

# Prescott discussed entertainment complex at dinner with tycoon

John Prescott was facing renewed pressure over his links with Philip Anschutz last night as it emerged that he discussed the tycoon's „entertainment district“ project for central Los Angeles during their secret dinner at the billionaire's Colorado ranch.

The revelation will add to the clamour for the beleaguered Deputy Prime Minister's resignation because it contrasts so starkly with the two reasons he gave last week for his hastily arranged visit to the 32,000-acre Eagle's Nest estate near Denver last year.

The ambitious „LA Live“ scheme based around the Staples Centre stadium is widely seen as a blueprint for Mr Anschutz's plans to breathe life into the Millennium Dome by transforming it into a entertainment and sports hub in Greenwich.

After news of his two-night visit to Eagle's Nest emerged, Mr Prescott initially said that the two men had talked about their mutual interest in William Wilberforce, the slavery abolitionist. He later claimed that he wanted to visit a working ranch and had a newly professed love of cowboy films. At no time did he make mention of discussions about the showpiece Los Angeles project. He also repeatedly insisted that Mr Anschutz's plans for the Dome and backing for a supercasino at the site had not been raised.

A senior executive at the Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG), however, told The Sunday Telegraph that there was a conversation about what the company was planning for its „entertainment district“ in Los Angeles. He said that Mr Prescott was keen to learn about affordable housing and

regeneration.

Mr Prescott's interest in urban-regeneration schemes is well known. Indeed, on July 26 last year he talked about the affordable-housing component of the Staples Centre project with AEG's chief executive, Tim Leiweke, at a reception in Los Angeles. Last night David Davies, the Conservative MP, said: „It beggars belief that John Prescott would have sat down and discussed this LA-based scheme without having discussed the Dome. The other question is: why did Mr Prescott not come clean and tell us he discussed this scheme rather than relying on his story about Wilberforce and cowboy movies?“

Mr Prescott set off on a nine-day American tour on July 17, visiting Washington, Texas, Los Angeles and Colorado. In LA, he delivered a speech to the World Affairs Council on American and British foreign policy in the wake of the July 7 London attacks and met city officials, newspaper executives and AEG. He fitted in the Eagle's Nest visit on his last weekend, flying back to LA on July 25.

Mr Prescott has repeatedly denied having any influence over the Government's casino policy, despite facing claims that his former department, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, favoured siting what will become Britain's only supercasino at the Dome rather than at other proposed locations.

On Friday it was revealed that Mr Anschutz had cancelled a scheduled meeting with Mr Prescott in London last week because of „media hysteria“. The two men have met on seven occasions. Mr Anschutz stayed in London last week but flew on Friday to Germany, where he will attend the World Cup final tonight in Berlin.

It has emerged meanwhile that Mr Prescott removed special planning protection from two busy Thames wharves to allow the Dome scheme to go ahead, despite fierce opposition from the Port of London Authority.

Delta Wharf and the Vic-toria Deep Water Terminal, which both handled aggregates, were given „safe-guarded“ status by the Conservative government in 1997 to ward off property developers and to encourage cargo transport on the river. But that status was overturned by Mr Prescott in May 2004 to make way for the Dome.

Mr Prescott is also under pressure to explain his „tremendous support“ for a GBP 15 million film being produced by Mr Anschutz's company, Walden Media. This newspaper can reveal that Mr Prescott discussed the production of Amazing Grace at a private meeting with Cary Granat, Walden Media's chief executive, and Michael Flaherty, the studios' president, in July last year. The film, starring Ioan Gruffudd and Michael Gambon, tells the story of Wilberforce and his anti-slavery campaign.