

Stephen Timms' Maiden Speech
House of Commons, 29th June 1994

Thank you for the opportunity to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My predecessor, Ron Leighton, who tragically died in February, was held in high regard by hon. Members on both sides of the House - as many have taken the trouble to tell me over the past three weeks - and also in the constituency. I worked with him first as a Labour Party ward official, then as secretary of his constituency party and then during my 10 years as a member of Newham Council. For the last four years I was leader of the council and saw at first hand the enormous volume of work that Ron took through, and the depth of his commitment to Newham: he was a tireless and determined advocate for the borough.

Ron took a particular interest in employment matters, and was deeply concerned about youth unemployment. He chaired the Select Committee on Employment for some years, and was responsible for a number of key reports. I particularly remember the Committee's investigation of the employment effects of urban development corporations. The report concluded that there had been a wholly inadequate impact on local unemployment in UDC areas. It was a landmark, responsible - in docklands, at any rate - for a much more constructive approach on the part of the London Docklands development corporation, from which Newham has continued to benefit.

Ron was the first chair of the Newham needs campaign, which was set up to draw attention to the inadequacy of the revenue support grant settlement for Newham and to the fact that the council had £20 million less to spend on services than the Government's own calculations suggested was necessary to provide a standard level of service in the borough. Ron was determined to draw attention nationally to that anomaly, and he therefore persuaded the campaign to organise a rally in Trafalgar square on a bitterly cold Sunday afternoon last November. Most of us expected very few people to turn up, but it was a great tribute to Ron's energy and the esteem in which he was held in Newham that several hundred braved the cold to ensure that the borough's voice was heard, and a very effective demonstration was achieved.

Newham combines, to a unique extent, deprivation on one hand and the potential for regeneration on the other. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Ms Morris) pointed out, the Department of the Environment recently released its index of local conditions. Drawing on the 1991 census, it puts Newham in the No. 1 spot as the most deprived local authority area in the country. There is a massive need for regeneration, but there are also great grounds for optimism about the future.

We have energy and vitality, and, despite the problems - perhaps partly because of them - we have a community that works. I am among those who want Government policies that will nurture and support our communities instead of tearing them apart, as has happened so often in the past 15 years. We have large numbers of bright and energetic young people, many from

families who arrived in this country from other parts of the world, now determined to build a better future for themselves and their families.

We also have vast areas of land close to central London, benefiting from excellent public transport links that are set to improve with the completion of the Jubilee line and - I hope - Crossrail and the channel tunnel high-speed link. Those vast areas - the docks, the gas works, the railway yards - are places where thousands of people used to make their livelihoods, and where we hope they will one day do so again.

As much as any area in the country, Newham needs successful urban regeneration, with investment in our housing and schools. But one key Government decision, which I understand is imminent, is critical to the regeneration of our area - the decision whether to allow the international passenger station at Stratford, on the route of the high-speed rail link to the channel tunnel, to go ahead.

In 1987, when I was chair of Newham council's planning committee, British Rail announced that it was considering Stratford as a station on the channel tunnel link. Since then, we have supported Stratford International. I find it extraordinary - given the Government's policy of using the high-speed link to promote development in east London - that, seven years on, there is still uncertainty about whether the station will receive the Government's support. The locations of the intermediate stations on the link are to be determined on the basis of regeneration, transport, environmental and commercial considerations. Stratford succeeds handsomely on all those criteria, but I wish to concentrate on the urban regeneration issues. Within five miles of the Stratford site are 125,000 people without work - a quarter of all the unemployed people in London. Our ambition is for Stratford and the nearby Royal docks to be transformed into a major commercial centre providing employment for many of those people, and the direct link to Europe will enable that to happen. When, in 1991, the then Secretary of State for Transport announced that the high-speed link would run through east London, he said that it was to bring economic regeneration to the area. In October 1991, he told the House:

"It is envisaged that the high-speed train from the channel tunnel to King's Cross will stop at Stratford".--[Official Report , 14 October 1991 ; Vol.196, c.34 .]

Only with a station in east London will the regeneration benefits that were the reason for the choice of the eastern route be achieved. I think that hon. Members will understand why, nearly three years after those announcements, we in Newham feel frustrated that uncertainty remains about the Stratford station. We hope that the Government will soon end that uncertainty with a firm commitment to Stratford.

The Government have invested heavily in east London, and valuable foundations have been laid. If they decided now that there should only be a station on the M25, that would jeopardise all that investment. The reason is--

the point has been made forcefully by the London planning advisory committee, speaking for all the London boroughs and the City--that if there were only such a station, it would suck development out of east London. We have seen that happen in a number of north American cities. Development would leapfrog east London, where it is so urgently needed and where the Government have provided some of the infrastructure for it to happen, and cluster around the M25, leaving inner east London to decline further and throw away the benefits of the investment made so far. There is overwhelming public support for the station in Stratford and throughout Europe.

One of the main conclusions of the report commissioned by the Department of the Environment is the importance of creating effective coalitions of "actors" within localities to achieve regeneration. I believe that Ministers will acknowledge that that has been achieved in Stratford. The Stratford promoter group includes about 15 public and private sector partners, including landowners, developers and construction companies, as well as public agencies such as the council, the university of East London and the London Docklands development corporation. They are all ready to go.

We do not ask for subsidy ; we simply want a green light to press ahead with a project that will pay for itself, will give a good commercial return and will ensure that past Government investment in east London is not thrown away. More than that, the project gives us an opportunity of the kind that comes only once in a hundred years, to change the nature of east London for the better, for good. I urge the Government to make a clear and positive decision for Stratford station and, in east London as elsewhere, to allow the local authority to build the coalitions that will create the changes in our cities and the regeneration that we so desperately need.