Mary Dejevsky

* *Whether you are representing anyone or any group (& authority to do so) no, i am speaking as a local resident*
* *Any qualifications you want recording - no*
* *Whether you support or object to the proposed development- i oppose it*
* *Are you happy to answer questions on your evidence? If so evidence likely to carry greater weight and may permit you to ask questions of opposing party- yes, i am happy to answer questions.*

below are my talking points: i will provide a text afterwards.

regards, mary dejevsky

TALKING POINTS FOR HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL & LEARNING CENTRE INQUIRY
7 October, 2020

preamble: I should make clear that I am speaking as a local resident, who opposes the application. I live in a 1930s mansion block about 5 minutes’ walk from Victoria Tower Garden, which is my closest open space. I am also a journalist, who has written on social and planning matters, but it is not my speciality and I am not speaking primarily in this capacity.

I have five points I would like to make and a request to the inquiry.

1. Uniqueness of the site:

2. Green space:  there, or someone with limited mobility.

3. Policy: london and westminster policy on green space

4. Congestion:

5 - and lastly: Process - the use by the Government of a PR company and publicity for the project as though it had been approved.

My request: about the provision of ‘augmented reality’ footage to give a better idea of the effect of the project.

- if time, a footnote about the difficulty of writing about this for a journalist.

i will adjust what i say according to what may have been said before by other participants.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

I should make clear that I am speaking as a local resident, who opposes the application. I live in a 1930s mansion block about 5 minutes’ walk from Victoria Tower Garden, which is my closest open space. I have lived here for 20 years. I am also a journalist, who has written on social and planning matters, but it is not my speciality and I am not speaking primarily in this capacity.

I would also like to clarify - because of the controversy that surrounds the supposed influence of Russians in London - that I am not Russian. I was born in Nottingham, went to school in Sheffield and studied languages at Oxford. My name is my married name, and my late husband was the son of Second World War Russian-Ukrainian refugees, and a US-British dual national. It’s unfortunate that I feel the need to make this clear, but experience - especially recent experience - suggests that it is prudent.

I have five points I would like to make and a suggestion.

1. Uniqueness:
I was amazed, and frankly shocked, to learn that ANYTHING was envisaged to be built on this park. It seemed to me, and I imagine to many people, that as a small park on the edge of the Parliamentary estate, with unique views, including a stretch of the Thames Embankment, and under the jurisdiction of the Royal Parks, it was surely a protected open space - it is - but, it appears, only up to a point.
If the inquiry rejects the development, maybe a recommendation could be made that it should be placed under a protection order to prevent anyone having designs on it again.

2. Green space:
This is a very rare green space in this part of Westminster. You may see this as a highly privileged area, and in many ways it is. But there is also a lot of social housing - far more than a casual visitor might imagine - and a lot of mansion flats with little or no outside space. There are a number of small formal gardens and courtyards, but this is the closest open space for a lot of people, where children can run around and  people can walk their dogs. It was an absolute boon during lockdown and since, and it is hard to imagine how we would have done without it.
    In the other direction, you have St James’s Park, but this is much further away, especially if you are a mother with a toddler needing to be shepherded through the streets to get there, or someone with limited mobility.

3. Policy:
There was reference in the opening presentation for Westminster Council yesterday to the 2018 London Plan, drawn up by the Greater London Authority, which includes the intention to make London what it calls “a National Park city”. Trying to move in this direction is even more important now, given what is now known about the pandemic and the far lower likelihood of becoming infected by the virus in open space. Building here would drive a coach and horses through that policy - which is being steered by democratically elected representatives.

4. Congestion:
Before the pandemic struck, there was a huge problem with coach parking and dropping off in the vicinity, with Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament attracting big groups of tourists. To put it mildly, another attraction is not going to help - especially one that is likely to need security.
Any disruption to traffic - currently works in Horseferry Road and the closure of Vauxhall Bridge, plus the periodic closure of Millbank for parliamentary security - causes enormous snarl-ups and attendant pollution all around. It is hard to see how the proposed development will not make matters worse.

5 - and lastly: Procedures:
This is possibly one of the most important points. It seems to me that there is evidence of at least two questionable moves on the part of the Government and the scheme’s supporters that help to explain why so many people take a rather cynical view of the planning process.

5.1. In June, 2019, at a time when objections on the council planning site were vastly outnumbering expressions of support (866 v 144), the tenor of communications changed overnight. There was a sudden wave of support, with the emails consisting not of connected sentences, like most of the public submissions, but  a few breathlessly enthusiastic words, such as “brilliant”, “fabulous” etc. There were more than 3,000 such submissions, the vast majority in favour of the scheme.
It turned out that the Government had commissioned a PR company, Big Idea, to promote its case - at taxpayer expense - and this duly happened. It also turned out that the company had been able to access the planning site and make submissions without logging in as everyone else had been required to do. The minimum is that all these submissions need to be discounted. This reminds me of nothing more than the vote-stuffing that happens in the sort of countries I have reported on to ensure that the government’s candidate always wins.

5.2. One day, a few weeks later, I went to the park and found two drilling sites. One had a hoarding around it, with posters advertising the new complex and saying that it had the support of the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, and a clutch of her predecesssors. There was no mention of the fact that the planning application had not yet even been considered, let alone that there was still an opportunity for the public to object. I contacted Royal Parks, who said they knew nothing about this. The hoarding vanished a few days later.
I regard both of these interventions at very least as gross subversions of the democratic process, if not actually illegal.

I am not going to talk about the purpose of the building or the merits or otherwise of its design or the security implications. Others are better qualified to do this.

A suggestion:

In January this year, the Environment Department published ‘Living with Beauty...’, the report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission set up by Theresa May. Among its many recommendations was greater use of “augmented reality” and other high tech tools in planning applications. The purpose is to give a realistic impression of how any development will look or feel to real people on the ground and from neighbouring buildings.
The architectural presentations we saw yesterday contained elements of this, but gave very little idea of the human scale. I can point to several developments in Westminster where the traditional elevations that accompanied the planning application bear very little relation to the finished result - largely because they had been drawn from flattering angles and distances that simply did not exist in real life. A more thorough walk-through of the memorial site, including a pedestrian-eye view and views from adjacent buildings, could give the inquiry a sense of how the complex would really look.

AND a footnote on reporting or commenting: It has been extremely difficult to persuade editors to publish reports or comments on this project and the issues involved, especially - in my experience - if you opposed the proposals. There could, and maybe should, have been a public debate on local television or in the Evening Standard, now the capital’s only ‘local’ paper. That there has not been reflects in part the sensitivity of some of the issues involved, including the concern that objectors and anyone who gives them a platform, will be branded “anti-semitic”.

ends