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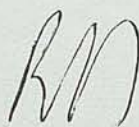
cc. PS/Mr Bloomfield
Mr Barry
Mr M Elliott
Mr S Hewitt
Mr Pearson

DESK BY AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

Mr D A Hill - M

DIVIS FLATS

I attach a draft incorporating a line to take and background notes in response to the points which the Irish may raise.



R B SPENCE

Central Secretariat

7 March 1986

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DIVIS FLATS

Introduction

Attached is a copy of the paper which will form the basis of Irish representations. The Secretary of State will not be expected to give a substantive response at the meeting and the Irish will be content for a reply to be made through the Secretariat in due course. Nevertheless, the Secretary of State might wish to get some key points on the record.

Line to take

I note the points which you have made. We recognise the unsatisfactory conditions in Divis and the strength of paramilitary influences. Our plans for tackling the housing problem are evolving. Some demolition has occurred and some more is planned. We want to examine whether it is possible for some of the blocks to be turned into satisfactory accommodation for single people and childless couples.

We cannot, therefore, commit ourselves to a policy of full demolition. In any event, the costs of rehousing are far in excess of the costs of improvement and the land is simply not available. The offer of land by the RC authorities is welcome but would make only a modest contribution. We are examining the whole question of the availability of land for housing in the context of the current review of the Belfast Urban Area Plan.

Background

The original decisions on the building of the Divis complex owed much to church and local community pressures to maintain population in the area.

There has, in recent years, been growing pressure from many sources - including Sinn Fein, the Church, and SDLP - for total demolition of the complex and its replacement with traditional houses. The Irish believe that the bad housing and environmental conditions and the very high levels of unemployment provide an exceptionally fertile ground for paramilitaries.

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Two blocks - Whitehall and Farset comprising 172 units - have already been demolished and 100 dwellings have or are being constructed on adjacent land. Two further blocks - Pound and St Brendans comprising 87 units - are to be demolished. It is proposed to refurbish the Milford Block as a pilot exercise at a cost of £3m. Decisions on further refurbishing would be taken in the light of the lessons from the pilot scheme.

The complex is generally acknowledged as being unsuitable for families with small children. Expert consultancy advice is that it should be possible to refurbish the flats as acceptable accommodation for single people or small adult families. This would involve sensitive housing management action over time to rehouse large families elsewhere and allocating refurbished flats to single people and childless couples on the waiting list.

Replacement housing for the 500 Divis dwellings not scheduled for demolition would cost over £15m : this is over twice the cost of rehabilitation; there would be no net addition to the housing stock. Such funds could be better used to help households on the waiting list.

In any event, land is not available to replace these 500 dwellings by traditional houses. The Divis site itself could only accommodate about 165 traditional dwellings. The land being offered by the church might only provide room for about 40 dwellings, which may prove helpful in rehousing people from the two further blocks to be demolished and large families from other blocks. There is also the fact that there are already 1500 families on the West Belfast waiting list, including over 300 priority cases. All experience suggests that it would be extremely difficult to persuade families in the Divis complex to agree to move out of the general area.

In the context of the review of the Belfast Urban Area Plan, the need for additional housing land, particularly in West Belfast, is being explored and a first draft should be available at the end of the year.

Finally, the Irish belief that demolition of the complex would reduce the influence of Sinn Fein is a little naive. Sinn Fein have been campaigning for demolition and would

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no doubt claim credit for it. There is no guarantee that demolition and rehousing would necessarily reduce the influence of Sinn Fein.

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