

E. R.

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PAB/1756/DP

Mr Bell

cc PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Mr Bloomfield
Mr Brennan
Mr Stephens
Mr Barry
Mr Chesterton
Mr McCann
Mr Spence
Mr Blackwell
Miss Elliott
Mr S Hewitt
Mr J McConnell
Mr Marsh
Mr Cowling
Mr Pearson

RB 34/5

DEMOLITION OF DIVIS FLATS: A POLITICAL ASSESSMENT

The Irish view seems to be that a decision in principle to demolish Divis Flats would be a body blow to Sinn Fein, would help to undermine their influence in the Lower Falls; and would strengthen the hands of constitutional politicians.

This represents a naive view of the situation in West Belfast. Sinn Fein's hold in the area is much deeper than the Irish believe. Sinn Fein have been very active in the campaign to secure demolition of Divis and would claim the major credit for a decision in principle.

It is, of course, true that replacement of the flats by housing at a lower density and of more traditional design could help to create a more pleasant environment in which paramilitary influences would have greater difficulty in maintaining their position. Replacement would also be helpful for the security forces. However, the problems of unemployment, of single-parent families and of long-established attitudes to the security forces and the State would remain.

J R Alford

J R ALFORD
Political Affairs Division
6 May 1986

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DIVIS FLATS

Line to take

I note your strong plea for a decision in principle in favour of eventual demolition. A full briefing has been given to the Secretariat, explaining the difficulties in devising an acceptable and sensible approach to the Divis problem. We will be considering as quickly as possible, the options which are available.

Points to make

- (1) We recognise the unsatisfactory conditions in Divis and the strength of paramilitary influences.
- (2) We cannot commit ourselves now to a policy of full demolition; the possibility of turning some of the blocks into satisfactory accommodation for single people and small families must be explored.
- (3) We have to bear very much in mind the costs; money spent on replacing, rather than improving, Divis means less money for other areas of housing need.
- (4) Even with the possibility of land being made available by the RC Church, there would remain serious difficulties in finding enough land to rehouse families from Divis in areas to which they would be prepared to move.
- (5) Demolition of Divis would have implications for high-rise developments in other parts of NI.

Background

The Irish are pressing very hard for a decision in principle in favour of demolition of Divis and Mr Barry believes that such a decision would help to undermine support for Sinn Fein.

The attached paper setting out the background has been provided for the Secretariat and there was a full discussion on 30 April. The Irish are, therefore - hopefully - better informed about the serious practical and other difficulties in endorsing their approach.

Bishop Daly has offered to make church land available for possible use by a housing association. While this offer might help in rehousing people from Divis, it does not provide enough land. Moreover, there could well be difficulties in following up the Church offer; the people living in the surrounding area may oppose an influx of families from Divis and many Divis tenants want, in any case, to remain in the Lower Falls area.

The Housing Executive have the statutory responsibility in this matter and are currently examining an investment appraisal on the proposals for refurbishing the flats.

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Background

1. The Divis Flats complex was constructed by the Northern Ireland Housing Trust for Belfast Corporation between 1968 and 1972. Much pressure was exerted by the Councillors representing the Lower Falls area in which the flats are located and by the RC Church for the maximum amount of accommodation to be provided in order to maintain a viable parish (St Peters) in what had been a densely populated area.
2. The Flats originally consisted of 12 "Sectra" Deck Access blocks and a tower block (19 Storeys). There were 795 housing units ranging from bedsitters to 6 bedroom maisonettes. More recently, the tower block has been refurbished and now has a waiting list; 2 new medium rise developments were constructed a few years ago (at St Peters Court and Albert Place) which are popular; and 2 blocks (Farset and Whitehall) were demolished. The current difficulties are therefore centred on 10 Sectra blocks of which 2 (Pound and St Brendans containing 87 units of accommodation) are scheduled for demolition.

Current Position

3. Excluding the 2 blocks which are due for demolition, there are 441 units of accommodation in the 8 blocks which will remain, and towards which the campaign for demolition is directed. These consist of 87 1-bed flats, 194 2-bed flats, 34 3-bed flats, 13 3-bed maisonettes and 113 4-bed maisonettes.
4. The site area occupied by the 10 remaining Sectra blocks is 11½ acres, but the RC Church would like to have a site for a nursery school of ½ an acre leaving 11 acres of usable land. This would accommodate about 165 traditional 2 storey houses if the Housing Executive built to their normal environmental standards.
5. The waiting list for accommodation which is held by the Housing Executive in West Belfast totals 1500. Of these, in round figures, 700 are families, 200 small adult families, 400 singles and 200 old-age pensioners. Of the 1500 applicants,

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300 have priority status, mainly because their dwellings are due for redevelopment. Almost all of the 1500 applicants wished to be rehoused in West Belfast and many have expressed a preference for the Lower Falls area where most of the Divis residents wish to remain. Housing land in West Belfast within the existing planning Stop-line is virtually non-existent, other than lands which are released by redevelopment. Proposals last year to re-zone some industrial land within the area were widely opposed and were dropped.

6. The Belfast Urban Area Plan Review is currently under way. It will be addressing the need, until the turn of the century, for housing land in the whole of Belfast Urban Area. A draft plan is expected to be published towards the end of this year. Already however it is clear that the difficulties of meeting the housing needs of West Belfast in the next 15 years are formidable. Poleglass which is currently being developed outside the Stop-line - and which has encountered political opposition from Lisburn Borough Council in whose area it is located - will over the next couple of years reach its planned size of about 2000 houses; many, including the Poleglass RC Parish Priest, are opposed to any expansion of this large development.

The Problem

7. The defects at Divis both of design - Deck Access, refuse disposal, insulation, building form, environment - and of maintenance - dampness, condensation, heating, plumbing, external lighting, lifts, refuse chutes - are capable of remedial treatment and vast improvement. Consultants' reports have indicated that the fabric of the flats is sound; we understand that a survey which was carried by independent consultants for the Residents Association reached a similar conclusion. Similar complexes (exactly the same type of construction and age) are occupied elsewhere in Belfast eg at Tullycarnet in East Belfast. They are not overwhelmingly popular with the residents but the accommodation which they provide is accepted.
8. There are also management problems associated with Divis. These are mainly concerned with rent arrears, squatting, vandalism, security, vacancy rates and

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social problems associated with high unemployment, paramilitary activity (which necessitates a continuing presence by the Security Forces and regular searches of the complex) and a high incidence of single parent families (or families where the father is absent in prison).

9. It is estimated that the cost of replacement housing for the 10 blocks would be of the order of £15m; the cost of refurbishment of 8 blocks plus replacement of 2 blocks by traditional housing is estimated at about £7m. Total demolition would result in a net reduction in the West Belfast housing stock (assuming displaced Divis residents were all rehoused in this area) of between 300 and 350 units.

The Proposal

10. Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) proposes to refurbish 8 blocks, but wishes to undertake a 'pilot' scheme on one (Milford) estimated to cost £750,000 in order to establish the viability of undertaking the whole exercise. Viability would be measured by value for money (ie the successful implementation of the planned improvements at a cost which is reasonable) and by customer reaction. Some of the tenants who are moved out in order to allow the the rehabilitation to take place would not be able to move back because the accommodation would no longer be suitable and others would opt not to do so. However, the Executive expects that some singles, OAPs and adult families who are on the waiting list for housing in West Belfast would be happy to accept refurbished accommodation, as has already happened in the Tower Block. Refurbishment would involve not simply repair and reinstatement but substantial upgrading aimed at curing many of the design faults and at reducing on-going maintenance costs.

Conclusion

11. The size and nature of the housing problems of West Belfast (paragraphs 5 and 6), the costs associated with demolition as opposed to refurbishment (paragraph 9), the probability that refurbished accommodation would be acceptable, albeit mainly to a different clientele than existing residents (paragraph 10), all point to the need to maintain the agreed policy of NIHE and DOE(NI) to opt for

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refurbishment rather than total demolition - provided this can be shown via a pilot scheme to be cost-effective and to be capable of attracting tenants from the existing waiting list.

12. The implementation of the agreed policy will of course require the co-operation of the existing tenants who, to date, via the Divis Residents Association, have refused to have any discussions about refurbishment; indeed they have made it clear that they will not allow any work of this nature to be carried out. The Housing Executive is currently trying to re-open discussions with the tenants of Divis. If they are successful in doing so they will be stressing that the demolition of the two worst blocks (Pound and St Brendans) will be undertaken without any strings attached as soon as the tenants who remain can be rehoused; they will also emphasise that agreement to refurbishment of Milford Block would not commit the tenants to agreement to similar treatment for the remaining 7 blocks (although the Executive would be stressing that they would hope that the pilot scheme would convince the tenants that such treatment would be beneficial). Finally, the Housing Executive would be trying to overcome the resistance of the existing tenants by spelling out the opportunity which refurbishment would provide to many of the existing tenants to achieve their desire to move out of Divis and into other Housing Executive accommodation.

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