

*In spring 2017, the South London Gallery (SLG) invited artist Jessie Brennan to collaborate with residents of Pelican Estate on a project titled YOUR WORDS. Jessie spent time listening to residents' experiences which, in different ways, celebrate the value of public housing and speak to the broader challenges often faced by those on council estates.*

*A broader context of the project, including Jessie's introductory text and examples of further conversations between Jessie Brennan (JB) and Pelican residents, can be found on the South London Gallery website:  
<https://www.southlondongallery.org/projects/jessie-brennan-words/>.*

**Susan (b. 1964, UK), Pelican Estate resident**

JB How did you come to live in Pelican Estate?

S Being born is the only thing I've done outside of Southwark. I worked for Southwark Council housing department and I think that's why I got offered this place. I took one look at it and said I am not going to live here longer than six months, 32 years ago! I'd had a good education, I had a good job. I couldn't be living in a tower block! [...] To me, it's just somewhere to sleep. It never felt like home because I've never felt inclined to do anything to it.

JB Why do you think that is?

S Because it, the block, was in a state when I first moved in. It was supposed to be knocked down. By 2005 it was meant to have been gone. And then they [Southwark Council] changed their mind. And it's got so much wrong with it, you don't have an incentive to do anything nice to it. [...] Well, now it's all luxury tower blocks. I mean, they've gone the complete opposite way because of regeneration. Nobody can afford them. So, so much for their 'no more tower blocks in London' scheme. They decided there's a lot more profit in more tower blocks; 'we'll just make them very expensive'.

JB Is that what you notice has happened in Peckham or more generally across London?

S Across London, but it's come to Peckham now. I mean, they're getting rid of our supermarket [in The Aylesham Centre]. Where are we going to have to shop? They're going to build luxury flats there with niche shops below. I mean, by niche shops I'm assuming they mean shops you can't afford. I can imagine one of those bakers where it's £5 for a loaf of bread. And if there is nowhere to shop, and every tower block they knock down they build 100 houses but only 10% of them are for council tenants, they're slowly getting rid of us. That is their ultimate aim, I believe. [...]

I'm Muslim. People think it's because of my [Algerian] husband. It's not... One of his friends gave me a copy of the Koran, I read it and it made sense. It's been 19 years since we separated officially. But we're closer now than we ever were. [...]

The only people that seem to be offered housing are the refugees. And people turn on what they can see: and they see the refugees – it's not their fault, it's the government's policies. But you can't go up to David Cameron, now Theresa May – and throw a volley of abuse in her face. But you can the local refugee. And they've divided our communities like that, and I think that's just another way of getting us out. Because it's the old rule, divided we fall. [...]

I get called racist all the time because I do want a control on immigration. I'm not heartless enough to say don't help refugees. [...]

JB Perhaps it comes back to this thing you mentioned before...?

S Divide and rule?

JB Yeah, and that immigration is a scapegoat for those austerity policies that impact the most vulnerable.

S Oh, I know. Every time they [government] mention it they know that people are going to focus on that for a couple of months and it takes focus off what they're really getting up to.

JB Which is?

S Everything is being privatised, but so long as they can spout out 'save our NHS, we'll do all we can for the NHS', that's taking the focus off them actually privatising it. [...] It's happening with housing, it's happening with benefits, it's happening with everything. I think it's – what do they call it? – ethnic cleansing, it used to be. I don't know, 'poor people cleansing'. [...]

I've only recently been given PIP – Personal Independence Payment. I applied *ten* times. I have all the medical data saying that my medical conditions will only worsen with age, they won't get better. [...] At one point I had an appeal that I didn't go to because I was so depressed – I couldn't function as a normal person. I didn't turn up to the appeal, so I lost that. [...] I can't physically go shopping so I do online shopping, but you have to spend a minimum of £40. So I only do that every two or three weeks, because I wouldn't have that £40 otherwise. [...]

And I think they're tailoring the shops around that. They are getting rid of all the shops by Rye Lane station. [...] When it was just us, they

didn't really care what Peckham looked like. Now suddenly they're taking an interest in making it all 'better', but the prices go with that. [...] But how do you stop it? The only thing you can do, because I don't believe in violence against anybody, the only thing you can do is vote. But, as I said, it doesn't matter who you vote in. They forget you exist. [...]

The fact is, we need council housing and it's just disappearing before our eyes.