

E. R.

CONFIDENTIAL

RBS 121/86

cc: PS/PUS (B&L) - M  
PS/Mr Bloomfield  
Mr Brennan - M  
Mr Stephens  
Mr M Elliott  
Mr Chesterton - M  
Mr S Hewitt  
Mr Cowling - M  
Mr Bell - M  
Mr Pearson  
(without encs)

Mr Barry

DIVIS FLATS

The attached paper was tabled by the Irish at this week's meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference and we are now required to provide a written response for the UK side of the Secretariat to hand over to the Irish side. This might be followed by an oral briefing.

You already have a copy of the briefing note which I prepared for the Secretary of State at very short notice. An updated and corrected version of this note could form the basis of the written response for the Secretariat.

I have discussed with Mr Bloomfield whether DOE should consult the Housing Executive (or involve its staff in any oral briefing); we have agreed that the matter should be handled at this stage by DOE and that the Executive should not be involved.

R M

R B SPENCE

14 March 1986

CONFIDENTIAL

## Divis Flats

1. The Irish Government considers that the future of the Divis Flats complex in West Belfast is a matter in which the interests of the minority community are especially affected (Article 5(c) of the Anglo-Irish Agreement).
2. There are approximately 600 dwellings in the Divis Flats complex. The tenants believe the structural flaws of the complex are beyond improvement. They believe that the best solution to the housing problems they face lies in the demolition of the complex and the replacement of the flats by conventional housing. They do not feel that their problem can be resolved by the rehabilitation of the complex.
3. They are supported in their views by the local Roman Catholic clergy, by the local Roman Catholic Bishop, Dr. Cahal Daly, by their local political representatives and by a wide array of independent observers and experts who have studied the issue. Indeed, demolition is favoured across the political divide and Belfast City Council voted in 1984 in favour of demolition with all the parties expressing agreement.
4. We believe the living conditions and generally bad environment in Divis are compounded by the difficult social problems of the complex with, for example, an estimated 80% unemployment level. We appreciate that the Housing Executive fully accepts that conditions are unsatisfactory and have proposed demolition of two of the remaining ten blocks - St. Brendans and Pound - as well as pilot rehabilitation of the Milford Block to be followed later by refurbishment of the other blocks.
5. We believe the living conditions and the environment of Divis have allowed extremists obtain an influence in the area that can and should be ended, through the replacement

of the complex. The basic reason for the extremist influence in the complex lies in the alienation of the residents from their environment.

6. We believe a decision in favour of demolition would send a message of hope throughout West Belfast and do much to increase confidence in constitutional politics. Divis has become a symbol of alienation and a commitment to its abolition would have a strong counteravailing impact.
  
7. We accept that one objection to our proposal will be that there is a shortage of building land in West Belfast and that less than half the present Divis population could be accommodated in conventional houses on the site in the event of demolition. These difficulties are not insurmountable. We know the Roman Catholic Church authorities would be willing to assist to the greatest extent possible and one option that might be explored would be Housing Associations in the context of church provided land.
  
8. We understand that demolition cannot take place immediately. We believe that a decision in principle by the authorities involving a commitment in favour of demolition of the complex and its replacement by conventional housing would be very helpful. This decision would naturally take time to implement fully and could proceed on a phased basis.