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H. L. ... for you

Mr. ... 14/11

Mr. Needham

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TT Pidgeon 31/10/85

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Mr F.R. ...

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31 OCT 1985
1430R

NOTE OF MINISTER'S MEETING WITH BISHOP CAHAL DALY : 28 OCTOBER 1985

Present:

- Minister (Mr Needham)
- Mr McCann
- Miss Porter
- Bishop Daly
- Father O'Donnell (Secretary to Bishop Daly)

1. Bishop Daly welcomed the Minister and thanked him for having taken the time to come to see him. He said he wanted to speak to the Minister about the housing problems in West Belfast and particularly about the problems in Divis.
2. The Bishop praised the work that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) was doing in areas such as Short Strand, The Markets, and Lower Falls, and said that already the improved housing conditions could be seen to have had a profound effect for the better on the residents. Similarly, refurbishment in Ballymurphy and Turf Lodge had helped.
3. Turning to the Divis Flats complex the Bishop put forward the case for complete demolition of the flats and replacement with traditional houses. He regarded the conditions in the flats as unworthy of human dignity. In addition, he was convinced that as long as the bad housing conditions applied, Divis would provide a happy ground for paramilitaries. The Bishop said he was aware that there would be difficulties in finding suitable land to rehouse all the Divis families, but nonetheless felt that demolition and rebuilding was the only solution acceptable to the residents of Divis.
4. The Minister said he had great sympathy for those who were living in unacceptable conditions and was anxious to improve their lot. However, this would have to be done within certain financial and logistical parameters. He pointed out that if the flats were to be demolished 500 families would have to be rehoused, but there were already 1500 families on the waiting list in West Belfast, of which 320 were priority cases. The maximum number which could be accommodated on the Divis site using a mixture of houses and flats would be 270, and if McCrory Park was made available by the Church an additional 40 houses could be built there. There was no land available to accommodate the remainder. The lack of land for housing in West Belfast was a major problem which was likely to get worse. Moreover, neither Lisburn District Council nor the inhabitants of Poleglass would be keen to see that estate enlarged. In addition, to demolish Divis Flats and replace them with houses would cost in the order of £6.5 million net and it would be very difficult to find this additional money given existing demands on the housing budget.
5. The Bishop thought that more houses could be built on the Divis site (which he claimed was 14.8 acres) than had been advised to the Minister. He said that 19 houses had recently been built on half an acre at Jude Street and so he felt that 38 houses could be build on 1 acre. Mr McCann explained why 38 houses could not be fitted in to 1 acre - 14-15 terrace houses could be accommodated on 1 acre. He also explained that 11.5 acres would

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remain for rebuilding on the site, which was the 14.8 acres less the land taken by the Tower Block and the 2 most recent blocks, Albert and St Peter's Court.

6. Mr McCann said that the Housing Executive was proposing to refurbish one block, Millford, and see how it would turn out. The estimated cost of this refurbishment was three-quarters of a million pounds. The Housing Executive proposed to break down the larger units on the top floors, aiming to provide accommodation for smaller families. Bishop Daly said that residents would regard the proposed refurbishment of Millford as just another make do job, condemning them to live in the flats for the rest of their lives. The Minister said that he fully sympathised with this viewpoint and had an open mind on the subject but repeated that the problem must be considered within the context of existing parameters.
7. After some discussion on this point Bishop Daly wondered whether the question of the Millford refurbishment might be separated from the total package of Divis refurbishment. He felt that the Millford refurbishment might be regarded more sympathetically if it were seen to be a separate issue. The Minister undertook to reconsider the Divis question in the light of what Bishop Daly had said to him and undertook to report back to the Bishop.
8. Moving away from the Divis issue, Bishop Daly said that the local priests in the Smithfield area of Belfast felt that the proposed redevelopment of that area would cause serious access problems for their parishioners. Mr McCann said that from his knowledge of the proposals he did not think there would be an access problem to the local church, but he undertook to speak to Mr Loughran about this and arrange for the local clergy to see the development plans.
9. Bishop Daly also said to the Minister that the residents of Pilot Street, Dock Land and Sailortown were pressing for the rebuilding of houses in those streets where houses had been demolished. Mr McCann explained to the Bishop that the redevelopment of this area was dependent upon the decision on the cross harbour bridge. This decision was expected in 2 years' time, but in the meantime no decision could be taken on the building of houses in the area.
10. Bishop Daly thanked the Minister for having listened to the points he made and hoped that he would see him again in the future.

Aileen Porter

AILEEN PORTER
PS/Mr Needham

cc PS/SOS (B&L)
PS/Minister (DOE) **3**
PS/PUS (B&L)
Secretary
Mr McCann
Mr Simpson
Mr P Bell - NIO (L)
Mr M Elliott - NIO (B)
Miss C J Garrett

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