

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, IC High Representative in BiH: "BBC Breakfast With Frost"

January 12th, 2003

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DAVID FROST: We turn now, after years on the fringes of power as leader of the Liberal Democrats, to Paddy Ashdown, who now has the authority most elected politicians can only ever dream of, ... the prime minister and all laws passed by parliament, but as the International Community's High Representative in Bosnia it's a job few would envy. He's been charged with bringing peace and prosperity to a country that was torn apart, of course, by the war in the Nineties. And he still bears the scars of that bloody conflict, every day he sees them around him. Unemployment stands at 60 per cent, and many war criminals are still at large, most infamously of all, of course, the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. Paddy Ashdown joins me now from Sarajevo. Good morning Paddy.

PADDY ASHDOWN: Lovely to be with you again David, and many congratulations on your ten years.

DAVID FROST: Thank you very much indeed, that's greatly appreciated – it's good to continue the relationship, albeit on this occasion from a different location. Is this the toughest job of your life, Paddy?

PADDY ASHDOWN: Oh I don't know David. I think it's one, I think it's the most interesting. I mean this is a country I love very much, it's the country I knew of course during the war, I've always found it irresistible when people say something can't be done to try and do it. I think this country can be brought to peace and I think it deserves to be brought to peace and I think in many ways it has made astonishing, almost miraculous progress, towards peace in the brief seven years since the war. Sometimes I think my two enemies are international impatience at failing to realise just how far they've come here and the lack of confidence about Bosnians in failing to understand what an extraordinary thing they've achieved in those brief seven years. I mean very briefly, this place has come further in seven years since that most terrible war than we've managed to achieve in Northern Ireland in more than 30.

DAVID FROST: At the same time it was a bit disappointing about that 45 per cent vote, and would you say there is real progress in terms of the divisions between the three parties, the different races there – the tribal conflict, as it were, as it would be called in Africa – those two points?

PADDY ASHDOWN: Yes I think there is, I mean genuine progress now. People tell me on the ground, people far more informed than me, that there is real understanding now and a determination to live together again, and I think that's quite remarkable. My wife Jane and I went up and stayed, for instance, in Srebrenica not long ago with some of the refugees, Muslim refugees who'd move back in there. Moved back into the towns in which they'd lost father, grandfather, son, husband, and yet there were these women moving back into those communities, working indeed with the people there, clearing their land in the mountains, beginning to get back to farms, sitting by the side of their houses waiting for the reconstruction aid to come. A million people – a million people! – have returned to the homes from which they were driven, and to the communities from which they were driven a short six years ago. Now, David, I went into Belfast in 1969 to watch my own people, the Catholics, burn out, burnt out of their houses in the Ardoyne, has one returned there? No. Here a million have. So I think there are some extraordinary things here. There's a huge amount to be done, a vast amount to be done, and we have to move faster, time is not on BiH's side. But is there a change in the last two years? Yes, I certainly think there is. On that election, I mean it was disappointing, of course it was, but perhaps we in the international community might reflect a little and bear some of the responsibility for that ourselves. We've inflicted six elections in six years on Bosnia. If you had one election every year for six years in Britain, I suspect the turn out wouldn't be ten per cent, let alone 40. So, it was disappointing but I think we bear some of the blame for that.

DAVID FROST: And what about the importance, or otherwise, of the capture of Radovan Karadzic? I mean as a token, as a symbol, would that have a liberating effect?

PADDY ASHDOWN: A huge liberating effect, and it is, I think, if someone said to me what is the biggest New

Year's present I'd like today, it would be to find him taken out of a snowy mountains behind me and locked up in the Hague as quickly as possible. Two points, however. He's been free now for seven years. We've been waiting for a lucky break. Well I think we need to approach this in a rather more systematic way. What we want now, to think about, is not a commando raid but a campaign – a campaign that systematically removes from him the support that he has. The fact is that this sort of waiting for the lucky break, the chance to catch him somewhere on some mountain pass, has by and large not worked. If it happens, no one would be more delighted than me, but I think we need to have a different approach to this which doesn't just rely on the lucky break but systematically goes about catching this man. And here's a point for our Western leaders to consider. If we do, God help us, have to go to war in Iraq, there could be nothing, but nothing, which would reassure the Muslim world more powerfully that this was a war against terrorism and not a war against Muslims than to capture this man who has done such terrible deeds against the Muslim community.

DAVID FROST: And in terms of other people being arrested besides him, we read a lot here about the problem of crime and drugs and so on and connection with asylum seekers and so on, is there a particular problem of crime and drugs in Bosnia, different to, or greater than, any other country?

PADDY ASHDOWN: Well it's no different to or greater than any other country coming out of war, David. That's the important point. You know, crime, corruption, criminality follows war like a dark shadow – inevitably – remember Europe in the 1940s and early 1950s. Chaos brings crime. Our mistake here was to believe that the first thing we should have done was democracy. It should have been the rule of law. And into that vacuum has moved now the criminal forces that we have to get rid of. The first priority here is indeed the rule of law. And again, if I may, a point of direct relevance to the leaders of Western nations, if you want to fight crime on the streets of Manchester, if you want to fight prostitution, drugs, cigarette smuggling – now an issue for today – arms smuggling, on the streets of Manchester, London, Berlin and Paris, you start here in Sarajevo. This is the front line. If you can clean it up here then you close off the conduit that passes those evil products of criminality, which come not from here but through here, into the streets of our cities. And that's why a commitment from Europe, through the European police mission, just established, to make sure that we establish the rule of law here is not only essential for peace in the Balkans and in Bosnia, but is essential to fight crime on the streets of our own cities too.

DAVID FROST: Paddy, thank you very much for joining us this morning. We look forward to coming back to you again in the months ahead for another progress report. Thanks so much.

PADDY ASHDOWN: Thanks very much. Bye bye David.