are out throwing stones and petrol bombs at the police are not supporters of mine or my party. These are people who are against the political process in which we’re engaged.

**JAMES LANDALE:**
What does this forty days now of violence tell you about the political settlement in Northern Ireland because some are saying what it shows is that there are still substantial minorities within Northern Ireland who feel excluded from that political process, who feel excluded from the economic process; and it’s been latent for some time, we’re now seeing it on the streets.

**PETER ROBINSON:**
Well I think that there are political issues and there are people that feel disengaged and there are people that feel that if we’re trying to build a shared society, they’re not getting their share. And this was one of the arguments that we brought forward to the coalition government when they attempted to - and succeeded - in reducing very substantially the funds that were available to us in Northern Ireland. That while we had been able to tick the box of getting political structures up, we needed to win the support of the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland, we had to show them that devolution worked, and I think we all recognise that it is no accident that the violence is occurring predominantly in areas that might be considered areas that are suffering from deprivation.

**JAMES LANDALE:**
And, finally, to all those people in Northern Ireland who are getting ready to protest, demonstrate and maybe take part in more violence tonight, what’s your message? What do you say to them?
PETER ROBINSON:
The only way forward in Northern Ireland is through the political process. That’s endorsed overwhelmingly by the people in Northern Ireland. If they have grievances that they want to be addressed, then those have to be addressed through the democratic process. It will not change anything to be involved in violence in the streets.

JAMES LANDALE:
Peter Robinson, thank you very much indeed.

INTERVIEW ENDS