

## FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY ADDRESS

By Rt. Hon. A. Crosland, M.P., P.C.,  
Secretary of State for the Environment

It is, I think, most appropriate that you should have chosen to meet this evening in St. John's or "Queen Anne's Footstool" under the shadow, so to speak, of the Department of the Environment. I suppose the day may come, although I personally find it hard to believe, when No. 2 Marsham Street will be regarded as one of our more distinguished Ancient Monuments, and some Ivor Bulmer Thomas of a future age will fight passionately for its preservation. I myself find its main advantage as an office is that it is the one place in London from which its full horror cannot be seen. On the other hand, it is convenient for visitors to be able to say to their taxi driver, "Take me to that large concrete toast rack near Millbank", and sit back in the certain knowledge that the driver cannot possibly lose his way.

When I took office as Secretary of State for the Environment at the beginning of March, I was of course faced with a massive list of engagements, reflecting the enormous range of the Department's activities, and the incredible complexity of its functions. My private secretary insists that our staff is larger than the entire Royal Navy, and the Department's Budget bigger than that of Belgium, although I suspect that on the latter point one or two noughts have been misplaced. I was delighted however that in the very early days of the new administration, your Secretary, with a faith in security of tenure for Government Ministers which I must admit at that stage neither I nor her husband entirely shared, asked me to address this meeting. It was an engagement that I was determined to keep. I have all my life been a passionate conservationist, and I welcome the chance of telling your Society how much I admire the work which you have done over the years, the enormous contribution you have made to the cause to which we are dedicated, and the valuable advice and support which you have always given to my Department and its predecessors.

It is interesting to look back at the problems which have confronted you, and indeed all who are concerned to preserve the environment, over the last half-century. The task of the conservationist has changed a great deal over that period, and today's problems are very different though by no means less challenging, than those which were encountered by your founder members. When your society was launched, the concept of planning legislation was in its infancy; indeed the first Town Planning Act, not yet a Town and Country Planning Act, was not passed until 1925. The lack of adequate controls was offset, to some extent, by the absence of great development pressures, although ribbon development and urban sprawl were certainly making themselves felt. The major problems of those days must have been apathy and indifference; apathy on the part of the public, a lack of general support for what the Society stood for, and indifference in official quarters. We owe a great debt to Societies such as yours for the changes in attitude which we now see.

Public opinion on preservation and conservation has certainly come a long way since 1924. Today, the need to preserve our heritage is no longer the concern only of an enlightened minority. A few years ago we witnessed an explosion in the growth of local amenity societies, as more and more people showed themselves ready to stand up and fight for the protection of their environment. The need to preserve what is left of the past, the buildings and the neighbourhoods which bear witness to a more leisurely age, to times when taste and scale were still of primary concern, is now widely recognised, though not in Grimsby or always in London. The press, radio, and television, reflect this movement in public opinion, and I welcome the publicity they give to threatened acts of vandalism in our historic towns.

So today public opinion, generally is on your side. You no longer have to struggle to interest an apathetic public. You will not agree, I fear, that indifference in official quarters has altogether disappeared. Judging by the flood of mail I receive every day, there is still a feeling that we do not take a positive enough role.

I doubt if any Government, faced in every case with the duty of balancing the conflict of interests that are bound to arise, will ever be able to satisfy all your members and supporters.

What I can promise you is that I am personally determined that your members' concern will not go by default. My Department is acutely aware of the issues involved, and I will ensure, as far as I am able, that the conservation aspects are given the fullest weight in all the difficult decisions we have to take.

You now have a new force to contend with, a force which must be carefully controlled if we are to have a country worth living in. It is, simply, the power of the bulldozer, and the pressures that it represents, which can in five minutes destroy the heritage of five centuries. We all share concern for this problem, central government, local authorities and amenity societies. I should like to concentrate, if I may, on your particular role.

The day is long since past when a society such as yours could simply be arbiters of good taste. Petronius, *elegantiae arbiter*, has been dead for some centuries. You now have to be active and even militant for constant vigilance and expertise are needed to make an effective challenge to the spread of indiscriminate development. I am convinced today, more than ever, of the vital part which you must play. There are, I think, two main aspects of the work of amenity societies everywhere, local and national. The first is as a source of informed opinion on local and specialist matters. Local societies and public alike often lack the expertise and the resources needed to put forward an effective case for the preservation of a building, or to fight a public inquiry on the course of a road. I know that you as a society, devote yourselves continuously to research and case-work in order to ensure that you are always informed and ready to act. The second function of an amenity society, and one which is becoming more and more important, is as a pressure group.

We cannot, indeed it would be quite wrong, stifle economic growth in this country, indeed it would be wrong to try. What we must do, and what all of us here are committed to doing, is to keep environmental considerations constantly in mind. We must use development to stimulate and encourage conservation, not to overwhelm it. Development pressures should not always be regarded as an enemy. Successful conservation requires these pressures. Historic buildings that have been allowed to fall into dereliction are no asset to the community, either in aesthetic or in practical terms. The most successful conservation programmes are likely to be achieved when old and valued buildings have to

justify their place in a town, when they have to be restored, and put to good use, if the alternative of demolition and redevelopment is to be avoided. Community interest must fight to win its place over developer's profits.

Your task has, I know, not been made easier in recent months by the inevitable upheaval caused by local government reorganisation, at a time when responsibility for conservation work has been passing from one authority to another.

The vigilance of your society in providing an element of continuity has been invaluable, and the help and support which you can give to the new authorities in the exercise of their preservation and conservation functions will, I know, be most welcome.

I have spoken so far about the role of amenity societies. I might at this stage perhaps say a few words about the achievements of the Department of the Environment in the field of preservation and conservation. Within the last seven days, both the Historic Buildings Council and the Ancient Monuments Board, established in 1953, have published their twentieth Annual Reports. They both demonstrate a massive shift in public attitudes to our historic towns and villages, and to our archaeological heritage, and this during a period of unprecedented demand for housing, roads, airports, hospitals and new development of every kind. The growth of amenity societies during the 1960s, the emergence of the concept of group value that has led to the preservation of many delightful squares and terraces of more modest buildings, the special interest in industrial architecture. All these are developments that my Department has fostered and encouraged. I might add that almost 200,000 buildings throughout England are now protected by statute. The importance the Government attaches to this field of activity is reflected in the funds now available to carry on this work: £2.5m this year for repairs and conservation, and over £1m for rescue excavations.

As I said earlier, and I stress the point again, we must not attempt to put a stop to growth and development, for we must develop and grow if we are to improve our environment. This does not mean, however, sacrificing our national heritage to the demands of office blocks and motorways. Indeed, it is increasingly important in these times when so many people are

forced to live and work in overcrowded cities, and particularly for those who are less well off, that historic towns and villages are preserved as places which people can enjoy.

We are firmly committed to conservation, not simply from an aesthetic point of view, but as a social necessity. This brings me to the Town and Country Amenities Bill, a private member's Bill currently making good progress through Parliament, to which the government are giving full support. Mr Michael Shersby, whose Bill it is, paid a warm and well-deserved tribute to your Secretary, Mrs Jennifer Jenkins, for her help, support and encouragement. She has, I know, spent a considerable amount of time in advising on this Bill, both during this Parliament and in the last, when a very similar Bill was introduced by Sir John Rodgers.

I do not propose to go through the provisions of the Bill in detail: you discuss it in your annual reports. What it will do is to strengthen very greatly the protection of conservation areas, for example, by bringing all demolition within these areas under control, and by placing a duty on local planning authorities to produce schemes for the enhancement of the areas. It will also give greater protection to historic buildings, and make it easier for authorities to buy them in order to preserve them. I am convinced that the Bill will be a valuable piece of legislation. Indeed I hope it will be strengthened still further before it becomes law, but however much the law is strengthened, we shall achieve real success only when everyone is fully committed to conservation. So we must spare no effort to encourage public participation and involvement in conservation matters. In this context I would like to make particular mention of European Architectural Heritage Year 1975.

As I am sure you all know, the campaign for this Year is already well advanced and is proving to be most successful, both in arousing a degree of public interest hitherto unknown, and in providing practical help in financial terms by enabling work to be done in areas which would not normally be eligible for grant aid, under the Heritage Year Grants Scheme. I very much hope that the contribution being made by the Heritage Year Campaign will only be the first stage in a long-term effort. The projects being organised, and the work being done, in connection with the Campaign, while valuable in itself, can only

be truly effective if the initiative taken at the time is carried forward into the future, and I look to you, as committed conservationists, to do all that you can to sustain the impetus of the Heritage Year Campaign into the years ahead.

In conclusion, I would just say this. You will judge us as a Government not by my words, but by our deeds while we are in office. If in five years time you care to ask me, or my successor as Secretary of State, to address you, I believe that he or she, will be able to point to further major developments of our policies in the field of conservation; and I am sure that on such an occasion further tribute will be paid, as I pay it now, to the support and the initiatives of your Society.