**Speaking Note for Victoria Tower Gardens Planning Inquiry**

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. I am Vice Admiral (Ret’d) Sir Jeremy Blackham, a life-long resident of London (at one time a constituent of Sir Peter Bottomley’s). I served for 40 years in the Navy, both in operational circumstances and frequently in Whitehall and Westminster and know both well. I have worked in London in industry, teach Masters students at KCL and am a frequent writer and speaker. A London based career. I am keenly interested in London’s parks and open spaces for historic, cultural, conservancy and social reasons. I want to make a statement. My remarks were composed last week and many of them have now been touched on in yesterday’s opening addresses, but I wish to make them because they are wholly independent and I represent only myself and none of the organisations represented here.

I strongly support a national Holocaust Memorial. It will commemorate an event which shamed mankind, an abhorrent crime which must be universally recognised and about which every generation should be educated. Sadly it is not unique. Several other equally abhorrent examples of genocide have taken place since the end of WW2, all of them a disgrace to humanity. If I have a disappointment over the proposal it is that it singularises a shameful crime which is not in fact singular and that it would be more appropriate to create a broader genocide memorial as a “preventative education” focus. This is an absolute moral, not a political, imperative. As a nation we must be concerned with them all.

As the Inspector wisely remarked yesterday the question whether there should be a Holocaust memorial is not an issue; it will, quite rightly, be built. I do, however, have real concerns over its location and format.

First and most seriously, as a military man, over security. Victoria Tower Gardens stands at the heart of our nation and its democracy, in a World Heritage Site, abutting the Houses of Parliament – “the Mother of democratic parliaments” as it was called in my childhood, close to No 10, and to Westminster Abbey, the centre of our national religious observance and our way of life and governance. As more than one incident has shown, this area is a potential terrorist target. It is already heavily congested with transport and tourists, to which this proposal can only add. It also risks bringing to the centre of our capital city other potential conflicts. To me, all this poses substantial, unnecessary and unacceptable security risks, when there are other, and in my view better, sites available.

Secondly, now as a citizen, this proposal will partially hide and will detract from the Buxton Memorial. I know that some groups have reservations about this memorial. However, it does commemorate the proud fact that the United Kingdom was the first nation to make slavery illegal and to commit its Navy to an anti-slavery campaign in several parts of the world for over 60 years in the 19th century, to stop, search and bring to justice those involved in the abhorrent slave trade, another deep stain on the history of humanity. But it’s not just historical – slavery is still rife in parts of the world today - and is properly a matter of current public concern. It seems to me wrong to diminish the visibility of a memorial which provides a focus and an educational asset which could perhaps be developed to cater for the views of other groups rightly concerned with this long and shameful practice. I would deplore anything which devalued this monument.

I want to mention the amenity value of the park. It is both a public recreational area and an important neighbourhood amenity. It is for the residents to present their views on this. I am, however, deeply interested in local parks and public open spaces in my own borough in SE London. I have been hugely struck during the Covid pandemic by the great public use made of these spaces, and have realised the enormous health and social benefits to all age groups afforded by these vital “lungs”, within walking distance of many city flat dwellers, which last point is very important.

In summary, I strongly support a national memorial centre to all instances of genocide. They, like slavery, are all equally abhorrent crimes and we have a clear moral duty to remember them and educate future generations. Since I have raised the question and suggested that Victoria Tower Gardens is not a suitable venue, where is it best done?

Exactly a mile by car or on foot from Victoria Tower Gardens is the Imperial War Museum. It possesses a great deal more open space, is much less congested by traffic and is a significantly lower security risk. It already has a Holocaust Memorial Gallery, and seems an appropriate place to commemorate all genocides, which are either the cause or the consequence, of conflict.

**Vice Admiral (Retd) Sir Jeremy Blackham KCB MA**