**Notes for remarks to the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre Planning Inquiry**

**7 October 2020: Christopher Dawes OBE**

Good morning, sir. My name is Christopher Dawes (I’m happy to be called Chris if there are any questions for me); I live in Vincent Street, which is close to Victoria Tower Gardens and I will draw on some rough notes which I have not supplied in advance.

You will see from my written submission that I oppose the *location* of the proposed Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre in Victoria Tower Gardens, though I do not oppose there being a Holocaust Memorial and a Learning Centre in the UK.

I am grateful for the opportunity to address this Inquiry, though I feel a little humbled following Sir Peter and Rabbi Romain, who have spoken so eloquently in words with which I entirely agree. I am merely pleading “Please, sir, don’t let them destroy my park”. You will hear further much more articulate and well-informed testimony and analysis of the principal planning objections to the proposal, with which I also agree; my remarks offer a more personal and local perspective.

I represent only myself, but bring to the inquiry my long personal knowledge of the area. I have lived in my current flat for 30 years and almost my whole working life was spent in some proximity to the Gardens: from my first civil service job in 1974 in the then Lambeth Bridge House, just to the south of the river, diagonally opposite the Gardens which were visible from my office, to my time in nearby Marsham Street and then subsequently in Cockspur Street, off Trafalgar Square.

My qualifications to speak as a local resident and office worker over many years are supplemented by a strong interest in the historic environment nurtured in my roles at various times with sponsorship responsibility for English Heritage, the National Heritage Memorial and Lottery Funds, the Royal Parks and the Occupied and Unoccupied Royal Palaces. I also had responsibilities in relation to memorials, as I had to advise Ministers on the application of the 1854 Public Statues (Metropolis) Act designed to limit the proliferation of monuments in London and, having been responsible for co-ordinating the necessary provision for the funeral route of Diana, Princess of Wales, of proposals for memorials to the Princess. I was subsequently involved with memorials also to those murdered in terrorist acts. I know the intense and understandable passion which is felt by those who have lost loved ones to terrorist violence that there should be a suitable memorial to them, and that must be magnified when there is a large community which has suffered appalling loss in what for me are the unimaginable circumstances of the Holocaust.

But however worthy each individual memorial, I have seen our green spaces continuously and, sadly, increasingly eroded in order to erect memorials, especially in the 21st century. At Hyde Park Corner, in Hyde Park itself, in the Green Park, at the edge of St James’s Park and in Parliament Square\*. But none is as egregious as this proposal. None totally dominates an entire park. It’s easy for politicians to trade symbols and move on; we are left the losers.

Turning to this scheme itself. As I see the debate, the proponents of the scheme under consideration have essentially 4 points to make. There should be a national memorial to the Holocaust. There needs to be a learning centre to teach people about the Holocaust because that will provide a moral lesson. These need to be built structures; and they need to be in Victoria Tower Gardens because it’s a location at the heart of British democracy and they will thereby in some way inspire our representatives to act in a moral way.

I accept of course that the Holocaust is a defining tragedy for an important part of our population and that there is a strong public demand for a Memorial. I have no objection to there being one. I’m not an historian, but it is not clear to what extent this can properly be said of itself to be “national”, as Rabbi Romain has noted, given that the Holocaust was not an experience of the British nation as a whole; the Second World War was not fought because of the atrocity of the Holocaust; and indeed I have read that Britain’s response to the fact of the Holocaust was at least ambivalent. So I do not find the argument to put the Memorial in a nationally important site overwhelming.

The Learning Centre. It does not necessarily require a building to teach people the moral lessons of the Holocaust, let alone the giant structure proposed, with the attendant crowding, traffic and security issues it would bring to this valued park and to the whole area. By all means establish a Learning Centre if you wish, but more appropriate and less destructive and divisive locations were identified earlier in this process, to which Sir Peter alluded.

Finally, the idea that our representatives will be morally improved by locating such a memorial near Parliament is an unevidenced assertion, which I find not only insulting to our Parliament but utter cant.

A quick word on the architecture. It is the work of a well-respected architect, but to my untutored eye the most obvious feature, the fins, plagiarise the magnificent USAF Academy Cadet Chapel in the Rockies at Colorado Springs, designed by Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owens and Merrill in the late 1950s. I couldn’t locate my own photographs, but there are images on the Internet and here is one. As you can see, full of fins: perfectly suited to the Rockies, but not the soft Thames landscape.

Having said that, what I especially want to emphasise is how much we in the local community value the park. We value it because of the benefit it provides to this very built-up part of the city, softening the landscape along the river when looking from the Lambeth side or crossing over the bridge, providing a fine setting for the Houses of Parliament and the road along Millbank. It benefits not only those who enter the Gardens, but the thousands who pass it every day.

It offers an important area of green open space in a dense urban environment. Traffic along Millbank and Horseferry Road pre-lockdown was often heavy, especially on the numerous occasions when nearby road closures for ceremonials and suchlike, for protests and for road and building works funnelled traffic along those routes.

Although there are expensive homes in the area, there is a large swathe of social housing, including where I live (albeit in a leasehold flat) on a Council estate in Vincent Street, There is social housing also in Page Street, in Regency Street and in the area west of Great Smith Street, without any private open space. This is a very mixed area, still with the legacy of being probably the original slum, identified as such in the 19th century and called by Dickens the Devil’s Acre. The proximity to Parliament of that swampy area of beggars, thieves, prostitutes and charlatans does not seem to have inspired parliamentarians to good works in those days, though others were. This area still suffers from a deficiency of open space, despite excellent efforts by Westminster City Council, which we have increasingly, especially recently, recognised is needed - now more than ever.

Victoria Tower Gardens provides an oasis for recreation and play. I’ve had the benefit of this, notably when I fractured my hip earlier this year and could set the Gardens as a target for my rehabilitation, having been wheeled there previously; and in recent years as a place to take my daughter, aged 3 when I first put my objections to the Council, 4 when I wrote to the Inquiry and now 5, to play in the playground. As I set out in my written comments I have an old-fashioned preference for public monuments that might inspire children, monuments to human achievements like the Buxton Memorial and the Emmeline Pankhurst statue, and monuments to self-sacrifice and mercy, like the Burghers of Calais. A Holocaust Memorial would confound that and dominate the whole space. Whatever individual stories of courage or fortitude might be told, I can’t see how a Holocaust Memorial can be anything other than a monument to the worst of human evil, indeed that seems to be its intended effect.

I have described personal benefits, but I believe that they are illustrative and representative and available to all, residents and visitors alike. As I see it, planning policies are put in place for the general public good, of which the benefits I have noted are part: they reflect real human needs and they should not be set aside when it suits millionaires and their politician friends. Once lost, they will be lost for good. This case should not be reduced to a contest between our commitment to our urban heritage, our trees, our green spaces and the amenity of our surroundings and on the other hand our commitment to fighting antisemitism. Commitment to the latter should not involve spoiling the former. We can have both. I love my city and want to save the best of it. So let there be a Holocaust Memorial. Let there be a Learning Centre of some kind. But not in Victoria Tower Gardens. Let us Save Victoria Tower Gardens for everyone to enjoy.

* ENDS -

\*In 2003 and 2006 respectively, the Australian and New Zealand War Memorials were added to the Hyde Park Corner Gallery of Memorials; in 2009 the 7/7 memorial in Hyde Park; in the Green Park in 2012 the RAF Bomber Command Memorial was added to 1994’s Canada Memorial. At the edge of St James’s Park we have the National Police Memorial of 2005 and the Bali Bombings memorial of 2006. Parliament Square has suffered similarly from the 21st century enthusiasm for monuments.