

From Dr Irene Lancaster and Dr Rowan Williams

3rd February 2022

Dear Secretary of State

Victoria Tower Gardens Holocaust Memorial Proposals

We are aware that a good deal of debate is still going on as regards the proposed Memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens and have been encouraged to believe that it is still not too late to underline the serious concerns that have been raised both during and after the formal Inquiry process.

Both of the signatories to this letter gave evidence to the Public Inquiry to express our opposition to the proposal; both of us – who have been extensively engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue for many years – are entirely in agreement about the extreme urgency of improving Holocaust education and awareness in this country at a time when both open and covert anti-semitism seems to be on the rise, as elsewhere in the world. But both of us are gravely concerned that the VTG proposal may not only fail to achieve this aim but may actually frustrate it and distract energy from the most effective measures needed, or even intensify anti-semitic feeling.

We do not intend here to repeat the points we and others have made publicly in the past (including the fact that several of those involved in initial consultations were given what in retrospect they believe to have been a very misleading account of what was in view), but note a number of factors that have become more significant in the period since the Inquiry's recommendations.

- (i) It is not clear that the weighty points raised by local residents and community bodies about the erosion of vital leisure facilities, the management of a vastly increased footfall (and density of traffic) in a confined space, and the mitigation of grave security concerns have been registered and addressed. Commentators like Lord Carlile have stressed the last of these; at the very least, the unpleasant experience of many Holocaust memorials in continental Europe suggests that a much increased likelihood of serious vandalism has to be considered, *and dealing with this will have implications for the entire VTG space.*
- (ii) Issues around the structural challenges of a quite extensive subterranean educational facility so near the river were raised but not fully discussed in the Inquiry. It is clear that some other buildings adjacent to the river (like the new Lambeth Palace Library) had had to take seriously concerns about flood-proofing. *Such concerns are unlikely to become any less grave* in the light of mid- to long-term projections about rising water levels.
- (iii) Given the recent public announcement of the new criteria thought to be desirable around the aesthetics of major new public buildings in the capital, we are surprised that there has been no rethinking of the overwhelming and aggressive impact of the proposed building in this particular space, and no planning that we are aware of to do with managing and maintaining the actual – very complex – structure. The design, as has been widely reported, was originally for a very different space in another country. *It would certainly do no service to the building's intended purpose if it were rapidly to become a maintenance liability or a visibly degenerating structure.* We are aware that an

alternative and more restrained design has been drawn up by Mr Hal Moggridge and shared with your office.

- (iv) This is an uncomfortable point to make, but it has to be remembered that we are in a period of widespread financial hardship for a great many people in this country. While public expenditure on Holocaust education is most emphatically *not* something that should be subject to penny-pinching, *there is a fair question to be asked about public expenditure and its effectiveness* where a substantial, would-be 'iconic' structure is concerned. If there are (as many believe) more effective and more economical ways of pursuing what most matters here, the perception of waste or of primarily cosmetic expenditure can be avoided.

We are well aware that this has been a long process, and the scrutiny has been protracted. However the strength of feeling that still remains around these and other issues felt to have been inadequately resolved persuades us that it is still worth underlining them, in support both of the local bodies that continue to voice anxieties *and* of the wider Jewish community who deserve the best that can be imagined in terms of past remembrance and present awareness-building. We believe that the project under consideration is not only well short of the best that can be imagined but risks undermining its own expressed aim.

Yours sincerely

Irene Lancaster

Rowan Williams

Dr Irene Lancaster, historian of Jewish thought, Holocaust scholar and child of Holocaust survivors

Rt Revd Dr Rowan Williams, theologian, Chancellor, University of South Wales