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Meeting with the Editor of the Irish News, 18 May 1983

I had lunch in Belfast with Martin O'Brien, Editor of the Irish News, on 18 May.

O'Brien was aware of speculation that there may be a split in the Provisional leadership, between those like Adams and McGuinness who are engaged in fighting an election, and those who are thought to be more militant. It is widely believed, based in part on hints dropped by leading Provisional Sinn Féin spokesmen, that the Provisionals will stop their violence for the duration of the election campaign. The recent killings (in Derry of Mrs Purvis and in Belfast of Constable Cathcart) have given rise to a belief that there may be a split in the Provisional leadership.

O'Brien, who claimed he had very good indirect links into the Provisionals through use of his staff, dismissed the speculation. As he sees it there is no split. The Derry killing had from a Provisional point of view been reckless unlike the Belfast killing which was premeditated and carefully planned. The public from whom the Provisionals draw their electoral support have become so inured to killing that these latest two will be soon forgotten and are unlikely to cause them to cast their votes elsewhere. He fully expected that a halt will be called to Provisional violence once nominations have closed. He feels that Provisional Sinn Féin will increase their vote by comparison with the Assembly election as they are fielding candidates in a wider area. He is uncertain as to whether they will improve their percentage of the total poll. Interestingly, O'Brien saw no evidence of any special treatment by officials of Provisional Sinn Féin and expressed his personal view that in constituency business all elected representatives should be treated equally.

O'Brien, while condemning violence, tries to understand the political motivation of the Provisionals. He considers them gravely misguided in their actions if not in their ideals. He has not hesitated to publish reports giving details of support by Provisional Sinn Féin for violence. One such recent incident concerned Martin McGuinness who, at a meeting in Dungiven, implied he supported Provisional IRA, a matter which the Irish News carried. McGuinness tried strenuously to convince O'Brien he had not said this but

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O'Brien remained unconvinced and stood over his reporter, who was from the North West News Agency in Derry.

O'Brien is much more concerned about the ultimate damage which might be caused by the IRSP/INLAS. He said that Jimmy Brown, the IRSP chairman in Belfast, who was among those arrested two days ago in connection with the alleged kidnapping of Mrs Kirkpatrick, had called to see him recently. He had told him that the two IRSP Belfast city councillors who had resigned recently had done so at his bidding because he considered they were not taking a sufficiently anti-imperialist line. He claimed he had made an electoral pact with Gerry Adams by which one of the vacancies would be taken up by Provisional Sinn Féin and he himself would fill the other vacancy. O'Brien said he is convinced Brown has a lot of blood on his hands. It seemed to me from what O'Brien said that he personally feared Brown in a way he would have no fear of a Provisional. Incidentally O'Brien thought Mrs Kirkpatrick may have gone voluntarily with the INLA.

O'Brien is very encouraged by the SDLP electoral campaign. He had made arrangements to put John Hume's visit to Strasbourg in connection with the EEC money for Belfast as lead story on the front page of the paper for this morning. [Due to an industrial dispute the paper wasn't printed.] He said the SDLP are getting a very positive response in West Belfast, particularly since Joe Hendron opened his advice centre in the Falls. Constituents with problems now have an alternative to Provisional Sinn Féin. He still thinks Adams will win the seat, though Hendron should do well. He is also encouraged by the selection of Elizabeth Flanagan to fight Carron in Fermanagh-South Tyrone. She should get enough votes (including those in Tyrone which normally go to Currie) to ensure that Carron loses his seat. O'Brien thinks Currie is very able but could never gain Fermanagh votes because of the way he has concentrated on the condemnation of violence without stressing why people resort to it. He thinks the Provisionals are fighting fourteen seats so that after the election they may engage in the numbers game with the SDLP. This also of course partly explains why the latter are fighting all 17 seats.

O'Brien's doubts about the Forum, where he saw a danger of a split in nationalist ranks, are beginning to lessen. He sees it

as the last chance for constitutional nationalism. He says he has been heartened by what he sees as a commitment on the part of the four leaders to deal with the realities of the situation. His hope is that an agreed document will emerge to which Unionists and the British will respond in a meaningful way.

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