

London Assembly (Mayor's Question Time) – 25 March 2015

Transcript of Agenda Item 4 – Report of the Mayor

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I would like to begin, if I may, by echoing very strongly the fine sentiments that have just been expressed both by Kit [Kit Malthouse AM] and by Len [Len Duvall AM] in memorial of Catherine Crawford [former Chief Executive, Metropolitan Police Authority]. She served London and London policing with very great distinction. I shall certainly explore with you, Roger, and with the Assembly the possibilities of a Catherine Crawford memorial lecture of the kind that Len has raised.

I also want to announce today that I am delighted to say that in the wake of Victoria's [Victoria Borwick AM] selection [as a Parliamentary candidate] to stand in the Kensington seat, she will of course be stepping down as statutory Deputy Mayor. You will be pleased to know, dear gentle Members of the Assembly, that we are going to have a new statutory Deputy Mayor in the form of the Chairman, Roger Evans, who has accepted my offer to undertake that work. You will agree he is a fine servant of London. I wish to place on record my deep thanks to Victoria for all the hard work that she has done. She has done a wonderful job for us and I know that she will be looking forward to passing on the torch to Roger. That will take place on Wednesday, 13 May. Your first moment as the statutory Deputy Mayor will be 14 May.

Since we last met, Members of the Assembly, there are a few things I wish to draw to your attention very quickly. We have a big announcement of 2,000 new homes on the Parcellforce site in West Ham. There is a huge development going on there. Of the 700 hectares of public land that we took over four years ago, 90% of it is now in development or on the point of development.

We announced a £30 million fund to help the homeless in our city and to supply new hostels and refurbish some of the hostels that are in poor condition.

The police numbers, as you will have seen, are back up at virtually 32,000 or 31,955. We have more women and more black and minority ethnic candidates now joining the police that at any time in the past. That is great news and is a vindication of the strategy pursued by Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe [Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis]. Concomitant with that, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) is achieving fantastic falls in crime with a 20% reduction now in the seven crucial neighbourhood crime types that we tasked them with pursuing. That has been achieved basically a year ahead of schedule. That is a considerable achievement and I would like to pay tribute to the men and women of the MPS.

We have delivered 85,000 new affordable homes - more than that - since this mayoralty began and you will have seen the announcements we have made about various housing zones across the city.

I thought that the Budget and the Long Term Economic Plan all contained good news for our city: skills co-commissioning, finally - London working with the boroughs to do more to target skills funding at the right outcomes for our young people; the London Land Commission to get more public land developed; the Croydon Growth Zone and £7 million for Croydon; Brent Cross and Cricklewood

and £97 million towards the establishment of a new station there; the Croyley Rail Link; and various other investments in our city, not least £30 million more for the Francis Crick Institute.

You have asked about the civil unrest on Wood Green High Street - and the Labour Group wants to know whether there were any implications - and an attack on a synagogue. Both are absolutely sickening events. There is no connection between them and certainly no implication for resources as far as we can see in the sense that Haringey's Safer Neighbourhood complement has risen. There is an increase of 97. The police were able to attend both incidents very rapidly and obviously we can never be complacent but several arrests have so far been made certainly in connection with the attack on the synagogue, which was, as I say, a nauseating event.

The Labour Group has also asked about what discussions we have had over extending right-to-buy to housing association tenants. I am not quite sure whether the question refers to forthcoming Conservative Party manifesto announcements or to Government discussions. What I can say is that obviously we are discussing all measures that we can support to help people on every type of income in London to get a share of the value of their property. I would remind you that we have had big success so far with the First Steps scheme and we have helped about 48,000 people on the First Steps scheme. We intend to help 250,000 more.

That, Roger, concludes my report.

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): Thank you for that. I am going to take supplementaries on those, first of all on the Wood Green incident, then on the right-to-buy and then on any other items that might prove controversial from your update.

Assembly Member McCartney?

Joanne McCartney AM: Thank you, Mr Mayor. I was not linking the two incidents. I was referring to the incident in Wood Green High Street where we had the Kurdish parade for Newroz, which has taken place for the last few years on an annual basis and has actually taken place extremely peacefully without any issue. However, it appears that a stall promoting extreme Islamic ideas popped up in the High Street at the same time. Whether that was premeditated or not, there was certainly, I believe, a brick thrown at the parade and some abuse called, which I understand the police are investigating.

However, at the meeting last month, you were asked about police withdrawing resources from private events and public protests. It just struck me that with events like these where there may be some community tensions that the police and perhaps your officers could just take extra care that extra checks are done so that we can protect the peace.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I see what you are driving at, yes. Absolutely. I thought you might be going in that direction, Joanne. There was a sergeant and there were six police constables allocated to the march. You are absolutely accurate in what you say. It seems that the disturbance was provoked by Anjem Choudary [British Muslim social and political activist] and his lot, who were there with their roadshow advocating Sharia law and handing out leaflets urging people not to vote. That is deeply antisocial and counterproductive. Of course, we run a great free city and the police are there to allow people to make protests of whatever kind and this was properly policed, but clearly there was a large element of provocation.

Joanne McCartney AM: It just strikes me that if this is continued, the police will just have to have extra regard to putting resources into community events such as this, whether they are private or not.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Yes. The disturbance, such as it was, was dispersed extremely fast and, as I say, there was a sergeant and six police constables there.

On the synagogue in Craven Park, which was the object of drunken attacks, six arrests have already been made and they have been bailed pending further inquiries.

Roger Evans AM (Chairman): All right. Are there any supplementary questions on Wood Green? In that case, we will move on to right-to-buy and Assembly Member Copley.

Tom Copley AM: Thank you, Chairman. Mr Mayor, would you support an incoming Government extending right-to-buy to housing association tenants?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): The crucial thing, Tom, is what the outcome is going to be in terms of producing more homes for London. That is the acid test for me.

Tom Copley AM: You nodded and so you support it?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Sorry, I nodded because I was being generally favourable to the idea of creating more homes in London. If it produces more homes in London, then I will support it. That is our policy. I must remind you that under this mayoralty --

Tom Copley AM: Do you think the current right-to-buy extended to housing associations would produce a better outcome for London?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Currently there is no such proposal but --

Tom Copley AM: There is a proposal, Mr Mayor, in the *Sunday Times*.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- the acid test, as I have said, is whether it will produce more homes and whether the receipts will actually be invested in the construction of more homes. That is the key thing.

If I may say so, obviously one of the issues with extending the right-to-buy to housing associations in the way that I think you are thinking of is that it would be potentially extremely costly to this body. We would have to make up the difference. Housing associations are private bodies, as we all know. It would involve massive subsidies. We would need to get the funds to support that.

However, at the moment, I want to stress that there is no such policy. What we are continuing with is Help to Buy. We are continuing with our excellent policy of First Steps --

Tom Copley AM: Hang on. You do not have to list everything.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- which, as I say, has already supported 50,000 people and families --

Tom Copley AM: We are talking about right-to-buy.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- and you will recall, Tom, that we have --

Tom Copley AM: It sounds like it has your qualified support but --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): No, you can try to put words into my mouth if you absolutely insist --

Tom Copley AM: Someone is going to have to!

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Go on. If you wish to misrepresent me, that is your privilege.

Tom Copley AM: I would not want to represent you in any way, shape or form, Mr Mayor.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): It will not be the first time you have tried to do it and I am sure it will not be the last. That is your job. That is what I expect the Labour Party to do.

Tom Copley AM: Let me ask. Do you think it is right --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Go right ahead. Be my guest. Make it all up.

Tom Copley AM: That is what you do! I have learned a few things in three years here! Do you think it is right to compel a charitable organisation to sell off assets below their market value?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): You are asking about a policy that has not, as far as I know, been yet proposed. I have indicated --

Tom Copley AM: It has been proposed.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- my priority, which is to build more homes for Londoners. That is what we are doing. We have so far built a record number of affordable homes. We are continuing with that programme. We have built more homes in this city than at any time since the 1980s, which was probably before you were born!

Tom Copley AM: You are very keen to answer questions that I have not asked you, Mr Mayor. The question is about extending right-to-buy.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): You are very keen to put words into my mouth and to invent policies on my behalf. If you wish to oppose a policy that I do not support, you are more than welcome to do it, but that is your privilege.

Tom Copley AM: I am sure it is not beyond your ability to imagine a hypothetical scenario where a future Conservative Government might extend it and, in those circumstances, to then say as Mayor of London - who has significant responsibilities, as you know, for housing in the capital - whether or not you think it might be a good idea.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I have given you a very clear answer, which is that my priority is to build more homes for Londoners.

Tom Copley AM: Your idea of a clear answer is rather strange.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): What I want to see is a policy that allows us to do so. If proposals to allow tenants more freedoms to buy their properties or to acquire their properties lead to the creation of more homes in London, then that could be a great thing, but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

Tom Copley AM: Do you recognise that the original rationale when the Thatcher Government decided not to give housing association tenants a right to buy was that, if they were able to buy their homes, it will erode the housing associations' asset base and the rental stream would be reduced and that this would make lenders cautious about backing them? Do you think that that is a danger?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): All of this comes pretty ill from the Assembly Member --

Tom Copley AM: Answer the question.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- who, as I remember fondly, said that the Labour Party should apologise for its dismal record in building council homes.

Tom Copley AM: I am still waiting for you to apologise for your dismal record, Mr Mayor.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Tom Copley, you have pointed out - and I remember it vividly - that Margaret Thatcher [former Prime Minister] in one year built more council homes than Labour built in 13 years.

Tom Copley AM: We always know you have lost the argument when you drag this one out. Go on. He cannot answer the question and so he drags this one out.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): On behalf of the Labour Party, you should now apologise, Tom Copley. You have asked for the Labour Party to apologise. Why do you not man up and apologise yourself? Go on.

Tom Copley AM: That is it.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): No apology?

Tom Copley AM: I got no answer.