

Building blots on the landscape

WONDER how many readers have noticed the proliferation of half-built and part demolished buildings around Hampstead? They are an unexpected and unwelcome sight but have become increasingly prevalent since the start of the recession.

Take the large development at the start of Fitzjohn's Avenue. This huge project includes underground car parking and absorbs two listed red brick houses on the west side of the road. Having demolished one of the original houses, despite its Grade II listing, the part completed site now has black plastic tarpaulins being fixed where the roof should be.

I spoke to the contractors who confirmed that the financing bank has foreclosed on the development and, unless the bank agrees to advance the many millions of pounds needed to complete, they will sit in this half-built and ugly state for years.

Turn the corner and you find an even more unsightly blight. A very smart builders board on Belsize Park promises two luxury homes from the remains of the large stucco-fronted houses. These boards have been in place for over a year but work stopped many months ago. Again a Grade II listed building was demolished but this time it has been left as a

pile of bricks and part-standing walls, with construction not even started. It looks identical to the bomb site I used to play on as a child in north London in the 1970s.

It is not acceptable for our skyline to be left pot-marked with abandoned building sites. I read that the Government is forcing the state-owned banks to lend again and provide credit to business. If this is the case they should start with the banks who have withdrawn funding from the building works in Hampstead.

DAVID BOUCHIER
Belsize Lane, NW3

Details of all crime should be publicised

MANY people will be querying why the police only released the picture of the Belsize gun mugger a week after the first instance (*Gunman robs lone woman in mugging spree, H&H March 24*).

The reason given by the police was that it might have swayed the results of an identity parade. However, releasing the images earlier might have prevented the fourth mugging.

A broader issue that needs addressing is why some safer neighbourhood panel are given a full list of crimes in their areas while others are only given good news stories.

I can understand that the police would want to reassure the public by playing down the crime stats; however, this confidence becomes shattered when people hear of crimes on the grapevine rather than through official sources.

While there are confidentiality issues that need to be considered, the police should release to the public details of all crimes in the area.

The crime rate in Camden is actually lower than some people think and releasing the statistics on a 'warts and all' basis, would actually boost the public confidence in the police.

JONNY BUCKNELL
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DEADLINES:
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Costly mistakes are repeated at Alexandra Palace

THE chronically dysfunctional Alexandra Palace Trust Board is in danger of squandering the goodwill it generated at the time of the stakeholder workshop last October.

Then, the momentum was towards some form of long-overdue independence for governance (many aspects of existing governance arrangements were thoroughly criticised in the two Walkate Reports).

But in the next five months there has been little except drift. We hear the same lame mantra repeated: nothing is ruled in or out. Well, it is time that the ultimate, independent board option was ruled in and continuing malign council-control ruled out!

Part of the drift can be explained by the fact the members of our trust's board – all politicians – are in election-mode. This by itself is an indictment of charity trustees and no way to run a railroad, let alone a major charity of historical importance. The chairman of the statutory advisory committee (David Liebeck) is angry at the time being wasted and recently remarked that it's long overdue that the politicians walked down the hill, away from AP and back to the civic centre!

And the time lost is not just since the stakeholder workshop. After the humiliating slap-down in 2007 by the High Court, it took two and half years before the policy of 'holistic' sale for development was formally abandoned.

That 15 year-old policy of flog-it-off, was the only strategy the board ever came up with which enjoyed 'continuity'. It was the only major strategy pursued with will and vigour.

But it also represented despair, a bankruptcy of ideas; was vandalism, an abrogation of responsibility and was an unmitigated disaster, burning millions of our money.

The recent drift also reflects abiding themes of this board which are (a) a general inability to make coherent, effective deci-



sions and (b) when a significant or strategic decision is made, it is often wrong, spectacularly: most notably, the decision to sell our charity's asset (the Palace) to a former slum landlord.

The board normally delegates its powers and functions to others; the board would say that is practical and necessary. But it is also due to political fractures, a short-term outlook, a lack of ability, the infrequency of meetings and general inattention.

Powers and functions devolve to consultants or to council employees. In practice, this has meant our London landmark (which could be a prime tourist attraction) is run as a local municipal department. This has led to trouble, with Palace management in the past operating in the shadows as a quasi-autonomous fiefdom, mainly for the benefit of its managers, their cronies and legions of consultants. The public, who pay for this charade, is often treated with contempt.

Due to lack of time and on-board expertise, this board is more dependent on external advisers and consultants. The many hangers-on often have an agenda separate from the official-stated one, and are keen to maintain the status quo. There needs to be a clear-out of the hangers-on.

Alexandra Palace has been a gold-mine for lawyers and con-

sultants. During the sale-to-Firoka, much of the official flannel – and attempts to defend against criticism – was delegated to an expensive PR company.

The board avoids addressing its own fundamental flaws and spends too much time considering half-baked ideas. In order to avoid responsibility and taking decisions, the board delegated studies about its own governance to an outside accounting firm. This is another indictment, and demonstrates paralysis. Consultants have grown rich while the building deteriorates.

The board's eagerness to delegate and its reluctance to take responsibility has been costly, confusing and corrosive.

And the board is slipping back into its well-known, old bad habits. It now intends to delegate not only much of its strategic role to its wholly-owned trading company, but even the charitable functions. And this with the blessing of the Charity Commission. The proper role for the trading company is managing trading operations and generating funds for our charity. Mixing this up with governance is a recipe for more trouble.

Most observers recognise that the fundamental conflict of interest between the roles of councillor and trustee is irreconcilable. For a while, everyone was repeating that governance needed reform. But nothing changes, guaranteeing continuing strife.

The current roadshow in libraries is no substitute for reform. Unless that nettle is grasped with both hands, an opportunity will have been missed and we can expect more drift.

Some of the individual members of the trust board are well-meaning and well-intentioned. Collectively, they lack expertise, competence, professional qualifications and Charitable Trust experience. Most of all, they lack vision and leadership.

CLIVE CARTER
Stapleton Hall Road, N4

We have taken the first tentative step towards recovery

YOU may have thought that the Chancellor's statement to a packed House of Commons last Wednesday, is the only Budget.

But you'd be wrong. In common with every other MP, every day of the past few weeks has brought, from every imaginable organisation, both public and private, the budget they would like to see. And not infrequently, these 'budgets' are accompanied by manifestos which gives the lie to the political commentariat, that the country has no interest in the political decisions made in Parliament.

And the decision, with regard to the country's finances and future, has been made.

This Labour Government and its admirable Chancellor will not throw the infant economic recovery out of the pram. As Alistair Darling made clear, now is not the time to engage in the 'savage and immediate' cuts proposed by the opposition parties.

Their focus is, as it has been since the international economic meltdown, the 'big black hole' of national debt. Unprecedented, they claim, unsustainable, and undermining of any recovery.

Really? The recovery, admittedly still in its infancy, is taking its first tentative steps. And unprecedented? I'm of that generation, and subsequent generations, who lived for the last six decades under the debt incurred by fighting and winning the Second World War.

That debt was finally paid off five years ago. Those 60 years were not an unconscionable vale of tears. We didn't live permanently in sack-cloth and ashes. Those decades saw some of the most amazing advances in our country – socially, culturally, economically, spiritually.

Because our greatest national resource, then and now, is our people. Energetic, creative, hard-working, and committed to an ideal of a mutually interdependent, multi-cultural society.

There is such a thing as a society. We all benefit from it, and are stronger for it. Which is why I wholeheartedly endorse the Chancellor's decisions. Rooted, as they are, in protecting not only those services upon which we all depend – the NHS, education, police, infrastructure, but the essential re-skilling, training and apprenticeships which we need in order to compete in an increasingly competitive world. Ensuring every child has the best possible start in life, and as we grow older and live longer, life that is worth living. That we build on our commitment to a truly green



Glenda Jackson

VIEW FROM THE HOUSE

I'm of that generation who lived for six decades under the debt of a World War

economy, as world leaders in off-shore wind farms, to other expanding areas of renewable energy, and not only at home.

International aid will continue to play the part the people of this country have always wanted our country to play in achieving the UN target of 0.7 per cent GDP by 2012. Because this figure translates into schools and health treatments, and clean water and adequate diets. Reducing infant mortality, with a child dying every 30 seconds from preventable disease. I don't need to tell you, you tell me.

What we do, in these areas, as a Government, as a country, is what the country wants us to do, indeed do more, at home and abroad.

Because Britain isn't broken, we believe that together, we can create a future that includes, not excludes; that hears all voices, not just a few; that welcomes new ideas and has a common purpose. A future built by individuals for the benefit of us all. And we will only achieve this by truly valuing each other and respecting and encouraging all the talents.

As EM Forster said: "Only connect". Well, we can, and we will.

□ Glenda Jackson is the Labour MP for the Hampstead & Highgate constituency, which becomes Hampstead & Kilburn at the next General Election.

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