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Holocaust Memorial Museum

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09 February 2017

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Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Christopher Pincher.)

5.03 pm

- [**Sir Edward Leigh \(Gainsborough\) \(Con\)**](#)

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The holocaust is one of the most difficult experiences in our history to commemorate in stone. For its sheer enormity and depravity, it defies adequate description, and transferring this into the built environment is all the more difficult. Architects across the world have attempted to tackle this task—in Israel, Paris, Washington, Ottawa and, perhaps most memorably, in Berlin, with Peter Eisenman’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

It is impossible sufficiently to convey the horrors of this great crime, but we have a duty to not just commemorate but teach future generations about the holocaust. I will detail why Victoria Tower gardens are insufficient for this task, while pointing out that we have a very good solution available close by, at the Imperial War Museum.

There can be no better example of the twofold task of remembrance and education than the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, which I visited recently and was very moved by. The visitor can experience solemnity and silence in a hall of remembrance, where one can light a candle, say a prayer for the dead and reflect. But this memorial is also a museum, and it is very large, with a permanent collection of over 900 artefacts, 70 video monitors and four theatres showing eyewitness testimony and historic film footage.

On arrival, visitors are given identification cards giving the name and story of a single person, whether a victim or a survivor of the holocaust. On a journey through history, they learn about anti-Semitism, the Nazis’ rise to power, the ghettos, discrimination, the frightening “final solution” decided around a conference table in Wannsee, and its implementation in Nazi-occupied Europe. The museum also teaches about the American response to the holocaust. It would be useful to detail Britain’s reaction at the time, whether it be to the Kindertransport or the well-intentioned but disastrous decision to severely cap German-Jewish emigration to the British Mandate of Palestine—always bearing in mind that we were the only nation to fight Nazism from the very first to the very last day of the war; of that we shall always be proud. Knowledge is vital—indeed, fundamental—to remembrance. We must make sure that Britons know about the holocaust in order to recall this great crime, as well as to prevent future attempts to commit anything remotely similar.

The Washington experience is the one that we should seek to emulate in a UK national holocaust memorial, but when we consider the Victoria Tower gardens site we see it is completely unsuited to the role. The US museum receives 30 million visitors a year, and it is thought that the proposed memorial here in London will receive over 1 million visitors per year. In line with this educative function, I hope that such a place of remembrance would become a must-visit site for children on school visits to London. However, Victoria Tower gardens is already a well-trafficked area that suffers from severe congestion. The traffic and access pressure will overwhelm Millbank, where there is no parking, at a location not capable of accommodating such a volume of people and vehicles, especially coaches. We want people to be able to visit a holocaust memorial museum uninhibited. We want crowds to experience this building, and so it is counter-intuitive to site it at a place that already suffers from congestion and does not have the capacity to deal with the number of people we hope will visit.

The abbey and Palace of Westminster are recognised by UNESCO as a world heritage site, and there is some danger, based on UNESCO's rules and recommendations, that such a large-scale project in Victoria Tower gardens might threaten that designation. I urge the Government, and Westminster City Council, to turn down the proposal for a learning centre in the gardens, not least because it conflicts with the council's monuments saturation zone. There are already 300 monuments in the City of Westminster. Last year, the council turned down an application by the Methodist Church to place a homeless Jesus—a bronze rough sleeper—outside Central hall because it conflicted with the monuments saturation zone.

We should also be worried about the precedent that this will set, not just for one of Britain's world heritage sites, but for our royal parks. Victoria Tower gardens is part of the royal parks, and if we allow a green space like this, even for such an unquestionably useful and justifiable purpose, to be built over, then other spaces under the care of the royal parks may suffer a similar fate. This small park, fringed with large trees, is the only oasis in this part of Westminster for hundreds of thousands of visitors, office workers and local residents every year.

The scale of the learning centre—there has been criticism of it in the architectural press—raises questions about the fate of the existing memorials in the park: the Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst memorial; Rodin's sculpture, "The Burghers of Calais"; and the fine Gothic memorial to the Victorian abolitionist Thomas Fowell Buxton. Will these three existing memorials be overshadowed? Local residents have no objection whatsoever to a memorial on the scale of the existing memorials; they are just worried about the scale of the underground learning centre.

In addition, the plans call for building downwards beneath the ground of the park at a riverside location. The area faces serious drainage problems already, and 50 properties were flooded from underneath after the rains of June 2016. We are talking about ancient marshland that has been built up across the centuries. Subterranean construction here may significantly disrupt the local water table.

Of course, the whole area used to be surrounded by the River Tyburn and its rivulets flowing into the Thames. This was the old Thorney Island. The Thorney Island Society, which looks after the local history and preservation of the area where we are now, has expressed its anxiety in a statement:

"The Society is obviously very concerned at the loss of this valuable small park, because it is very difficult to imagine that a project of this size and importance would not dominate the space and transform it from a tranquil local park to a busy civic space. We do not object in any way to the building of a memorial, but we feel that there are more appropriate sites, already proposed as well as not yet considered."

The society has urged people to sign the petition opposing the current proposal.

Happily, there is a solution. The Imperial War Museum is spending £15 million on renovating and improving its permanent exhibition devoted to educating people about the holocaust. The museum sits in a location that would not suffer from increased traffic and that is already conducive to tour and school coaches. It is less than a mile away from the Palace of Westminster, so it is still located in the centre of the nation's capital. The museum's directors have been very welcoming of the idea of having the national holocaust memorial at hand there, and they have offered a site next to the museum. Far from glorifying war, the Imperial War Museum makes the opposite point—that war led to the hatred and destruction that made the holocaust possible.

- **[Bob Blackman \(Harrow East\) \(Con\)](#)**

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My hon. Friend is making a powerful case, and I am delighted to hear that he supports the principle of a holocaust education centre and beyond. Does he not agree that schoolchildren and other visitors to the Palace of Westminster could walk to the holocaust centre, and so they could combine their visits without having to travel by car or by coach? They could visit all the facilities in one go, rather than having to travel between them.

- **[Sir Edward Leigh](#)**

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That is a perfectly fair point, but I believe that because of the severely constrained site, there might be difficulties with the sheer number of visitors. I make the separate point that we are talking about a decant of Parliament, and many services may be based in Victoria Tower gardens. There are all sorts of other problems that I think my hon. Friend should consider, although I hear what he says. After all, we are talking about the Imperial War Museum, which is very close indeed.

Given the constraints of Victoria Tower gardens, the concept proposed for the site has already had to be scaled down from an entire learning campus to a few underground rooms. I say to my hon. Friend that it will not be like the Washington DC memorial; it will be much smaller. Why should we scale it down? We think it is really important, so we should make a proper memorial like the ones in Berlin and Washington. What the architects have proposed is simply insufficient to convey the enormity of the horrendous crime we are seeking to commemorate, and it fails in its scale to respect the dead whom we seek to remember.

We would be much wiser to take our example from the memorial museum in Washington, which is a proven exemplar when it comes to imprinting the importance of the holocaust upon the minds of future generations, and a place to preserve historical recollections, but also a place to remember the dead. Given the seriousness of what we are commemorating, we need to make sure that this is done properly.

To sum up, the Victoria Tower gardens site is too small for what is needed. Further development there would threaten a UNESCO world heritage site and set a dangerous precedent for green spaces in the care of the Royal Parks Agency. Meanwhile, just a short distance away, still in the very centre of London, we have a permanent exhibition already devoted to the study of and teaching about the holocaust. There is a chance for synergy; we can build on those connections and create an integrated experience based on the example that works so well in Washington. This proposal, which is supported by me and many others, including the Imperial War Museum, will allow the United Kingdom to have a proper place to remember the holocaust and to educate future generations about this enormous crime.

5.14 pm

- [**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government \(Andrew Percy\)**](#)

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I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who is my constituency neighbour, on securing this debate—he was quite right to do so in order to raise his concerns. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for making a contribution.

I need to begin by making it clear that the decision has already been taken to select this particular site, so I cannot go too far into the specifics, or rerun the arguments about which site has been selected for what reason. Before I respond to some of the specific complaints and issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough raised, it is important to reflect on why it is so vital for us as a nation—for all of us in the House and, indeed, the country—to build a holocaust memorial.

The holocaust may have reached its barbaric climax at Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz-Birkenau, but it started in the hearts of ordinary men and women. We have seen again the madness that can sweep through peoples and nations with the killings in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. Such killings shock our conscience, but they are at the awful extreme of a spectrum of ignorance and intolerance that we see every day—the bigotry that says another person is less than my equal, or less than a human being—and we cannot let those seeds of hate take root in our hearts.

That is why building the memorial is so important to our country. It is also why the new national memorial to the holocaust is to be located next to this place, the heart of democracy and of the values that suffered so terribly during the holocaust and in other events since. The accompanying educational centre will send out a powerful message about our values as a country. Together, we will stand up for the British values of tolerance and respect for others

that I think are epitomised by this building and this Parliament. Together, we will educate every generation to fight hatred and prejudice in all its forms, and we will defend the hard-fought British liberty of freedom of religion and belief.

The plans to build a new holocaust memorial in Victoria Tower gardens have support not only from the Prime Minister, but from across the political spectrum, which is very important. The independent and cross-party UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation was set up to advise the Government on taking forward this work. The foundation's board includes Members from both sides of the House—my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) and the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond)—as well as distinguished Members of the other place and, of course, the Chief Rabbi. There are also representatives from a variety of fields who have given freely of their time to share their knowledge and understanding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough raised concerns about the siting of the memorial in Victoria Tower gardens. I hear his comments about museums and memorials in Washington DC and elsewhere, but important as they are, this is a unique and specifically British memorial that should chime with our values. The decision to locate the memorial in Victoria Tower gardens followed an extensive search of more than 50 sites across London, but none was considered more prominent or appropriate than Victoria Tower gardens which, as I have said, is next to this building.

My hon. Friend asked whether the memorial might not be better placed at the Imperial War Museum. This site was explicitly considered among the 50 other sites by both the Holocaust Commission and the cross-party UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation. The promise that all parties made to our holocaust survivors was that we would create a striking and iconic memorial, and there is nowhere more striking and iconic than next to our Parliament in Westminster.

I can reassure my hon. Friend that careful consideration is being given to the impact of the memorial and the centre on the gardens. I showed him the proposed designs yesterday. They are very much outlines, but the selection of a final design will take place shortly. I assure him that preserving the park as a much-loved public amenity will be key in choosing the final design. I also assure him that residents and users of the park will be fully consulted—they are, and can already be, part of the process. As this moves to a planning application, they will be able to explain their views in the usual way. The designs have come from some of the world's best architects and artists. They will be considered shortly by the jury, who will be mindful of the need to maintain the integrity of the park.

I assure my hon. Friend and colleagues that we are consulting local residents, stakeholders, Royal Parks, Westminster City Council and Historic England to ensure that the current character of the gardens is maintained. We would like the memorial and learning centre to be a logical and harmonious addition to the space. If my hon. Friend looks at some of the proposed designs, he will see the various ways in which the designers believe that that can be achieved. I assure the House that, within the budget for building the memorial, funding will be dedicated to enhancing the appearance and usability of the gardens for local residents, people who visit the capital and local workers who, as my hon. Friend said, use the site very much. Victoria Tower gardens is already a well loved and much visited park in London. My hon. Friend made a lot of comments about visitor numbers, but I do not necessarily share his views about congestion. The experience of many of us who come from outside London is that people face congestion throughout the capital. I am not sure that one central London site is any more difficult to get to than another. Congestion is a problem throughout the capital and the situation might be just the same if one were trying to visit the Imperial War Museum. Many of the problems are with getting into central London in the first place.

We hope to encourage a wide range of people to visit the memorial—that is obviously a key part of the project. We envisage hundreds of thousands of people visiting the memorial to reflect, to remember the holocaust and to make use of the important learning centre. Visitors' arrival and exit at the site will be carefully considered and planned in consultation with Royal Parks and local residents.

We intend to continue to engage local residents at every step of the way, especially now that the shortlisted designs have been submitted. That will begin apace once a final designer is selected and we move towards a planning process and application, which should be towards the end of this year.

I invite colleagues on both sides of the House to look at the shortlisted designs. There are a range of designs, some of which are more interesting than others. While I have a favourite, I

should not share it with the House because the process is still open. Anyone who looks at the designs will see that they would have different impacts on the gardens. We look forward to further feedback from members of the public about the final design.

I reiterate the importance of the new national holocaust memorial and learning centre. It will serve as a reminder of the depths of depravity to which a seemingly enlightened society can plunge if it abandons its democratic values, and of the importance of constant vigilance in protecting those values. There could be no more powerful or appropriate location for such a memorial than next to the mother of Parliaments and the place that has, throughout our history—it continues to do so—stood up for the democratic values of freedom and tolerance that we hold so dear, but that were so patently and appallingly absent during the holocaust.

Question put and agreed to.

5.23 pm

House adjourned.