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## **A Speech by Film Director Jim Jenner at the House of Commons Dinner, November 12, 2005**

Lord Banks, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honor to be here tonight to speak to you about a subject dear to my heart.

I believe I was invited tonight to bring a little outside perspective to your wonderful efforts here. My film-making has indeed taken me all over the world and I stand before you as someone who may be able to shed a little light on the issues of the pigeon sport globally and where it fits in to modern society.

First of all it is important to note that the tremendous effort made here, by my English racing colleagues, ably assisted by Lord Banks, to elevate the legacy of homing pigeons as a vital part of our wartime history, is unprecedented. Thanks to you, there is now a beautiful, and permanent, monument to these brave birds here in London. And the fact we are gathered here tonight, at the very epicenter of English society, to talk about Columba Livia is the most positive step that I'm aware of, world wide, to bring back some respect for a species that I like to think of as the Underdog of the Animal Kingdom.

I use the term "Underdog" to refer to pigeons because it is the saddest irony of my lifetime to see such a phenomenal creature, our oldest domestic bird, our oldest feathered friend, become so misunderstood and vilified in the last half century.

But why should we care about how pigeons are perceived by the public today? Well, first of all, let's remember what has changed and how these birds once enjoyed a much more vaunted position in society.

As Jean Hansell has so beautifully documented in her books, it is the Rock Dove, Columba Livia, that symbolizes the holy spirit in all the world's major religions. This species' gentleness and loyalty, and their success as caring parents, made them an icon of Venus, goddess of love. The bird is also the international symbol of peace, and it is almost certain that the bird that brought the olive branch to Noah was a rock dove, because this is the family that has been a companion to man since ancient humans lived with these birds in the rocky caves around the Mediterranean. So, for centuries, domestic pigeons were revered. They were a big part of everyday life. Pigeon keeping was a huge pastime in the Middle East, Asia and Europe. Today there are over 1,000 varieties of domestic pigeons that descend from the Rock Dove.

Pigeon racing, in one form or another, is easily as old as horse racing, the sport of Kings. I guess it is more accurate to call our hobby the sport of Queens, because her majesty Queen Elizabeth is a pigeon racer. Actually she is a third generation racer because it was her grandfather King George who first established a racing loft at Sandringham a century ago.

When the Olympic Games open in London in 2012, tradition calls for the release of homing pigeons to mark the official start of the games. This again is symbolic of an ancient friendship. During the original games in Greece it was common for an athlete to carry pigeons from his village to the Olympics. If he won a race, he would tie a strand of the finish line to the bird and release it to fly home and let his fellow villagers know of his victory.

And speaking of Olympic athletes, I have to share some comments I recently got about pigeons as part of the latest film we are releasing next week. In the United States Professor Ken Dial is one of the world's foremost experts on how birds fly. For over 20 years this Harvard trained scientist has conducted experiments on bird locomotion. He has been recognized universally for many breakthrough findings, particularly on how dinosaurs likely learned to fly. Professor Dial has studied the greatest fliers in the avian kingdom and he calls our pigeons the ultimate

Olympic athlete. According to Professor Dial no bird, in fact no creature on earth, can match the speed and endurance of modern racing pigeons.

But given all this rich history, from the Royal family to respect from eminent scientists, how is it that we are fighting so hard to earn recognition for the racing birds we care for? How did Columba Livia become an “underdog” if you will.

We are victims of several factors, a perfect storm of negative components that have made for reduced status for our birds. First, during the 1960's and 1970's there was a concerted effort by the pest control industry to convince public officials that pigeons carried dozens of diseases, including tuberculosis. This false campaign was intended to elevate the pigeon as a public health threat that could then be exterminated, for a profit mind you, by the industry. And, even though the pigeon sport eventually got them to cease and desist with their medical falsehoods, the stigma has remained.

Secondly the American comedian, Woody Allen, coined a phrase in one of his movies for the feral pigeons in New York City. He called them feathered rats. Sadly, this too, took root in the minds of the public, or worse, in the minds of everyone in the media who ever thought to do a story on pigeons.

For us this stigma is very serious, because no matter how different our pedigreed and pampered race birds are, to a city council they are just pigeons and they now regulate us as if our birds were a health threat and a nuisance. Now we have the joys of bird flu to deal with as well.

So, in our lifetime, one of the world's most revered creatures, and one of nature's most phenomenal athletes, has been reduced to the status of vermin in the minds of the media and much of the general public.

Why is this important? Why should we care about this if we can still quietly practice our hobby? And what has this got to do with what may be next for the effort that was born here in the Churchill Dining Room several years ago? Well it has a great impact on how our sport can survive, much less grow.

Why we should care about people being able to enjoy pigeon racing can be illustrated in my sharing my own personal journey to this room. And I don't mean the 7,000 miles to fly here from the Rocky Mountains of Montana. I mean the emotional and intellectual journey that I have experienced because of my fascination with homing pigeons. I'm going to mention it because I know I am not unique, I know my comments here will bring many nods of agreement from the pigeon fanciers here tonight.

I was ten years old when my family moved from the country to the city. At school one day a boy brought a couple of street pigeons, in a bird cage, for show and tell. I'd never seen these big birds up close. And I had never had the experience of looking into a bird's eye and having it, basically look back, with an obvious intelligence that was taking my measure. Science now tells us that the bird was indeed thinking, pigeons have been found to be able to remember hundreds of faces, and are equal to higher order animals, such as dolphins and porpoises, in their cognitive abilities.

Anyway, I followed my new friend home and became part of a pack of black and white boys who roamed the city catching and keeping street pigeons. I then visited the library and, for the first time in my life I had a topic that I wanted to know about. I discovered the incredible story of homing pigeons in war and the fact that pedigreed racing pigeons, in countries like England and Belgium, were raced by the thousands in competitions of 100 to 600 miles.

Like many little boys of my generation I became a pigeon keeper. I had to learn how to design a pigeon loft. I had to learn how to build it. I had to learn how to find racing pigeons to buy and the very basics of having a feathered family in my back garden that I was responsible for. At ten years old I ruled my own little world. Twice a day it was up to me to feed and care for my birds. I made mistakes, such as trying to help a hatching baby bird out of its shell, a hard lesson when you realize that mother nature often doesn't want assistance, and the death of the living thing I was trying to help broke my heart.

I learned how to convert dollars to pounds so I could send away for precious English books that annually carried the stories of the Kingdom's greatest pigeon men. I learned these champions could be commoner or King and that a great pigeon could win a race flying to a loft near a countryside manor house or to the kitchen window of a Welsh coal miner. I learned about the birds and the bees, well the birds anyway, without having to have a sit down with my father!. I learned how the life cycle of all living creatures is tied to the seasons, to the changes in the length of the day. I learned to observe and understand the weather. I learned about nutrition and the components of grain, such as fiber, fat and protein, in what I fed my birds. I learned about genetics and how the findings of Mendel became evident in the feather colors of the babies of birds I mated together. Let me repeat, I was ten years old, and I was learning in the best way a child can, by hands-on experience, self-study and observation. Far different that having my face glued to a video game.

Outside my little back garden pigeon world, I had to respect and deal with my elders, because in my city there were Champion pigeon men I wanted to know. Many of these expert trainers were professional people, but others were salt of the earth, working men, and I had to learn how to speak to them, and win them over, before I stood a chance to talk them out of precious eggs or babies to raise.

I learned about management and planning and hygiene. And every day I alone was responsible for delivering clean feed and clean water to my birds and always scrapping away their droppings.

And for all this hard work, and all this study, I was rewarded. Because each day I could visit my birds, birds I had raised, and I could let them outside into the sky. And from where I stood, earthbound, I could watch them fly. I would watch them disappear, often for an hour and then, magically, come back, come back to me. At the age of ten I saw a creature give up its freedom, to return to my care, because of the bond I had built between us.

It's easy to be poetic about this part of my life because the emotions are so deep within me. But the magic I am describing was not unique to little Jim Jenner in the Northwest corner of America. These emotions, the life lessons, are in the heart of every pigeon person in this room. They are, in large part, what made us what we are today. And I can tell you that all of we pigeons boys turned out OK, while many boys didn't do so well and fell into drugs and crime.

Now, like most pigeon men, there was a period when teenage hormones became stronger than the pull of the birds, well a pull to a different kind of bird you could say, the unfeathered variety. But the emotional satisfaction of those early years was always in my heart and when I finally settled down I took up the hobby again.

But what I am trying to describe here, by sharing what is by no means a unique experience, is a simple illustration of how profound an impact homing pigeons can have on a young person. Since then I have seen, in virtually every country I have visited, that my own story has been repeated several million times. That's how many people keep pigeons world-wide, and the emotions I've described are the same for the boys of Belfast or Beijing, Cardiff or Calcutta.

Why is this important? Well I read with interest Lord Carter's report on sport in the U.K. It is obviously very much on the radar screen of government today to encourage sport and active recreation for young people that gets them away from television and violent video games, and into drug free activities that engage their minds. For many experts sport is the answer.

Can we call pigeon racing a sport? Well a dictionary definition of sport is a game or organized activity. It may or may not involve hard physical play. Worldwide, pigeon racing is far greater in terms of participation and prize money than dog racing for example. Much like horse racing it involves highly bred contestants, although no horse race on earth matches the twenty to two hundred thousand birds that can take part in a pigeon race on a summer Saturday. In terms of size the Royal Pigeon Racing Assoc, the RPRA, with over thirty employees, is much larger than the vast majority of sport bodies in the U.K. When you read Lord Carter's report you realize that as many people race pigeons in the U.K. today as play volleyball, or hockey or sail or learn gymnastics. And while building and managing a team of racing pigeons may not be as physically demanding as running down a football pitch, let's look at the some other benefits. First of all we can't make light of the physical demands and responsibilities of, twice a day, every day, hauling food and water back and forth to your loft. And cleaning and cleaning and cleaning. But it is the mental and emotional component that I think I can best address. A lot of Lord Carter's report discusses the benefits of sport that go beyond mere exercise. It is the aspects of getting away from the TV, interfacing with others and getting your mental gears turning that are listed as key goals of the hundreds of millions of pounds investment in youth that the study contemplates. That's where the huge impact on my own life becomes noteworthy because it is not unique. Pigeons can literally change children for the better. Here's what I mean by that.

I'm sorry that House of Commons decorum doesn't permit the showing of films. Because, let's face it, a filmmaker's work speaks louder than his words. If I could, I would have shown you one of the stories that was in my last film, "Share The Blue Sky".

It was called "Pigeons Go To School" and it told about a program for at risk teenagers at a secondary school in the United States. I'm going to provide copies to Lord Banks and others so you have a chance to see this saga.

At this school the science teacher is a pigeon fancier, as is his father. Together they created a small pigeon loft behind the classroom and the students were in charge of raising and training a flock of racing birds. These teenagers, mostly from poor Hispanic families in a small farming community, represent much of what modern society is burdened with. Most are from single parent families, most ended up at this last chance, alternative school because of serious attendance or behavior problems. They were no strangers to teen pregnancy, drugs, crime or abusive home lives. What you see in this film is the simple connection that pigeons can bring between human beings and the natural world. And I need to point out to our honored guests something they may not know. As a child's pet, domestic racing pigeons are hardy, they live happily in small spaces, they are easily tamed and most of all, they fly. Since time began these big birds have imparted something special to the soul of a child who cares for them.

My favorite images are of a huge boy, a legend as a vicious fighter before he was tossed out of the mainstream school, cupping a tiny baby pigeon in his big hands. My favorite comments are his words about how gentle pigeon parents are with their young and how calm he feels when he watches the birds fly. The most profound comments come from the school principal who relates that the problems of the class have changed. Before the pigeon program, he says, the problem was they didn't come to school. Now, he says with a smile, the problem is they don't want to go home. A follow-up study, commissioned by the state education department, found that the students in the pigeon project improved by over a full grade point in their academic

performance. Their attendance rose dramatically. Most significant the incidents of aggressive behavior all but went away. Phenomenal results for any sport program to be sure. In my story one girl spoke of how it made her feel to be asked to care for an abandoned baby pigeon. In her own words she said she went from contemplating suicide to deciding to continue with school, find a job and build a life for herself. I'm not making this up. It's all there.

So here we are, in the House of Commons, talking about pigeons. And you've succeeded brilliantly in honoring the homing pigeons contribution to saving lives in war. But what is next? Where does pigeon racing fit in the future of society? Why should we fight to be recognized as a viable and important part of youth sport?

Speaking of competitive sport I think of my friend Gerry Francis here It's true to say he's one in a million in more ways than one. Statistically there can only be so many champions of his caliber, only so many heroes of Team England. No matter how many hundred million pounds are invested in expanding sport in the U.K., mother nature is going to produce very few athletes of Gerry's caliber. That leaves several millions other kids on the sidelines. And, for many, simple exercise is only small part of what is missing in their lives.

That's where we come in. I think this is the next step. A critical component of the entire sports effort is active recreation that gets children out of a sedentary lifestyle and mentally engaged in something other than TV or a computer screen. It is up to us to produce the tools that can help to do this by working to help more young people become interested in racing pigeons.

Now some will tell you this is impossible. Many within our sport will say we are the last generation, that kids today just can't be engaged in our hobby. I beg to differ. In fact I venture that any pigeon person who has visited a school to talk about pigeons in the last few years, would also beg to differ. Say what you will about the spoiled and disinterested youth of today, I have witnessed the same magic in their eyes that I had when I saw my first pigeons. The flame can still be lit, and it is our job to light it.

Ohhh, that will never work, others will say, schools or youth centers would never let pigeons be around. Well, I'm reminded of a film I worked on twenty years ago for a group that advocated introducing animals, particularly cats and dogs, into the then antiseptic environments of convalescent centers and homes for the elderly. Have you been to any of these places lately? They have dogs, and cats, and birds all over. And do you know why the administrators changed their minds? Because you can show, scientifically, that contact with other living creatures makes humans calmer and happier and we live longer!

Why should we care about this? Well the more young people interested in our hobby today means the more people likely to take up the hobby later in life. And all of the wonderful things that pigeon keeping brought into my life, and yours, are still there to change the lives of a new generation. And they need it more than ever.

Again, let me share what I've learned around the globe. Attracting youth is a big problem for the pigeon sport everywhere. And I believe one of the problems is that most efforts try to bring young people directly into existing racing clubs. In most cases this is a mistake. First, let's remember that pigeon racing is the toughest competition out of the box of any sport in the world. Unlike golf where you have a handicap, or tennis where they have seedings, or football where the teams are scaled based on their overall performance, from day one in pigeon racing you are competing with the top trainers on an equal footing. You are often up against hundreds of other fanciers with years more experience. Your birds are competing against thousands of other pigeons each weekend, in races where a few seconds means the difference between first and fiftieth place. Unless you are a genius, early success is hard to achieve. What's more the

average pigeon club is typically full of older folks who look forward to their weekends with their mates, it is often not a place a young person is comfortable, at least until they learn the ropes.

That said there are ample opportunities to put pigeons in front of young people through their science education. Today's teachers are desperate for new and engaging curriculums that break the chain of young people's slavish devotion to their cell phones and video games. Whether it's a small loft at a school, or a youth center or even at a local zoo or a nature center. We have to think about putting live, flying homing pigeons in front of young people and be ready to help encourage those that become fascinated by our birds. It can be done. It must be done. Imagine for example if there was a replica of an historic military loft, with live birds inside and display boards and a movie screen around it that described military birds and modern pigeon racing. Now imagine that this entire unit is at the London Zoo. How many people a day would get a positive impression of our hobby?

Probably the single most significant change in the sport is the advent of electronic clocking. Although it has not been adopted officially in the U.K. it is still a fantastic resource to create programs that engage young people. By that I mean it is possible for a small loft of birds to be clocked over a series of races, either one bird sprints, or as a group, download the data and come up with an overall winning bird. It's the kind of competitive information that can keep kids engaged in how their individual birds are doing, and the races can be as simple as ten or twenty mile events. And it also means that a single pigeon loft can serve as a focal point for many children even if they couldn't have their own birds at home. And let's also remember how little physical space all this takes compared to a sports pitch. A demonstration pigeon loft can be the size of a single parking stall.

What I really want to emphasize is that there is no significant youth oriented program that is being used by the hobby world-wide, and I believe this is the perfect forum for this type of effort to be launched. And I don't bring it up as a challenge that I make and walk away from, but as something I would love to be involved with at any level.

I believe that this is the forum for several reasons. First the bulk of the national pigeon organizations, world wide, are almost totally devoted to the complex business running races and issuing bands. And, occasionally, dealing with controversies like doping. I must digress for a moment to point out to our many dignitaries here tonight that when I was here a year ago the big news was the RPRA's drug testing of British race birds. Sadly, there has been virtually no follow-up report that this effort, which made the Wall Street Journal, American television, etc. and made us look like we had a shady sport going on, has turned up no, zero, I repeat no instances, of drug use among the winning trainers who were suspect.

And this lack of positive public affairs is part of what I see as a problem with the organizations themselves trying to reach out to youth. Most of them are run by older pigeon men, who are often not the best or most sophisticated marketers in the world. I believe an outside, ad hoc group, like your amalgamation which has been so successful at attracting celebrity support and positive media attention, would be far more effective at bridging the many different arenas of the sport and be able to work at the highest levels of government and education to tell our dramatic story.

As a side light there are considerable cultural advantages to this as well. The highest number of at risk youth are those with the least access to nature. They are often poor, disadvantaged and living in single family, urban environments. Many of them, Muslims youth for example, also have a cultural legacy of pigeon keeping that goes back hundreds of generations. I can't tell you how often I get letters in fractured English from pigeon fanciers in Egypt, Iran, Pakistan and other Muslim countries who are reaching out to learn more about pigeons worldwide. And let's remember that while the hobby is dwindling in many parts of the West, it is exploding in

countries such as China, Poland and Portugal, countries where a growing middle class is taking up pigeon racing.

If we started today to create a U.K. and global effort to promote the pigeon sport, to make it part of science curriculums and youth activities, how on earth would you fund such an effort? Well, let me leave you with this thought. The pigeon racers in this room know our hobby is a sport in every sense of the word. It is mentally challenging, it is highly competitive, it is extremely emotionally satisfying, and not just in your youth. We care about our hobby's survival. We honor what it has done for us in our lives. Here's what I mean.

Let me go back to Gerry Francis for a minute because he has a new job you may not know about. Gerry said he didn't want to coach but he is coaching. Not on the field. He's in his back garden breeding, training and conditioning athletes that can go fifty miles an hour, flat out, all day long. He's the coach of what is arguably the formula one flying machine of the avian kingdom. And, even though he may not be running up and down a football pitch, Gerry is mentally and emotionally tied to his team. And if one of his players wins, if one of his birds is best, there won't be cheering fans or headlines in the newspaper. But there will be a little smile on Gerry's face when he sees the other fanciers in his club, and the emotional satisfaction he gleans from that victory will go deep in his heart. Best of all, it is a sport he can play, a team he can coach, until the day he can no longer walk to the loft. Our sport is magical because the older you get the better you get at it! And a successful and dedicated fancier like Gerry is willing to commit his time and money to helping the hobby he enjoys so much.

I don't make light of the importance of physically active sports. I've quarterbacked my school team. I've reminisced with my buddies about our victories on the field. You have too probably. But I venture no victory in athletics is as clear in your mind as the first pigeon race you won, or the band number of the marvelous creature that won it for you.

That is what we are talking about helping bring to other people in the world. And based on my world travels I can tell you that many other intelligent pigeon leaders, world-wide would be proud to be invited to England's House of Commons to work on improving our hobby, to have it recognized as a sport, to try to develop a global program to encourage youth involvement in this hobby. But what about the money?

Well think about this. Is pigeon racing in your will? For all the thousands of hours of satisfaction this hobby has brought to you, is there anywhere you could send your money that would further the sport, that would help it live on for future generations? No there is not. And as we witness the passing of an entire generation of pigeon fanciers, I maintain that the right program, achieving the type of success you have achieved with the war memorial, could easily become a place that a fancier would bequeath a few hundred or a few thousand pounds.

Our hobby is a wonderful, competitive sport that is beneficial to the emotional well-being of the people who practice it, young or old. It is indeed a sport worth fighting for. I hope some of these comments and radical ideas may be a catalyst for where we go from here.

Again, to Lord Banks, thank you so much for hosting this event. Honored guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting us.