HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL AND LEARNING CENTRE INQUIRY

SPEAKING NOTE

My name is Paul Dimond and I am speaking in a personal capacity as an individual interested party.

I much appreciate this opportunity. I have no expert qualification in planning but am a local resident five minutes’ walk from Victoria Tower Gardens.

I oppose the application. I support the Opening Submission on behalf of Westminster City Council, those on behalf of the Thorney Island Society, Save Victoria Tower Gardens and the London Gardens Society, the Opening Speech on behalf of Part 6 Party Baroness Deech and the statements by Vice Admiral Sir James Blackham, Sir Peter Bottomley, Mary Dejevsky, Dr Sally Marlow, and others in similar vein. But I would like to submit the following points for your consideration.

A privilege of over forty years in HM Foreign and Diplomatic Services, working in three Continents, was to absorb something of how others see and evaluate the British. I was particularly fortunate to work only in democratic countries, appreciating the variety among them. But a common feature I found was the deep stock of esteem still felt for the United Kingdom, our sense of history, our approach to common law, our common sense, wisdom in the application of the separation of powers and reasoned distribution of decision-making to local government best able to reflect local interests. These features of foreign and Commonwealth interest in these islands help to drive inward tourism, from which our economy benefits so strongly in normal times. Many visitors arrive with expectations of evidence of the way in which we do things for the public good, through our good governance, including the working of the planning discipline. Against such background, I see your Inquiry into this case as a welcome chance to demonstrate fairness in our planning process.

To avoid any doubt, I want to state very clearly that I find the proposal for a Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre as in the September 2015 specifications to be incontrovertible, most especially an enhanced learning centre that is fit for purpose: will be lasting; taking due account of our local circumstances, will bear comparison with such centres as the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Jerusalem, the Information Centre under the Field of Stelae in Berlin and many others; and will be implemented without undue harm to the normally accepted conditions of life, the environment and respect for the value of green space in this dense capital city.

Transferring to the younger and future generations and to visitors from overseas the reality of the Holocaust as we see it in the United Kingdom must be the central educational aim. I would put the educational effect to be sought in this, quite simply, alongside that achieved in another instance when, every September at Oosterbeek, witnessed by the British and Polish pilgrims, the local children play a central part in laying flowers at the graves at the cemetery of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The effect there is stunningly poignant and has been effective now for two generations. There are many other comparable examples of this. But I fear that I harbour doubts about the fitness of the Victoria Tower Gardens for the purpose of leaving visitors to the proposed Learning Centre with a desired sense of deeply sober and quiet reflection, and with lasting effect, in the limited space there is as they would leave the proposed Centre, with the reality of the immediately adjacent traffic congestion along Millbank towards Lambeth Bridge.

My last and principal point is however on the severe loss of amenity as now afforded to local residents by Victoria Tower Gardens. I am not seeing this as a proprietorial backyard. The immediate vicinity west and south of the Gardens contains a long-established and mixed residential community, largely flat dwellers with no access to private gardens, a community now growing in size with the newly built and converted blocks. The reduced area of usable amenity space that would result from siting the project here would effectively remove a long valued calm refuge of green space next to the river, relief from the intense hubbub of the surrounding area. To succeed in its purpose, the project would attract significant numbers of visitors to the area that also contains schools and already suffers from high air pollution. Taking account of current and foreseeable security works further north on Millbank and in Old Palace Yard, the dropping-off and collection of visitors by road would further exacerbate the pollution close to the residential area. The effect of the necessary security to protect the Centre itself would make matters worse, impacting the quiet enjoyment of the Gardens by local residents, not least children, senior citizens and those looking for modest exercise close to their homes or places of work.

These drawbacks seem so real in contrast to an imaginative alternative of an enhanced Centre at the Imperial War Museum. I conclude that the Victoria Tower Gardens site is not suitable and oppose the application.

Paul Dimond