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cc: PS/Mr Needham (L&B) - M
PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Mr Bloomfield
Mr Brennan - M
Mr Stephens
Mr Barry (DOE)
Mr Chesterton - M
Mr Elliott
Mr Spence ✓
Mr McCann (DOE)
Mr Bell - M

PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - M

SECRETARIAT DISCUSSION ON DIVIS FLATS

1. At the last Conference meeting on 11 March, the Irish Side tabled a paper arguing in favour of the demolition of Divis Flats. At the beginning of April, we handed over our own paper on the topic setting out the background to the Divis Flats problem and explaining the approach being taken by the DOE and Housing Executive. After considering our response, the Irish asked for a meeting of the Secretariat to discuss the issue in detail. This meeting took place yesterday. Those attending were as follows:

British Side

Mr McCann (DOE)
Mr Spence (Cent Sect)
Mr Elliott
Mr Hewitt
Miss Elliott

Irish Side

Mr Lillis
Mr O'Ceallaigh
Mr O'Criodain
Mr Lyons (DFA)
Mr Scannell (DFA)
Mr Corr (DFA)

2. Introducing the discussion, Mr McCann rehearsed the arguments set out in the British Side's paper. He explained that much of the existing accommodation at Divis was unsuitable for occupation by large families but, if properly refurbished, would be ideal for single people and small family units. There were a considerable number of such people on the

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West Belfast waiting list. Divis therefore represented a valuable housing resource and experience elsewhere with similar property in Northern Ireland suggested that it could be made an attractive place to live for the right sort of tenant. Demolition would, of course, imply the complete loss of this resource and would pose serious rehousing problems. It would take 17 acres of land in addition to the present site to provide accommodation for all the existing residents. Such land was not available in West Belfast. Theoretically, people could be rehoused in North Belfast and by extending the Poleglass complex further into the Lisburn Borough Council area. In practice, the residents would not be prepared to move from the Lower Falls. The issue had now become deeply political. Sinn Fein would accept nothing short of demolition and were not prepared to consider alternative plans for the complex. At the same time, a decision on Divis would have implications for the future use of similar high-rise accommodation in other parts of the Province and would be very expensive. For all these reasons, the Housing Executive favoured the refurbishment of the Divis complex and regarded complete demolition as an unsatisfactory solution to the problem.

3. For the Irish Side, Mr Lillis thanked Mr McCann for his detailed presentation and agreed that the issue was both politically sensitive and enormously complicated. He said that Mr Barry was personally committed to the demolition of Divis Flats because he believed that the removal of this particular grievance would serve to undermine Sinn Fein support in West Belfast. He explained that Bishop Daly was prepared to release a large section of land in West Belfast to help re-house the Divis residents. He wondered therefore whether the Housing Executive would be prepared now to take a "decision in principle" to demolish the Flats and begin the process of rehousing. Even if this took several years to achieve, the residents would, at least, be able to see some hope of eventually obtaining improved accommodation and a valuable propaganda weapon would be removed from Sinn Fein.

4. Mr McCann replied that the amount of land offered by Bishop Daly was inadequate to meet all the existing housing demand. The best answer to the Divis problem remained refurbishment rather than demolition.

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Comment

5. The Divis issue is on the agenda for the next Conference. Mr Barry can be expected to press for "a decision in principle" to demolish the Flats. He apparently feels strongly that such a policy would be a body blow to Sinn Fein. Full briefing for this item will be provided by Central Secretariat.

S Hewitt

S G Hewitt

1 May 1986

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