

Gateway to London Launch Canary Wharf, Tuesday 19th November 2002

I wanted to start what I have to say to you this morning by asserting that modernisation and community come together harmoniously in the Thames Gateway area in a way that I have never seen anywhere else.

I visited last week a business in my constituency. It is a funeral business based at a superb modern campus in Beckton, with American-style manicured lawns and facilities to meet the needs of the very diverse faith communities in our area. It epitomises modern East London.

But actually, it is the business of Thomas Cribb and Sons, established in 1881. I was met at the door by the current principal, the grandson of Thomas Cribb, who told me he has just celebrated his 60th year in the business, and is handing over to his own two sons and granddaughter. Much of its recent success has been based on providing very traditional horse drawn East End funeral corteges. The name of Mr Cribb is revered in Canning Town. And they have had the same telephone number more or less since the telephone was invented. And in that business modernisation and community tradition sit very easily alongside each other.

Yesterday and today we are hosting in London the E-Summit, bringing together representatives of all the G7 countries plus Sweden and Australia to compare notes about how we are getting on putting Government services online and supporting businesses to exploit the new technology. The Prime Minister addressed the summit yesterday lunchtime and made some important announcements about rolling out broadband communications to support public services, including connecting up every school in the country over the next three years. That was about modernisation par excellence.

Last week, with Sir Robin Wales the Mayor of Newham, we launched a project called Carpenters Connect on the Carpenters Estate of high rise blocks in Stratford - one of the most hard pressed council estates in the area. That estate has been wired up - all 400 flats of it - with the most modern optical fibre network I have yet seen as the Minister for e-Commerce, to provide high speed access to the Internet, a Carpenters Estate television channel - and it was a wonderfully exuberant community occasion. One of the residents commented that she had been worried that this network would lead to people spending all their time sitting in their flats watching the TV screen - but that in fact the opposite had been the case and there were all sorts of examples of young people and old people and everyone in between getting together to develop projects which the modern technology was making possible.

It is another example of modernisation and community sitting together very comfortably. When the campaign for the international passenger station on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link got under way after its launch fifteen years ago, we commissioned opinion surveys of people in Stratford - and 80% of them said they supported the plan for the international station, partly I think because Stratford started as a railway town in the middle of the nineteenth century, and it makes sense almost instinctively to people that Stratford's new prosperity should once again be based on the most modern railway development in the country. It is modernity sitting alongside community. So in the Stratford campaign we had the community alongside the local authority, and with local businesses - Canary Wharf and many others - all enthusiastically supportive too. It is our ability to bring everybody together in that way which is one of our biggest strengths. And

of course there is at Stratford today a vast construction project under way, tunnelling with two machines inching their way from Stratford back towards St Pancras has just begun, tunnelling on the other side of Stratford is due to start shortly and from 2007 we shall be able to board a train in Stratford and get off a couple of hours later in Paris or Brussels. And people see that rightly as an exciting prospect.

Of course you could say that it isn't surprising communities in East London want things to change, because after all they could hardly get any worse. And there is an element of truth in that. People have had frankly a raw deal in the Thames Gateway in the past. But that enthusiasm for change gives us a tremendous opportunity to bring about large scale change with the active support and encouragement of the community - making it easier for everybody, and consequently possible to achieve a good deal more than would be the case elsewhere, and to do it in the confidence that people in the area will be able to enjoy the benefits.

The Gateway to London briefing document makes a related and very telling point. It points out rightly that the Thames Gateway is a national regeneration project. Actually it points out its major European significance, as part of what we are told is affectionately known as the "Golden Banana" taking in London, Paris and Brussels. I'm not quite sure who speaks affectionately of the Golden Banana. That was a new one on me, but the Thames Gateway will certainly play a significant part in enabling London and therefore the UK as a whole to continue to prosper. But "at the same time", it says - and rightly - "this strategy can help tackle the government's social exclusion agenda since the Thames Gateway is also home to a disproportionate number of ... disadvantaged communities".

The Thames Gateway initiative is about doing well economically, but it is also about doing good socially. And that is a major strength of the initiative.

As you know, the Government is taking the Thames Gateway initiative very seriously and has recognised its key national strategic importance. The Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership, established two years ago, is chaired by Lord Rooker. It has its executive in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, headed by John Sienkiewicz who has been heavily involved in the affairs of this region for a decade or more. The partnership has five other Ministers - Nick Raynsford the local government minister, John Spellar the transport minister, Alan Johnson from my department the DTI, Margaret Hodge from education and John Hutton from health, working alongside interests from the area.

And the team led by John Sienkiewicz has been working alongside the sub-regional partnerships - in London, south Essex and north Kent - to scope the opportunities in the 14 key zones of change in the Gateway. Action Teams have been set up to take progress forward in each of them. And looking across the whole region there are working groups on transport, environment, priority communities, innovation and economic development, housing, health and education.

This is an enthralling project with an enormous amount at stake for a very large number of people. My ministerial work brings me to Canary Wharf from time to time because I am responsible for the Radiocommunications Agency at Wyndham House, just on the other side of the dock. I decided to use the eleventh floor conference room of Wyndham House a few weeks ago as the venue for a meeting with the Japanese telecommunications minister, and of course he was much more interested at looking out of the window at the extraordinary scene of

development which we can see around us than he was in the formal agenda which had been prepared for us, and I was happy to share that fascination with him too. He was particularly interested to notice an absence of earthquake safeguards from the frameworks of the buildings being constructed here, by contrast with Japan.

There will be a lot of international interest in what is happening. I wish Gateway to London every success in raising the profile of the sub-region both within the UK and overseas, in delivering major inward investment projects into the area and attracting many new jobs. That is a key task in taking forward the Thames Gateway initiative and in making sure that we realise this vast potential both for modernising the economic geography of the United Kingdom - boosting the Golden Banana - and for strengthening and renewing the communities of the Thames Gateway. I hope we shall all be able to work together on those twin objectives and I am looking forward immensely to seeing these great changes that we can look forward to unfolding over the next few years.

Thank you.