Submission to the Public Inquiry into the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre Victoria Tower Gardens.

Planning Application 19/00114/FULL.

Submitted by Viscount Eccles CBE in my personal capacity;

This memorandum is focussed on the question “Will what is put forward in this Planning Application enable the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to carry out the five recommendations made in the Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission’s Report of 2015.”

On the 27th of January 2015 David Cameron in response to the publication of the Commission’s Report said “that is why today –with the full support of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition-- I am accepting the recommendations of the Commission”

He also said “I am also setting up the Holocaust Memorial Foundation” which was to carry out the recommendations.

For the reasons which follow I, John Eccles, Viscount Eccles CBE conclude that the Planning Application for the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre Victoria Tower Gardens will not carry out the Commission’s recommendations as accepted by the Prime Minister with cross party support in 2015. In particular the facilities available to the Learning Centre are unfit for the purposes set out in the Commission’s Recommendation 2. Nor is the independence in the Commission’s final recommendation assured.

The Recommendations in the 2015 Report were as follows--

Recommendation 1

“ A striking and new national memorial”

The Commission listed seven principles to be followed if the Memorial was to fulfil its purpose. There is no full explanation in the application to confirm that the recommended principles will be met given the facilities proposed.

The Commission considered three sites all of them larger than the Victoria Tower Gardens.

Recommendation 2

Recommendation 2, which is lengthy and demanding, was headed “A world-class Learning Centre at the heart of a Campus driving a network of national educational activity”. By 2015 seventy years of Holocaust remembrance and study had taken place. The Commission emphasised that it had no wish to “duplicate” the work of other Holocaust focussed institutions. Its intended Campus would be a focal point for collaboration and partnership. There would be a Professor appointed. Additionality was essential to an institution coming late to the remembrance and understanding of the Nazi Holocaust. The Commission foresaw partnership and cooperation with universities, schools, the Imperial War Museum, The Holocaust Educational Trust, and many other national and international institutions.

When accepting the Commission’s recommendations the Prime Minister cited “generations to come” and repeated as “world class” a Learning Centre with its Campus at the heart of a national effort.

The question now is whether the proposed design and facilities of the underground Learning Centre will enable the Ministry to carry out Recommendation 2. It is advised by the Holocaust Memorial Foundation on “taking forward the recommendations of the Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission”. In fact there is no Recommendation 2 plan in the application.

Recent responses from the Minister of Faith to my written requests to be informed about Learning Centre plans are brief. He writes that “an engaging, reflective and powerful exhibition” is planned which repeats an announcement made in 2018: that “we have appointed an internationally acclaimed and experienced curator”: and that ”we are drawing on a range of expert academic advice”. In the same letter of the 17th September he says “I understand your wish to see the developing plans for the Learning Centre, however as I explained in my earlier letter the business case is not suitable for publication at the current time. To publish information about, for example, forecast construction and operating costs could make it more difficult to achieve good value for money through public procurement”.

The 17th September reply from the Minister is narrowly commercial. There is no evidence that plans to carry out Recommendation 2 have been made.

This recommendation was central to the Commission’s work. They spent much time and effort on it. It was uppermost in the Prime Minister’s acceptance with its cross party support for all the recommendations in 2015.

This raises two questions. First are the Learning Centre’s underground facilities as planned likely to enable the fulfilment of Recommendation 2? Second is it timely to be making this Planning Application without the Ministry having satisfied itself that the facilities put forward will meet the needs of Recommendation 2?

In considering the position now all that is certain is a thematic visitor exhibition for visitors to the Memorial. Nothing else is certain.

It seems highly likely that the Victoria Tower Garden site, which is quite small and narrow, will not enable the Ministry to carry out Recommendation 2. The designed accommodation and facilities will be insufficient to meet the demands of the recommendation.

This likely failure to meet a Recommendation raises the question – by what authority is the Ministry proposing to depart from the Recommendations accepted by the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in 2015?

Recommendation 3.

Recommendation [3] is headed “An Endowment Fund to secure the long term future of Holocaust Education – including the new Learning Centre and projects across the country” and then when referring to the Trustees of the fund the Recommendation says “to support Holocaust education around the country for generations to come”.

This recommendation that there should be trustees and that they should raise endowment funds to cover the costs of the Learning Centre will not now be carried out.

Instead the Learning Centre is to be directly managed by the Ministry. There will be no trustees and no Endowment Fund.

This decision not to implement Recommendation 3 is neither explained nor justified.

Recommendation 4

Headed “An urgent programme to record and preserve the testimony of British Holocaust survivors and liberators” Much work has gone on over many years to preserve a record. Holocaust Trusts, The British Library, The Imperial War Museum and many others have made records. It has been expected that the new Holocaust institution would both want and need to work with these like institutions. No plans to cooperate and work together have been announced.

Recommendation 5

In Delivery and Next Steps the Commission makes its final Recommendation. The first sentence reads as follows- “The Commission’s final recommendation is the immediate creation of a permanent independent body.”  Then “This organisation would oversee the establishment of the new National Memorial and Learning Centre and run the Centre.”

The Prime Minister in January 2015 announced the creation of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation and charged it with the executive responsibility for establishing the Holocaust Memorial and for running its Learning Centre. For reasons unknown the Foundation decided, after a while, that it could not carry out the task which the Prime Minister had given it. The Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government stepped into its shoes.

This was a major change because the Ministry is not an independent body. It is the responsibility of the governing party. It is not a cross party body. Inevitably party politics became a factor in plans for the Learning Centre.

As the new institution is to be a direct Ministry responsibility the Commission’s final recommendation will not be met. This failure is a sufficient reason to question the Planning Application and either to support a turn down or at least the provision of demanding conditions on any qualified acceptance.

In summary it is certain that the Recommendations made by the Prime Minister’s Commission and accepted by cross party consensus will not be carried out if Planning Application 19/00114/Full is approved as presented. The two principal failures to comply rest, first, on the failure to provide the necessary facilities and the failure to have prepared a business plan to ensure that Recommendation 2 will be carried out. The second failure is that the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government is not an independent body. Therefore the Commission’s final Recommendation will not be carried out.

I trust that the Inspector will take into account this analysis of the Ministry’s response in its Planning Application to the five accepted Recommendations made by the Prime Minister’s Commission in its 2015 Report.

John Eccles

N B. A personal note.

Declaring my interest I live in Smith Square, Westminster and I regularly walk in the Victoria Tower Gardens. I previously lived in Barton Street SW1. I know of and have given money to the Thorney Island Society which has a continuing and broadly based interest in Planning Applications.

I am an elected hereditary member of the House of Lords.

I am 89 and so am unlikely to see how these matters finally turn out. I was 14 when British troops went into Bergen-Belsen. The impact was appalling. Ever since I have been committed to every endeavour to understand and to minimise the chances of comparable genocides carried out in pursuit of racial ideologies. To this end I consider that an open and clear commitment to the human and financial resources needed to bring about the Commission’s recommendations is a necessary condition if I am to support this Planning Application. This commitment is not in contemplation and therefore I oppose the Application.

John Eccles