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Visit to Divis Flats 20th February, 1986

1. I visited Divis Flats, accompanied by Fr. McGurnaghan of St. Peter's Church, on 20 February and spoke to several residents. (Fr. McGurnaghan introduced me as an acquaintance from Dublin).
2. Fr. McGurnaghan told me one important point has now been cleared up. His contention has been that the Jude Street housing complex sites 19 houses on a half acre and this would allow circa 400 houses to be built on the eleven acre Divis site in the event of demolition. Bishop Daly made this point to Needham who replied that maximum rate would be 15 houses per acre (or 20 if some flats were added) with a cumulative total, therefore, of 165 houses or 220 if flats included (thus leaving a total of around 300 families to be rehoused).

Fr. McGurnaghan has now received the report of his own surveyor who has confirmed the NIO claim that the Jude Street site is 1.1 acres and the maximum density would be 20 houses per acre in relation to Divis.

3. Fr. McGurnaghan gave me copies of the most recent correspondence between Bishop Daly and Needham (attached). The Needham letter is significant on several points:
 - his acceptance that conditions on the complex are unsatisfactory
 - the reference to concentration on smaller families and single people for housing allocation in the complex is not a new development but Fr. McGurnaghan identifies this as one of the major problems of recent years. The blend of single people (mainly often with severe social problems) or single parent families with the older long stay Divis community has enhanced already existing tensions and shattered any community framework. The Housing Executive claims it seeks a suitable 'tenant mix' but Needham's letter tends to confirm the opposite and does not address the real issue of the long term residents as opposed to 'transition' tenants such as the groups Needham is describing.

- for the first time, Needham makes explicit that the demolition of St. Brendan and Pound blocs can proceed separately from agreement (if forthcoming) to rehabilitation of Milford. The Housing Executive has in the past stated that these developments were part of a package. Fr. McGurnaghan feels the agreement of Tenants to Milford rehabilitation is extremely doubtful and Bishop Daly also makes this point in his reply to Needham. The tenants will rightly feel that rehabilitation makes the prospect of early demolition considerably less likely and argue that rehabilitation would make no material difference. Chris Patten in a P.Q. reply on 6 June 1985 costed Milford rehabilitation at £11-12,000 per unit (a total of £744,000) and rehabilitation of the entire complex at around £5½ million. It is difficult to calculate the cost of demolition and replacement by conventional housing but at a figure of circa £22,000 per house the figure would be somewhere in the region of £12 million.

4. I visited four of the blocs and spoke to five families. All, without exception, stated that the living conditions are unacceptable and only complete demolition will satisfy them. The stairways and landings in most blocs are covered with graffiti and can only be described as providing an environment inimical to any sense of self respect. The tenants' complaints on actual flaws in the estate can be summarised as follows:

- refuse disposal systems. These are utterly inadequate in size (being placed at the end of each stairway) with the result that the system becomes entirely clogged and rubbish overflows throughout the week. This is not merely a health hazard (rodents apparently are regularly seen) but a fire problem since children frequently set the jammed chutes on fire.
- dampness and condensation. Two of the flats shown to me had clear problems of dampness although both had been promised remedial action.

- the heating system (which costs approximately £14 per week) frequently fails.
 - lifts regularly break down
 - drying areas are inadequate.
 - playing areas for children are grossly inadequate and dangerous.
4. Fr. McGurnaghan told me that comparisons with, for example, the Protestant Tullycarnett estate are misleading because of the special circumstances of Divis. Protestant families on Housing Executive lists have a much greater choice and many have refused go to Tullycarnett over the years but instead went, for example, to Ballygomartin, Glencairn, Carrickfergoes or to Dundonald. Divis inherited a community already living in the worst slum conditions in Belfast and the problem was enormously compounded by the influx of additional families during the high points of tension in 1970-72. Indeed, no one at the moment knows exactly how many families are living in Divis or the degree of over-crowding (one of the flats I visited had seven people living in a two bedroom flat).
5. Finally, Fr. McGurnaghan said Bishop Daly's group of experts considering alternative land sources to meet the overspill from any Divis demolition is continuing to meet and promised to keep in touch.



G. Corr

25. February, 1986.



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From the Bishop of Down + Connor

10th. February 1986

Rt. Hon. Richard Needham, M.P.,
Under Secretary of State,
Department of the Environment (N.I.)
Stormont,
BELFAST BT4 3SS.

Re: Divis Flats Complex

Dear Mr. Needham,

I am sincerely grateful for your recent letter in reference to the Divis Flats Complex, and I greatly appreciate the time and thought which you have devoted to this problem, and the detailed analysis which you have made of the points raised during our recent conversation.

There are, from my point of view, positive features in your response which I welcome. In the first place, I welcome the decision in principle that the St. Brendan's and Pound Blocks should be demolished as quickly as possible, and that there should be no linkage between their demolition and the further refurbishment proposals. This is certainly, so it seems to me, a step in the right direction.

It might be helpful if furthermore a proposed refurbishment of Milford could be dissociated from any proposals regarding the remaining blocks. It seems to me that, if the refurbishment of Milford is perceived by the residents to imply a commitment on the part of the Government, via the Housing Executive, to permanent retention of the remaining blocks, and consequently a commitment on the part of the residents to accept their permanent retention, there would be no realistic hope of securing the consent of the residents to this project. I am glad that, to quote from your letter, "it is not in dispute that current living and environmental conditions in the Divis complex are unsatisfactory", but I would have to add that residents there would strongly disagree that these conditions are capable of substantial improvement. If the Milford refurbishment could be carried out in such a way as to secure, for all to see, such a "substantial improvement" in that block, then there might be some hope, however tenuous, that tenants would agree to some extension of the refurbishment programme. Their conviction that the conditions in the complex are irreformable is not founded on prejudice or propaganda, but on their own experience of the utter futility of remedial, and even ordinary maintenance works, over a long period of time. The door to total demolition within a reasonable time-span must, at the very least, not be closed, and must be seen not to be closed.

Might I add that I have no kind of relationship with the "Divis Residents Association and their supporters". My concern is simply that of a Pastor for the well-being of these people. I venture to repeat what I have said earlier, namely that I believe that there is no greater single contribution which could be made to the well-being of the people of West Belfast, and consequently to their confidence in constitutional politics, than the prospect of the demolition of Divis and the provision of decent living and environmental conditions in the Lower Falls. I have just recently been looking over some of the new housing which is being provided by the Executive in the Oldpark area (formerly known

as "The Bone"), and I have seen for myself and heard from my clergy of the transformation which this scheme is bringing about in terms of the enhanced self-respect of the inhabitants, their pride in their environment, their determination to keep their neighbourhood free of graffiti, vandalism and violence. My dream and hope are that a similar transformation can and will be brought about in Lower Falls.

With renewed gratitude for your concern and interest, and looking forward to meeting you on future occasions,

Yours sincerely,

+ Robert B. Kelly



DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT (N.I.)
STORMONT, BELFAST BT4 3SS

The Most Reverend Cahal E Daly DD
Bishop of Down and Connor
Lisbreen
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*Answer
10 Feb-1986*

4/2/1986

Cahal E Daly

I am sorry that it has taken me so long to write fully to you about Divis Flats.

I have been examining afresh with my officials the problem of Divis - I do accept that it is a problem - in the light of our discussion, various other representations which have been made to me on this subject and against a backdrop of the need for more, rather than less, public housing in West Belfast to give some hope of accommodation within a reasonable timescale to the high waiting list there. I also have had to bear in mind the availability of resources and you will have noted that the Housing Executive's programme for next year and beyond will not be able to keep pace with that of the current financial year partly because they will be receiving a slightly smaller amount of Government funds but mainly because their receipts from the sale of houses will be a good deal less and their repayments of outstanding loans (which of course have been increasing rapidly in recent years) will be substantially more.

As I said to you at our meeting I simply cannot look at Divis outside our overall housing strategy. It must be considered in the context of meeting the current and future housing needs of Belfast, the financial resources that can be devoted to this task and the shortages of land in areas which are preferred by those whose needs must be met. These issues, will of course be addressed in the new Belfast Urban Area Plan.

While it is not in dispute that current living and environmental conditions in the Divis complex are unsatisfactory I do not accept that they are incapable of substantial improvement. I do believe that we can help very significantly not least by breaking down some of the larger units, moving out families and replacing them with single people or small adult families. It would be no service to applicants of this kind who now make up more than half of the waiting list in West Belfast and who are currently living in overcrowded or very poor accommodation to demolish housing units which are fully capable at reasonable cost of being adapted for their needs. Moreover it is clear that demand from single people or small families will be likely to increase rather than diminish and it is an inefficient use of scarce resources to allocate traditional houses to single people.

It would of course be indefensible ^{if}, as some have stated, Government's intention was to maintain substantial accommodation in West Belfast as a means of repression on its population or because for political or other reasons they deserved only second class treatment. These statements have no basis of fact.



That Divis Flats need improvement is not in dispute but consultants in private practice (not Government officials) have reported that they are structurally sound and with the exception of the St Brendans and Pound blocks can be refurbished at reasonable cost. On the basis of experience elsewhere they should be capable not only of providing suitable accommodation for single people but indeed of providing highly attractive accommodation to such tenants. The Housing Executive have been willing to have this theory tested in practice by carrying out a pilot scheme in one block - Milford - after thorough consultation and then letting the results be judged by the new tenants before moving on to carry out any further work.

If the opportunity to accommodate singles and small families in Divis is not taken the implications for all who seek public sector housing accommodation in West Belfast must be faced. The conclusions of the Greater West Belfast Housing Study carried out last year included a stark message about the long-term supply of houses because of the ^{shortage} storage of suitable land. As a result of representations from many organisations and interested parties (including yourself) we did not confirm the proposed rezoning of industrial land. This already leaves a gap which must be filled but if standard family housing units are used for all requirements, regardless of family size, in West Belfast the substantial shortfall already identified would only be increased.

I have to tell you that having reviewed the future of the Divis complex within these parameters I cannot agree that there should be any substantial change in our strategy. For the reasons which I have tried to spell out clearly as I see them I do not believe that a compelling argument for the demolition of the whole complex has been made out and I cannot agree to this central demand of the Divis Residents Association and their supporters. I have to say to you that in my view any Minister who has to face up to this problem in all its dimensions would be bound to come to the same conclusion.

It has been said, however, that Government, via the Housing Executive, is exercising a form of moral blackmail by insisting that the tenants of Divis should agree to the full refurbishment proposals before the two blocks which will be demolished in any event will be taken down. I can accept that resentment may have been caused by the insistence upon this linkage and as I believe that the St Brendans and Pound blocks should be demolished as quickly as possible I agree that they should be taken down whenever the Housing Executive has been able to rehouse the remaining tenants. Because of the shortage of accommodation in the areas where these tenants wish to be relocated it will however be some considerable time ahead before this can be accomplished.

I regret deeply that the debate about the future of Divis Flats to date has been conducted in such a negative and emotive way. I am convinced that a refurbished complex can continue to provide part of the answer to the varied housing needs with which the Housing Executive has to deal in this area. We have achieved some success with the treatment given to the Tower Block and across the City, for example, at Annadale it can be seen that accommodation reviled until its refurbishment is making a renewed contribution to the quality of the lives of its residents. I hope that the tenants of Divis will be prepared to think again and to engage in further consultation with the Housing Executive about what the future can hold for them.

RICHARD WERRUM