**Statement to VTG inquiry**

My name is Dorian Gerhold. I was a House of Commons Clerk for 33 years and am now a historian. My objection is to the location and not to the principle of a Memorial and Learning Centre.

My starting point is that *part* of a public open space is being taken, whatever the exact percentage, and *some* harm is being done to a heritage asset, namely Victoria Tower Gardens, whatever the precise level of harm. The onus is therefore on the applicant to provide a clear and convincing justification for why the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre need to be in Victoria Tower Gardens, based on public benefits. The main point I wish to make is that the public benefits claimed for this particular site do not stand up to close examination. The applicant has produced not much more than slogans, constantly repeated over several years and scattered throughout the proofs of evidence. When challenged the applicant has often misrepresented contrary views and reaffirmed its original position without engaging with the arguments, as in Mr Balls’ and Lord Pickles’ Annex G.[[1]](#endnote-1) There is no witness from the applicant whose main purpose is to explain why the Memorial needs to be next to Parliament, and there is just one page in Mr Balls’ and Lord Pickles’ proof of evidence on the reasons for choosing the site.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**First justification: national and international importance of the development**

**(1)** So I will run quickly through the justifications put forward. The first is the national and international importance of the proposed development.[[3]](#endnote-3) But this is not specific to the proposed site unless the applicant’s other claims are accepted, and if similar effects can be achieved on a different site without harm, I do not see how the harm on the proposed site can be justified. In addition a strong case can be made that the choice of site reduces the importance of the proposed development, because the learning centre is too small to achieve the vision set out by the Holocaust Commission in 2015,[[4]](#endnote-4) it will never be possible to expand it, and its scope has been reduced to a concentration on the role of the British Government and Parliament during the Holocaust,[[5]](#endnote-5) largely ignoring the ‘learning points’ which the Commission wanted to guide the Learning Centre’s work;[[6]](#endnote-6) indeed its emphasis on the role of national governments contradicts one of the learning points.[[7]](#endnote-7) A Memorial and a Learning Centre devoted to the 6 million victims, as envisaged by the Holocaust Commission, deserve a prominent site; it is far less clear that this applies to an exhibition which is mainly about the complexity of Britain’s responses to Nazism.[[8]](#endnote-8)

**Second justification: will complete “garden of national conscience”**

**(2)** The second justification is that Victoria Tower Gardens will become a garden of national conscience, with a ‘commemorative narrative’ incorporating the three existing statues.[[9]](#endnote-9) This is one of the five reasons given in the planning statement for choosing it,[[10]](#endnote-10) although what the ‘national conscience’ means is not explained. For example the Burghers of Calais supposedly represent freedom from oppression.[[11]](#endnote-11) The first problem is that the event as portrayed is based on a single medieval chronicle, and almost certainly never happened in the way Rodin depicts, which makes it a terrible companion for the Holocaust Memorial. The second is that it has nothing to do with freedom from oppression; the burghers and the inhabitants of Calais saved their lives, but were expelled from their city. The third problem is that, even if the story were true, it is about six people who expected to be executed, but were not, which compares with six million who died in the Holocaust. Attempting to make it part of a commemorative narrative with the Holocaust Memorial borders on the offensive. As for the other statues: Mrs Pankhurst, successful campaign, one dead; Buxton Memorial, successful campaign, no dead in the campaign (many dead slaves, but the Memorial does not commemorate them); total deaths connected with the three statues, one; Holocaust deaths six million. I cannot fathom what Sir David Adjaye means when he says the Holocaust Memorial ‘completes’ the story of the existing memorials,[[12]](#endnote-12) and I note that Asa Bruno in his proof of evidence distances himself from this extraordinary argument.[[13]](#endnote-13) The applicant, typically, has done little to investigate the real significance of the existing monuments.

**Third justification: association with national institutions**

**(3)** Next, Mr Balls and Lord Pickles claim that the overriding advantage of Victoria Tower Gardens is its prominence, both in terms of being seen by millions of people and in associating it with national institutions and monuments, though they do not specifically refer to Parliament.[[14]](#endnote-14) But the choice of site is a major departure from the Holocaust Commission’s idea of prominence,[[15]](#endnote-15) and if it had thought that only a site next to Parliament would do, it would presumably have said so. In any case Mr Tavernor is at pains to tell us that the Memorial and Learning Centre will be almost invisible.[[16]](#endnote-16) If the overriding requirement had been prominence, a much better site would be in Whitehall, along from the Cenotaph, using a government building nearby as the Learning Centre. This site was apparently never considered, probably because no-one told the Foundation’s property advisers that the criteria had changed completely after they were advertised in September 2015. Victoria Tower Gardens is not uniquely prominent.

A related claim is that the location will show the importance attached to the Memorial and be a symbol of commitment to remembering,[[17]](#endnote-17) but other sites could convey the same message, and more effectively because untainted by controversy and by false links with democracy. Also, one of the messages of the Victoria Tower Gardens site is that, although the Government talks a lot about valuing Holocaust commemoration and education, it was not willing to pay for a site, but instead seeks to appropriate one which was placed in its care for different purposes.

**Fourth justification: connection with Parliament and democracy**

**(4)** Then we come to the alleged connection with Parliament and democracy, including the idea that putting the Memorial next to Parliament associates it with British values or democratic values.[[18]](#endnote-18) This is a lot of different issues bundled up together. As soon as they are disentangled and examined separately the arguments fall apart.

The first argument is that the site will draw a contrast between democracy embodied in the Palace of Westminster and genocide. This reflects the applicant’s insistence that genocide happens when democracy fails.[[19]](#endnote-19) On that basis there are just two conditions in the world: democracy on one hand and genocide on the other. But in the real world authoritarian regimes have often been tolerant of different races and religions, while racial and religious hatred can and does sometimes flourish in democracies. It was racial and religious hatred which led to the Holocaust, not lack of democracy. The symbolism and the ‘abstract truths’[[20]](#endnote-20) of democracy versus genocide claimed by Mr Balls and Lord Pickles do not work because they are not truths.

The underlying problem here is that Parliament stands for something different: not protection from racial and religious hatred but that Government should reflect the will of the people and should be accountable. A democratic Parliament will take on the character of those who elect it, as the German Parliament did in the early 1930s, with disastrous results.

The second argument is that the location next to Parliament will convey messages or reminders to visitors.[[21]](#endnote-21) In many cases it is not clear why anyone would draw the suggested message. For example why would looking at the Palace of Westminster remind you to be vigilant?[[22]](#endnote-22) In others cases the messages are too convoluted, for example the message that Parliament ought to protect against racial and religious hatred but does not necessarily do so.[[23]](#endnote-23) The applicant insists that the view of Parliament will remind visitors that political decisions have far-reaching consequences.[[24]](#endnote-24) We must imagine a visitor, say a teenage boy, who passes right through the Learning Centre without picking up this basic truth, but on emerging he catches a glimpse of the Palace of Westminster, the scales fall from his eyes and he realises that political decisions have far-reaching consequences. The argument is ridiculous, but it is explicitly endorsed by Mr Balls and Lord Pickles in Annex G, para 22. In practice people will draw their own messages. Victoria Boyarski, the experienced teacher who spoke on 7 October, expects that pupils will conclude from the location that the British Government was in some way responsible for the Holocaust,[[25]](#endnote-25) and Gita Conn said in a newspaper article submitted to the inquiry that the location will be an acknowledgement that Britain could have done more to save the Jews.[[26]](#endnote-26) In these ways the location next to Parliament will confuse the message rather than amplify it. It is typical of the applicant’s approach that no research has been conducted on what messages people actually draw from seeing the Palace of Westminster; instead we have assertions.

The third argument is that placing the Memorial and Learning Centre next to Parliament will be a reminder to MPs of their power to oppress.[[27]](#endnote-27) It is surely implausible that any MP with intolerant views will be influenced by a nearby Memorial which they can easily avoid, and Lord Blencathra dealt with this argument very effectively in his speech on 13 October.[[28]](#endnote-28) Would it have made any difference if there had been a monument to tolerance next to the Reichstag in the 1930s? The applicant has provided no evidence that monuments do make a difference. The defences against intolerance are not monuments but the hearts and minds of both citizens and parliamentarians; hence the importance of education wherever it is carried out.

A fourth argument, made mainly by Learning from the Righteous, is that the location next to Parliament is justified because Jewish refugees and the Holocaust were discussed by Parliament.[[29]](#endnote-29) But just about everything in British and European history has been discussed by Parliament, and it is far from clear how much influence parliamentary debates had on the Government’s decisions.

**The choosing of VTG as the site for the Memorial and Learning Centre**

**(5)** I also deal in my written submission with how Victoria Tower Gardens was chosen. In fact I seem to be the only person who has investigated this. There is a mystery here. In September 2015 the Holocaust Memorial Foundation set out the criteria which would guide its search for a site, following closely what the Holocaust Commission had recommended, including a physical campus where Holocaust educational organisations could locate their offices, at least 5000 square metres of built space, room for gatherings of 500 people, an auditorium, prayer rooms and so on.[[30]](#endnote-30) In January 2016 the Prime Minister announced out of the blue the selection of Victoria Tower Gardens, a site never publicly mentioned before and incapable of providing what was regarded as necessary four months earlier.

What happened in between is utterly opaque, and the planning and environmental statements do not help at all. They refer to the search by the property consultants CBRE, who were instructed by the Foundation to find a site to meet the criteria set out by the Foundation in September 2015. CBRE reported on 24 sites in central London which met the criteria, not including Victoria Tower Gardens, on 11 January.[[31]](#endnote-31) It turns out that this was an expensive sideshow.

The process that mattered was a parallel one, evidently operating with different criteria. We have a few clues. One is the letter of 26 October 2015 from Lord Feldman of Elstree, a member of the Foundation and Conservative Party Chairman, to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, suggesting that the Memorial could be in Victoria Tower Gardens and the Learning Centre ‘close by’ in Millbank − incidentally a different interpretation of co-location from the one now insisted on: the two structures could be close together, but not necessarily on the same site.[[32]](#endnote-32) The Secretary of State replied on 3 November 2015, saying that the Gardens might be an attractive location for the Memorial because it would be close to the Learning Centre in Millbank.

We also know there was a meeting in Downing Street on 2 December 2015 at which the Foundation, Royal Parks and two government departments discussed using Victoria Tower Gardens for the Memorial.[[33]](#endnote-33) Then on 13 January the Foundation rejected the 24 sites which had been reported on only two days before and recommended Victoria Tower Gardens for both the Memorial and the Learning Centre, leading to a government announcement about the Memorial alone just 14 days later. What we don’t know is who took the crucial decisions, when they took them and what the reasons were for scaling down the Learning Centre so drastically. In other words we cannot be sure what the real reasons were for the choice of Victoria Tower Gardens.

I say ‘we’, but of course the applicant does know, and could help the inspector greatly by providing the relevant minutes and meeting papers. The fact that these documents have not been made available entitles the Inquiry to infer that they would not assist the Secretary of State in advancing his case, but would actually detract from it. The Inquiry should infer that the main reason the site was chosen was because it was both prominent and free, thereby saving money. As I have shown, the choice did not meet the criteria laid down by the Commission or the Foundation, and the reasons which have been given have been drawn up subsequently to fit a decision already made, especially in the recently-revised Environmental Statement.[[34]](#endnote-34) We simply do not know for certain the real reason for the attempt to cram the Learning Centre into this small park and to abandon the Holocaust Commission’s vision for that Learning Centre.

**What should a Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre achieve?**

**(6)** Finally, I ask what it is we would want the Memorial and Learning Centre to achieve, especially as regards education. I suggest it is common ground that we would want anyone who visited it not only to acquire more accurate information, but also to be deeply moved by the appalling human tragedy, to understand where racial and religious hatred can lead and to leave with a determination to counter such hatred in their daily lives. My case is that locating the Memorial and Learning Centre next to Parliament in Victoria Tower Gardens will contribute nothing to the desired outcome, will result in an inadequate Learning Centre, and will wreck an irreplaceable public park to no purpose. The Holocaust is far too powerful a story to need add-ons like British values or unconvincing links with Parliament, and a better site could be found. I suggest that if the applicant fails to substantiate the reasons given for locating the proposed development in a public park, that should lead directly to a recommendation that the development be rejected.

1. CD 8.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. CD 8.1, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. CD 8.34, para 10.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Britain’s Promise to Remember: The Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report*, pp. 13-15, 43-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. e.g. Letter from Helen Jones of the Holocaust Memorial Team, MHCLG, 28 February 2020; letter from Lord Greenhalgh, Minister of State, MHCLG, to Baroness Deech, 30 April 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Holocaust Commission report, pp. 48-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, No. 2. See CD 8.9, para 8.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Description by Learning from the Righteous, CD 9.13, para 1.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See statements in CD 10.25, Annex 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. CD 6.1, para 4.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. UKHMF exhibition boards, September 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. CD 8.3, para 9.1.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. CD 8.5, para 8.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. CD 8.1, paras 48-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Holocaust Commission report, pp. 13, 41, 54-56. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. CD 8.11, para 5.2.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. CD 8.1, para 48; CD 10.25, Annex 1, No. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. CD 10.25, Annex 1, especially Nos. 1-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. CD 10.25, Annex 1, No. 5; CD 8.1, Annex G, para 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, para 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. e.g. CD 8.1, para 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. CD 10.25, Annex 1, No. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. CD 8.1, Annex G, para 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. CD 10.25, Annex 1, No. 12; CD 8.1, Annex G, para 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Apparently no speaking notes submitted. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Submitted on 4 October. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. CD 10.25, Annex 1, No. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. CD 10.32. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. CD 9.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. UKHMF, *Search for a central London site* (Sept 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. e.g. CD 6.1, paras 4.20-4.23. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Summarised in CD 10.25, Annex 3, para 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. CD 10.25, p. 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. CD 6.49, paras 4.3-4.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)