



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Meeting with Fr. Joseph MacGurnaghan,  
Administrator of St. Peter's Parish,

Belfast 14th February 1986.

1. Fr. MacGurnaghan is parish priest and Administrator of St. Peter's Parish which includes the Divis complex and the surrounding Lower Falls area. The church and parochial house are virtually surrounded by the complex and most of the work of the clergy relates to the particular problems of Divis residents. Fr. MacGurnaghan said the total population of Divis is around 2,000 people and the complex has approximately 510 units of accommodation. There are basically three categories of resident: families with young children; older residents who have lived in the parish all of their lives and in Divis since its construction and "transients", a group which can be broadly defined as people forced to live in Divis because they are ineligible for early re housing in more desirable estates. Fr. MacGurnaghan said this latter group included a large number of people with particular social problems such as alcoholism, drug dependency, broken families.
2. Fr. MacGurnaghan described Divis in emotional and vivid terms as a centre of vice and alienation that degrades everyone living in it. He believes it has destroyed and scared the lives of many of its inhabitants and broken their sense of self-esteem and respect. There is a virtual social stigma attached to residence in the area with little intermingling with the surrounding areas. As an example of this, he mentioned the virtual boycotting of the Divis Community Centre, which is situated in the complex but with the goal of serving the larger local community. The centre is organised by Gerry Downes, whose son Sean was killed by a plastic bullet at the Galvin Rally two years ago. Most Divis residents refuse to attend functions at the centre and Downes, who is a city employee and totally non-political, is now apprehensive about the future of his post.

Fr. MacGurnaghan spoke strongly of the contempt he has experienced from the Housing Executive and the NIO in his eleven years with the parish. He described his attitude as almost one of despair at what he termed mindless indifference, hostility and ignorance regarding the problems of Divis.

He described as pointless the proposal to rehabilitate the "Milford" block as an example to the residents of what could be achieved in the rest of the complex since the total cost of rehabilitation in all the blocks would cost in the region of £6 million whereas demolition and replacement by conventional housing would (by his calculation) only amount to an additional £4 million.

3. Fr. MacGurnaghan told me that the Housing Executive have now apparently decided to "rehabilitate" Milford regardless of agreement by the residents to the proposed demolition of Pound and St. Brendan's blocks and the demolition of some of the link ways between blocks to give residents greater privacy and security. Hitherto, the Executive intended these proposals to be implemented concurrently. It is not clear if objections by the residents association will still be a bar to demolition or to rehabilitation of Milford but it is difficult to see how progress can be made without their agreement.

Fr. MacGurnaghan confirmed that the residents association is totally dominated by Sinn Fein. He added that Sinn Fein and the paramilitaries are entrenched largely because of the depth of bitterness felt by the residents. He said the residents have neither interest or knowledge regarding the Anglo-Irish Agreement and added most wouldn't even know how to spell it. In his view, only demolition of the complex will end this situation and create a normal community. The unemployment level in the complex is over 80% and the mere fact of habitation in the area is an impediment to employment possibilities. The clergy, through the schools, have recently conducted a survey to obtain data on social patterns in the area and problems experienced by residents (the results should be available in two months). Many of the completed forms he showed me had comments written in demanding abolition of the flats. Fr. MacGurnaghan added that the lack of control of the complex by the Housing Executive is illustrated by the fact that one of the flats (which is on ground level immediately on entry to Divis) is a Sinn Fein advice centre.

4. The N.I.O. and Housing Executive have argued that one of the obstacles to demolition would be subsequent shortfall implicit in replacement by conventional housing. Needham in a letter to Bishop Daly argued that the maximum possibility would be 15 houses per acre (possibly 20 if some flats were included) and, consequently, at most 170 (or 220 with flats included) houses could be constructed on the eleven acre site.

This would leave a shortfall of almost 300 units. Fr. MacGurnaghan strongly disputes this and showed me the neighbouring complex in Jude Street where, he claims, 19 houses have been built on a  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre site. Needham in his letter said he believed the Bishop was referring to another site but, in fact, there are 19 houses very closely built in an oval configuration on what to an untrained eye looked not much more than half an acre. Fr. MacGurnahan said Bishop Daly is having surveyors examine the two blocks of church land which he is considering as suitable to meet the shortfall created by Divis demolition. The only difficulty with this is that many residents would not wish to move out of the area they have lived in all their lives. We did not discuss the matter further since Fr. MacGurnaghan clearly feels the Housing Executive are being misleading about the number of houses that could be built on the present complex. The Executive certainly have a strong case on the shortage of land in West Belfast but their capitulation on the expansion of Poleglass does not enhance their argument. (Poleglass is a new Catholic estate on the outskirts of West Belfast which was originally intended to have 4,000 houses but it is in the Lisburn Council area and the Council objected to this total on the grounds that it would increase the number of Catholics in the borough).

5. Fr. MacGurnaghan bluntly asked what interest Dublin has in the Divis problem and I told him, on a confidential basis, that we are anxious to see an early and positive resolution of the issue and would hope to work closely with him and the Bishop on it. He mentioned, in this context, that the U.S. Consul in Belfast, Sam Bartlett, had recently visited Divis with two congressmen (whose names he could not remember). Bartlett had apparently told him the conditions of the Fund would preclude it being used for projects such as Divis.
6. Divis is in essence as much a political as a housing issue. It is more than an estate that has failed or a community that has been infiltrated by Sinn Fein and paramilitaries. Even if the Housing Executive do proceed with rehabilitation, the basic problem of a community that has withdrawn all consent from the existence and organisation of the complex remains and Fr. MacGurnaghan is convinced that nothing short of demolition will end what he terms a malign cancer. I asked him for any detailed documentation he can provide and agreed to his offer of a tour throughout the estate on my next visit to Belfast.