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A FUTURE FOR OLD BUILDINGS?

Listed Buildings: The Law and the Practice

THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Speaker: Mr. P.J. Purton LMRTPI

1.00 WHO IS THE PUBLIC?

You will recall, sir, when you took appearances that I am instructed on behalf of the public interest. Before you reach for your tranquilizers or press the buzzer for Securicor may I invite you to relax? "Tyme" has marched on and I am harmless - comparatively. But who is the public?

May I start with a misquotation? "What ish the public? Ish a villain and a bastard and a knave and a rascal! Who talks of the public?" Thus spoke the gallant Captain MacMorris as he stood before the walls of Harfleur. Of course the gallant captain was talking about his nation. I am talking about my nation. But before I attempt to identify and analyse the component parts of my nation which qualify for the term "the public" a commendably brief historical survey would be appropriate.

I start in 1875 with that magnificent legislative tour de force the Public Health Act Section 176(4) refers to the discretion vested in a Local Government Board to direct that a local inquiry be held into land acquisition proposals. Owners and occupiers had been quite separately catered for but here at last the great British public was to participate. The route to Airedale and Winchester was charted.

I do not guarantee that this was the first time that "the public" was statutorily recognised in this context but undoubtedly this did represent a major step forward in the process of what we now call public participation in planning if not its actual birth. Needless to say this was not made in the context of Listed Buildings but it is unlikely I think that the

concept would have been adopted for Listed Buildings if it had not received some patronage in earlier years. The period between 1875 and 1947 in terms of public participation saw mainly a repetition of the 1875 pattern. 1947 came and went with just a whisper about Building Preservation broadly repeated in 1962 by Section 32 of the Town and Country Planning Act - lists of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. But still essentially only the owner or occupier and the Local Authority are concerned. Sub-section (5) of Section 32 required the Minister to consult with such person or bodies of persons as appear to him appropriate or having special - and I emphasise special - knowledge of or interest in the same - demonstrably not in the Minister's interpretation the great British public.

1968 has already been catalogued in some detail by earlier speakers and was of course repealed by 1971. But before this I would like to spend a little time on what should be from a Ministerial point of view the chef d'oeuvre on Historic Buildings Listing and Conservation namely Circular 61/68. There are a number of features of this Circular which I think cast a fascinating light on a definition of the public. Paragraph 3 suggests criteria intended to be helpful to Local Planning Authorities by way of broad guidance in dealing with applications relating to Listed Buildings. Summarised for my purposes they are briefly:-

- (a) The importance of the building
- (b) Historical interest as well as architectural merit
- (c) Economic factors and in particular the burden on public funds
- (d) Alternative use and in particular use of the site for some public purpose leading to enhancement of the environment

Is it not interesting to note that in every single one of those basic criteria the public interest in one way or another is vitally involved. But how did the Circular provide for that interest to be taken into account? In other words who does Circular 61/68 think is the public?

First it clearly thinks that the following bodies are representative of the public, namely The Ancient Monument Society, The Council for British Archaeology, The Georgian Group, The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, The Victorian Society, The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. All these groups receive special treatment to the extent that they are entitled to notification of all applications for Listed Building Consent where demolition is involved. In other cases their involvement is rather more discretionary.

Secondly, paragraph 18 emphasises the importance of securing the greatest possible measure of public participation in conservation and encourages co-operation with voluntary bodies, both national and local, concerned with the protection of historic buildings and the preservation and enhancement of amenities.

Thirdly, paragraph 19 requires the public's interest in historic buildings, the public's right to be aware of decisions to be stimulated.

Fourthly, paragraph 21 suggests that Local Planning Authorities should establish Conservation Area Advisory Committees including persons not members of the Authority. I wonder how many of these have been set up? The answer to that question discloses a very unhappy state of affairs. My informant at Saville Row tells me that Circular 61/68 received very little attention in this respect. So little attention in fact that Circular 127/74 was thought of some six years later. This asked Local Authorities to give details of the committees they had set up pursuant to 61/68. Now I accept that these Committees function primarily in respect of Conservation Areas although I am going to suggest later their scope should be widened. Some Local Authorities set up a Committee for each Conservation Area; others one for their whole area so the figures I am about to disclose are probably even worse than they seem. Today - 1976 - only 200 such committees exist and there are over 360 Local Authorities charged with this responsibility. But as yet no satisfactory definition of the public. Incidentally Circular 127/74 introduced the concept of the "street scene" - a most important advance in terms of the public interest?

And so to Skeffington. I refer to Skeffington not because he had anything particularly to do with Listed Buildings but because he was quite specifically concerned with public participation. One of the first observations one cannot fail to make on reading Skeffington is that in paragraph 3 - accompanied by a fanfare of trumpets, he mentions the general invitation made when he was appointed for the great British public to submit ideas and comments. Over 400 organisations and individuals responded - 400 out of how many thousands? If ever there was a demonstration of sheer public apathy surely this disclosure alone underwrites it. Undismayed, Skeffington goes on in paragraph 5B of his introduction to define his public. I quote "he does not think of the public solely in terms of the community as it shows itself in organised groups. He regards the community as an aggregate comprising all individuals and groups within it without limitation" I wonder perhaps if he was too generous in his definition. Clearly he intended to be and he wasted no time in making the point that as life becomes more complex one cannot leave all the problems to one's representatives and that the pace, intensity and

scale of change inevitably brings bewilderment and frustration when people affected think it is imposed without respect for their views. Certainly a fair comment on the situation today. I will return to Skeffington later but I wonder whether or not some sections of the public, as Skeffington would have it, can really be regarded as representing the public interest in the broad sense. Clearly some form of organisation, some vehicle for conveying the view of the public - and which is not available today - or if available is misused or neglected, must be found. Skeffington's free-for-all may be ideal in theory but could never work in practice. Airedale and Winchester underline this. But let us look at potential vehicles.

2.00 The Objector

I have used the term "the objector" because it may seem that the public generally objects to something and very rarely approves of it. This is a basic fact of human nature to which too little recognition is given in our planning processes and an entirely natural reaction to just that air of bewilderment and frustration to which Skeffington referred. However, I think the objector can be divided into a number of different types namely:-

A. Statutory Objectors

These are the bodies that are given statutory rights to be consulted and to appear at enquiries and it is conceivable that they could be involved where Listed Buildings are concerned. However their views are readily obtainable, insular to a degree, having regard to whatever specific statutory function they have to perform and, although public in the sense that they usually perform a public service, cannot I think be regarded as doing anything other than advancing their own parochiality when required to do so. I dismiss them as representative of the public.

B. Property Objectors

These people actually own the property which is in issue or may own adjacent or adjoining property which will be affected one way or other by the proposals. It is easy in a paper of this length to generalise but their main involvement is probably with the financial merits of the case; they are perhaps even more parochial than the statutory objector and only coincidentally can be regarded as representing the public interest in any context at all. I dismiss them as easily.

C. Sensibility Objectors

The nationally organised sensibility objector, as I have already indicated, has been given a special status

by Circular 61/68 and I believe this should continue to be recognised. But there may be other more local sensibility objectors, namely those whose concern with the proposal is for its local aesthetic merits, its historical value, or related factors. I think when one comes to deal with sensibility objectors one is beginning to get closer to be public pulse although there is a danger, for reasons advanced later, that too much importance can be placed on them. Their energy needs control and discretion.

D. Community Objectors

These fall broadly into two groups. They can be distinguished, I think, from sensibility objectors since they invariably have some other axe to grind in the nature, perhaps, of an alternative use for the premises - usually for the public - or the effect on the general environment or on the community, generally, in terms of the loss of amenities of one form or another. The first group tends at least to recognise financial responsibility. Again, probably nearer to the public pulse and having something in common with the parish or community council to which I will refer later - but again, generating energies which need control and purpose to be effective. The second group may be broadly described as action groups, other local minorities, amenity societies and petitions. In this context it is essential to beware of "noise-makers" and petition presenters when defining the public. The average member of the public does not get up petitions. In the event of the small petition therefore which has just been circulated in a small group it is likely to be a-typical having been presented only to a-typical people for signature. In the event of large door to door public petition it can be legitimately assumed that those who did not sign disagree and non-signers always outnumber signatories.

The "noise-makers" do perform a valuable role in raising questions which would not otherwise be asked and they can influence public opinion by their efforts. It is essential always to realise that they are not themselves usually good representatives of the public mood.

E. Competitive Objectors

These of course are people with some alternative proposal but, again, occupy a very narrow parochial plane from the point of view of the public and can readily be dismissed.

F. The Local Authority - The Shire or Metropolitan County and the District Council

Whatever their aspirations I think I can dismiss in a few words any thought that after 1974 the Shire or Metropolitan County or the District can in any recognisable sense be regarded as capable of representing the public in the sense of this paper. Together with Central Government they are the principal components of what I call "the System". Neither in the case of the elected representatives of the Shire or Metropolitan County or the District Council can it in my view be said that they any longer truly represent the public. They are usually politically orientated and once swept along in "the system" are isolated from their electors (under 30% of whom will have elected them in any event) and only coincidentally aware of their views. At this point I should say something about this word "system" which I have used and I apologise for also introducing "class" at this stage - in my view today an irrelevant, misleading and reactionary concept. I use the term because it is regrettably one which we still all understand. Perhaps more wisely I could have used the specious alphabetical classifications into which we are sometimes stuffed by a mealy mouthed Government when avoiding the use of "class" namely "Grades A B C1 or C2 etc" But for my purposes "class" must do. The fundamental problem is that planning and public participation is a middle-class concept brought into being by middle-class politicians to express middle-class aspirations and substantially practiced by middle-class academics and professionals. Furthermore it has created a "system". This is an enormous machine, bits of which are constantly falling off or breaking down, other bits of which are always being added, but a machine to which, like any other, the eternal search for perpetual motion has been applied. In other words, it always has to be seen to be doing something. It doesn't seem to matter whether it is going forwards or backwards or sideways provided that the whole apparatus is seen to be working.

Thousands upon thousands of people are employed in it; Central Government and Local Government are matched by private practice. A person's sole purpose in life is to be seen to be doing something within (or for some without) the "system" and having something to show for it at the end. Rarely if ever does the "system" stop and check where in fact it is going. Dobry, for example, is the classic example of the man who was stood in front of the steam-roller to extol its virtues, to criticise some of its less sensitive features and to recommend certain mechanical and indeed spiritual improvements. The only one of these he overlooked was a brake as a result of which the steam-roller moved majestically and unseeingly on rolling out the said unfortunate Dobry in its path, leaving him happily still with us, but severely winded.

G. And thus I come by devious and entirely illogical process to the Parish or Community Council. And I hold out great hopes for the Parish or Community Council. Having dismissed the ability of the Shire or Metropolitan County and the District Council to represent the public as I believe the public to be, and accepting that not every voice can be heard in any particular situation, we still must look for suitable vehicles to mobilise, give purpose to, and advance public opinion. The 1974 Local Government reorganisation has left the Parish or Community Council remarkably and sadly short of executive powers but thereby, in my view, leaving an enormous amount of time on its hands to mobilise the views of its electors, and the sheer parochiality of these councils in every sense of the term suggests to me one of the best vehicles for identifying and mobilising the public if properly used. A great deal more time and money needs to be spent in strengthening the facilities of these councils for this sort of purpose. Perhaps this is "grass roots" stuff but I make no apology for this. Furthermore I would like to see an urgent response from Local Authorities in setting up the Circular 61/68 Committees and for the scope of those Committees to be extended to include Listed Buildings per se - and mandatory on all Local Authorities to submit all proposals (not only demolition) to them and to the Parish and Community Council. And let us make certain as well that these Committees do not consist of just middle-class activists. Thus the Parish or Community Council with properly organised sensibility objectors and other community objectors is my definition of the Public monitored by an extended 61/68 Committee. And I find that frequently their views are overlooked.

3.00 Public Opinion

What then is public opinion?

How does one communicate with the public and how does one form it?

In so far as the majority is generally non-activist, the public tends to be conservative supporting the status quo. Not necessarily the legal status quo. It supports what it perceives to be the practical status quo. Thus there will usually be a majority against any change of use of any area or development unless fairly substantial benefits are immediately obvious from this.

Consequently conservation, preservation and extension of recreation are generally popular and the public favours listing of buildings and the like. This is especially so since in my experience the public is surprisingly aware of the amenity value of pleasant

looking (as distinct from what contemporary professional architects might call good) architecture. There is thus a dichotomy between the public which favours retaining a pleasant old building even though it is architecturally an undistinguished one and the developer or architect who finds no merit in it and sees the commercial or the architectural benefits of replacing it. However the public is given too little credit for the value of its sensibility and the evaluation of of aesthetic judgements. It is maintained by some - particularly architects - that the reluctance of the public to approve of new buildings in the modern style of architecture is due to a lack of educated appreciation of architecture by the public. Since it is the public which has to live with buildings thus constructed, it should be the architects who are re-educated to building what the public likes. Indeed the surprising suggestion was made to me the other day that because of the general furore which now accompanies any proposal concerning a Listed Building, contemporary architects have resolved to design buildings which, while functional, are ugly and unpleasant, in order that no problem arises in the future when it is to be pulled down. It seems, if I may say so, to be a somewhat short-sighted view since it takes no account of the perceptive changes in public sensibility which can occur over the years. There are Georgians and there are Victorians and there may one day be Seifertians. Who, when St. Pancras Station was built, would have thought that there would now be all that fuss about pulling it down? Undoubtedly St. Pancras Station was built as a highly functional building, ugly and unpleasant, in order that no problem would arise when the need came to pull it down.

Another interesting point which I think does arise is consideration of what may be termed "the eternal triangle". There are worthy if inadequate attempts at communication between the Planning Authority and the public (quite apart from those elevated to special status by Circular 61/68). There are usually earnest communications between the applicant and the Planning Authority but far too rarely in my experience is the third side of the triangle ever completed, namely communication between the applicants and the public. In fact the majority of applicants seem positively paranoid about concealing their intentions from the public. It is my belief that it is this mutual mistrust (coupled with the bewilderment and frustration to which I have already referred) which increases rather than decreases the responsibilities of both the applicant and the Local Authority and leads to a great deal of the difficulties experienced today with proposals affecting Listed

Buildings. Indeed this secrecy may be one of the contributory factors to the process of "spot-listing". There is no half-way house - a factor which the public interest may broadly seem to welcome - since "spot-listing" brings the full force of the legislation into effect. I am quite certain that if applicants (to many of whom PR is or should be second nature) cannot or do not communicate, then I think they bring on their heads all the difficulties that they usually experience. I am quite certain that if the merits of a proposal and its disadvantages are fairly and clearly explained to the public, then the public's response is always much more amenable and constructive than if suddenly confronted by what to them is a major interference with the status quo and the enthusiasm or propensity of "spot-listing" might diminish. The result of this lack of communication, particularly along the third side of the triangle, leads in my view to an exaggerated view being held by everyone of what is called "the preservation obsession". Nevertheless we are experiencing a reaction to the major slaughter of meritorious, historic and architecturally interesting buildings which occurred in the early period of post-war development and everyone should recognise this for what it is. Something wrongly preserved can always be destroyed in the future. Something now destroyed can never be rebuilt and there should always be, therefore, a bias in favour of the preservation of buildings and locales of pleasing aspects.

4.00 How far should public opinion prevail

I find myself in a difficult position when I come to deal with experts. By inclination, training and my own professional discipline, I believe in experts. In terms of a Listed Building it is quite clearly desirable to have an expert who is able to rehearse all its features and characteristics, its historical origins and interest and any other relevant factors in a purely factual sense. But it needs only one expert to do this. My initial confidence begins to wane when it comes to aesthetic or sensibility judgements. Is the opinion of Sir Fortescue Facade for the developer any more reliable in this context than that of his doughty opponent for the Local Authority, Sir Peregrine Pastiche (both past Presidents of the REBA) or, for that matter, Fred Bloggs who happens to live there and likes it or, indeed, me who walks passed it everyday? I doubt this and it is why I believe the contribution the Listed Building makes in a more general context rather than in isolation is still given insufficient weight. This is where public opinion is important and must prevail. And where the Parish or Community Council and the Committee which I have mentioned can play its full part. How much our current disaffection is due to a failure to comprehend the emotional and physical

impact on the ordinary human beings of their immediate environment is a nice point. How much has it been encouraged by forcing people out of their back-to-backs into highrise flats - (vertical back-to-backs with a flush loo) - a standing condemnation of man's inhumanity to man. Can I perhaps coin a new rallying cry for the homeless masses - "Give us back our back-to-backs". How do you measure against the unquestioned expertise of Bill James and his ilk in calculating the cost of preservation, the simple response of Bill Bloggs the occupier - "Well all it wants is an inside loo and a decent handle on the front door and 6 panes of glass upstairs - it suits me!"

The overall importance of public opinion is that without it experts function in a vacuum responsible to no-one, creating an environment which may bear no relation to the wishes of the general public who have to live in it. In any purportedly democratic society the role of the expert in public affairs is to devise the best and most efficient machinery to work within the general reference points laid down by the public. This is as true with planning and listed buildings as in any other area of public concern. On no account should the expert ever be allowed to override informed public opinion on the subject of those reference points.

From this springs the need to communicate and inform the public of the full facts which are too often glossed over by the media, since they are of little interest. It can be said, in my experience, that the public will rise to the task and there will never be any need to ignore public opinion in favour of "overriding public interests" since if these are truly overriding they will be perceived as such and accepted. The phrase "overriding public interest" is too often used to cover projects which are in fact merely desired by the proposing body - usually a local authority government or nationalised industry. There is very seldom a project which actually deserves the phrase. It is often the case that officials in a position to do so seek the easy way out and sooner than go to the trouble of looking for, obtaining, and planning for an acceptable alternative, will find it all too easy to try to override local concern and use the site they first thought of. Such abuses can only be corrected by granting to public opinion a supreme position in planning and relying upon informing the public and the common sense of such informed public opinion in the case of genuinely overriding public interest.

Communication is the fundamental problem in planning. Granted that the noise makers are not truly representative, how is the public on the one hand to be informed and on the other to give its views?

Ultimately however unrewarding it may be in terms of response in any individual case or indeed

overall, it is necessary to communicate by going out to the people. Exhibitions of plans and models in local libraries and town halls, particularly on Saturdays and in the evenings when the working public can actually get to see them; the sending of circular letters with prepaid reply forms to selected or random members of the public (although I know Stanley Coggan has views on this); personal calling - all of these are the first methods by which communication must and can be established in our present experience.

The complaint is too often heard from Government and Local Government Officers "We held an Exhibition" - (between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. on Tuesday). Or "We asked them to write in". The public is interested but both unsure of who to contact and how, and of the reception of its views. Frequently complaints made to Public Authorities are peremptorily dismissed - people fear that the same happens to their views on subjects such as planning. There is undoubtedly also the problem of apathy. It is not good enough to accept this - efforts must be made to surmount it along the lines I have indicated. People must be assured their views count and know precisely how to make their views known. A sustained campaign is required to enhance people's knowledge of the consultative channels. Good communications in my view is the essential prerequisite of all good planning, not only in respect of listed buildings.

I have commented on the failure to communicate. How can this be remedied in the future? Experience has already demonstrated that people do not answer letters, do not visit the 17th floor of the District Council office to see the cosy little exhibition between 10 and 4 (after 1974 it is probably in the next Borough in any event and they have just withdrawn the bus service). People do not usually attend enquiries except in the limited activist context that I have already described. Of what do the great mass of the public - the non-activists - take notice? I suggest that they do three things. They read the papers, listen to the radio and devotedly watch T.V. Now I am well aware (as a practising private solicitor I should be) of the superficiality of these media in many respects. My profession bears more than its full share of the consequences of this. But first - the papers. I suggest not tiny little formal advertisements on some inside page preceded by a mass of meaningless words about Section this or that of some Act that 90% of the public has never heard of and 50% probably can't pronounce either, but full page splashes with pictures "This one or that one" "This building to be demolished and replaced by that" - advantages and disadvantages - cost - who pays. I am sure a suitable formula could simply evolve (without destroying the need

for the formal notices about which I have been rather rude) and no more expensive, I suggest, than the discreet little exhibitions.

Secondly - local radio - compulsory allocation of time at peak hours or on certain news programmes giving full details of matters affecting Listed Buildings and where and how you can make your views known.

Thirdly - television - one of the most potent and almost totally untried means of communication in this context which again can now be organised on a local basis. Perhaps I can give a pertinent example. Some of you may recall that not so very long ago there was an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum entitled "The Destruction of the English Country Home". I had overlooked this both in the press and the radio but happened to watch a programme on television concerning the exhibition. This took me the following day to the Museum itself and those who visited it will recall that the exhibition started off with a simple blackboard on which was chalked the next House to go. It so happened the day I attended that it was a property called Strensham Court near Worcester which I had known in the past. I immediately resolved to take my family to see Strensham Court for the last time before it went. I did so the following weekend three days later. On arrival I was confronted by a pile of rubble. The night of the television broadcast the property had "caught fire" and in order to avoid danger to the public the owners had demolished it as an emergency. No doubt there are many lessons in terms of public response to be learnt from this but the particular one is the question of reaction. No doubt I evinced a moderately activist middle-class reaction; clearly elsewhere another type of reaction was provoked. I am sure that all would have been equally moved by the programme and what they saw.

5.00 The Future

I believe it is essential that the target of decision making should in general be the next generation but one - 50 years hence. This is especially true of planning in view of the life of the average building which will be used by that generation. But I am also extremely sceptical of the value and capabilities of macroplanning in terms of town country or regional plans. These tend, by definition, to be opposed to the normal course of events by forcing development into non-natural areas to increase costs and distort development. Inevitably they are also obsolescent as soon as published and generally obsolete within 5 or 10 years because of unforeseen, unforeseeable and quite uncontrollable economic and demographic changes.

The Listed Building does not lend itself to macroplanning at all. It is irrelevant to the structure plan and the bane of the local planner and perhaps the developer as well. Very few of our towns lend themselves to macroplanning in preservation terms - perhaps areas of York, for example. But it is interesting to note by way of a comparison that a substantial area of Rome has been totally preserved and no redevelopment at all is allowed other than in very exceptional circumstances. And the Listed Building is always in the wrong place. It is on the street frontage sticking out at a vital bottle-neck in the highway - it is bang in the middle of an area of outstanding natural beauty or Green Belt - it is dwarfed but not bested by tower blocks all round. Applying contemporary planning principles, few of our Listed Buildings would ever have been built and I doubt whether few of our future listed buildings have been or are being built now. I have already alluded to what might be called "ugly functional" with a view to eliminating the listing problem in the future. There may be a real danger there.

The object of this paper has been to try and identify the public interest; to analyse how it has been involved up to the present time; and to suggest how it is best and most constructively involved for the future. The first two parts of this exercise require no further conclusion, but it may be useful, as the sun rises slowly in the east and the lure of the next speaker becomes irresistible, to summarise the third element, namely:-

1. That the national society given special status by Circular 61/68 should retain that status - at least while it is seen to be reacting responsibly.
2. That responsibility for mobilising local public opinion and giving it expression should prima facie devolve on the parish and community councils who should automatically be advised of all proposals affecting Listed Buildings (whether or not demolition is involved) and should make their views known to the extended Circular 61/68 Committees mentioned next.
3. That the Circular 61/68 Committees (originally intended to be concerned only with conservation areas) be extended to include listed buildings and the proposed listing of buildings and automatically entitled to receive details of all proposals affecting the same (whether or not including demolition). The membership of these Committees should be as comprehensive and as far reaching

as possible and their recommendation to the Planning Authority in respect of any particular proposal be ignored at that Authority's peril.

4. That there should be improved communications concerning Listed Building proposals particularly between the applicants and the public. This is a difficult matter for which to legislate, but practical advice for applicants.
5. That there should be more flexibility in recognising and accepting the public's requirements in respect of Listed Buildings and that this should at least be partially achieved by the operation of 2 and 3 above.
6. That there should be a sustained campaign to enhance people's knowledge of consultative channels and that far more enterprising and original use be made of the popular media (on a mandatory basis) as a means of making information available to the public.
7. Abandonment of macroplanning in this context and far more flexibility in land use planning.

In conclusion then where does the relevance and importance of Listed Buildings lie and where does the public interest really lie? Listed Buildings do not conform and the public must not conform. There has always been a strong non-conformist streak in the British character and it is this which in listing, as in everything else, must be maintained, upheld, encouraged and, indeed, must prevail. While all around we are forced into slots, given numbers, pigeonholed, dragooned, categorised, imported, exported, let us at least maintain our independence here. In mediaeval times the lists had a certain meaning. Today they have a slightly different connotation - only slightly - but adopting the mediaeval definition I enter the lists on behalf of the public interest.
