

Lord Howell of Guildford – 04.09.24 speech to the House of Lords Holocaust Memorial Bill

My Lords, my concern is whether this project and the Bill fulfil the prime aim—the essential and vital aim—of keeping fresh the memory of the most satanic massacre in recorded history of one of the world’s greatest and most brilliant peoples. Some say that Stalin killed many more, but there is no doubt in my mind that it was the systematic, organised and almost enthusiastic slaughter and murder—in the way that was particularly revolting in the gas chambers—that marks out the Holocaust as the worst of all and the most terrible thing that could happen and could be done by man to man and woman to woman. Does the Bill do what my noble friend Lord Cameron asked at the beginning? It must be a permanent reminder; does it fulfil that function? I have to give a qualified answer: not as it is organised.

In many speeches this afternoon, we have heard the common theme that it is the location that is the problem—it is the location that chokes. Of course, with the location goes the security problems outlined so vividly by some speakers. That is why one has to reluctantly agree with all sorts of authorities, including the *Times* newspaper, which called it a bungled effort by all parties and a national embarrassment, and said that something is wrong and has to be put right if we are to get near that prime aim.

What is wrong with it being in Victoria Tower Gardens, a small park? The answer is that it will be huge, on a Baalbek pillar scale. I do not know whether colleagues have examined all the photos of what is intended—we have to judge by the photos—but they are absolutely terrible. It dominates; the photos present an enormous feature, quite out of keeping with all the features around and with the glorious Palace in which we work at present—although it will presumably lie empty for a time ahead. It will obviously suffocate and completely blot out the statues, which my noble friend Lady Bottomley spoke about so beautifully a few minutes ago. These represent the suffragettes, a fantastic cause, and our fight against slavery, of which I am very proud, although it seems to get overlooked half the time. There is also the “Burghers of Calais”, reminding us of the price of freedom.

If anyone wants to see where we should be going on this line, they should go to Berlin, to the heart of where the horror was authorised. Go to the memorial—those beautiful granite blocks. It is not too tiring but just right. When the rain falls, they are the tears of

those who were slaughtered and of those left behind. It is right next door to the Führerbunker, where the arch-murderer of all lived and, thankfully, died. That gives a feeling of the idea and size we should work for.

The 1900 Act said that it had to be a park for ever, and this Act says that it is not going to be a park for ever; it is going to be dominated by a project and a structure which I do not believe does justice to the cause, honour or memory of the Jewish

people, of whom I am a huge admirer. It falls short of the adequate homage to their suffering, of which we should always be reminding ourselves, and so should our children and grandchildren.

The noble Baroness, Lady Deech, said it all at the beginning in her superb and accurate speech. Common sense just cries out in this whole situation. The previous Government seemed towards the end of their days to be encased in a fatal Westminster bubble, cut off from common sense. It was a long descent from the first and second Cameron Governments, which my noble friend led so ably. A connection with what most sensible people were doing throughout this country had been lost. As a result, this is now widely regarded as a major mishandling and mistake, which we must put right, but neither the past nor the present Government seem to realise this.

I will certainly support the Motion from the noble Baroness, Lady Deech, if she puts it to a vote. I shall also be guided entirely by the proverbial common sense of my noble friend Lord Strathclyde, who put the words into everyone's minds and mouths: that we should put behind us this ridiculous difference, created by the obviously wrong location decision, and get on and build a good, genuine memorial that works, in the right place and of the right design. That is what we should be capable of doing on both sides of politics and in the organisation of government of this country.

6.22pm