

I'm your man

The industry has been stung recently by government criticism. In his first interview, construction minister Nick Raynsford tells Denise Chevin that the industry has his full support. Photograph by Gautier Deblonde.

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IT'S BEEN 17 WEEKS SINCE construction minister Nick Raynsford moved into his new office, but it still lacks personal touches. The spacious room is in Eland House, the hi-tec office block in London's Victoria, just around the corner from the old headquarters in Marsham Street, and completed earlier this year. The plants are wilting, the pristine white walls remain completely bare. Classic Whitehall bureaucracy is keeping it that way.

"I'd love to put some pictures up," sighs Raynsford. "But the problem is that the walls are metallic and you can only use magnetic hooks, and the government picture department won't issue them."

The smiling minister is clearly enjoying being in office, even if he has misgivings about his office. "The temperature's not always right – it kills off the plants. In wet weather, it leaks and you can't see out of the windows," he says, peering at the filthy glass that cannot be cleaned because the design of the building makes it difficult to use a cradle.

With so many teething troubles to contend with in the new headquarters of the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions – supposedly a flagship green building – perhaps it is not surprising that Raynsford's boss down the corridor has been less than complimentary about the industry of late.

John Prescott's abrasive comments, questioning the competence of the British construction industry after a major contract on the Millennium Dome went to a foreign firm, riled industry leaders.

Not surprisingly, Raynsford comes to the defence of the deputy prime minister. "John wants us to have a highly successful industry in this country, where all the contracts are won by British firms.

"The key comment he made was that he

was going to be a very demanding client. In a sense, he is saying what Sir John Egan said two or three years ago, that the industry has got to become more efficient. I don't see those comments as being hostile to the industry. I don't know any sensible person in the industry who will object to that message. Maybe John puts it in a slightly more abrasive way than others, but that's not necessarily a bad thing."

Raynsford continues in his chatty, fluid style: "I can see there are people who'd like a nice cosy relationship where government pats everyone on the back. I think that's the slippery path to extinction."

"I see my job as a combination of creating a climate in which the industry can do well – like unblocking the private finance initiative – and helping the industry itself to rise to the challenge, equipping itself to be leaner, more effective and more successful."

In the next few weeks, Raynsford plans to announce a new taskforce to improve efficiency, led by BAA boss Sir John Egan. He wants to tackle training and is trying to tailor the government's high-profile Welfare to Work initiative to the construction industry. He also plans to lead trade missions to Egypt and Jordan, and possibly the Philippines.

Perhaps the most thorny task ahead of him is getting through parliament the final piece of the Construction Act – the Scheme for Construction Contracts. Raynsford is determined to do so by Christmas. The latest draft of the controversial scheme, which comes into force if contracts do not comply with the act, has just been released. Wrangling over the scheme has held up implementation of the act which, even if the timetable for the scheme goes according to plan, is unlikely to come ▶

► into force before next April, a year late.

That is a hectic agenda for any parliamentary under-secretary of state looking after construction, let alone one who has to spend half of his time as minister for London, where getting a new mayor in place is one key responsibility.

Industry leaders were delighted that the former *Building* columnist and housing specialist, who earned their respect and affection while covering the portfolio in opposition, landed the job in government. But there are serious grumblings that his plate is overloaded.

It has been estimated that his workload is two-and-a-half times that of Tony Baldry, the last Tory construction minister appointed at junior ministerial level. "We can't get to him since he took over," says one, complaining of cancelled meetings. "We can't get the government to listen to us - it looks arrogant," moans another.

His immediate predecessor, Robert Jones, was a minister of state, a notch higher up the departmental ladder. That, too, is a source of consternation. "In government, hierarchy is important," says one of the industry's more political animals. "He doesn't have the authority of a minister of state, so when he acts as an advocate, he is always being outranked."

The worries are further reinforced by the change of personality at the head of the department. "The last secretary of state would fight construction's corner. Prescott is not particularly acting as an advocate. He only seems able to stick the boot in," complains one industry leader. And why, ask these doubters, did Prescott not follow John Gummer's lead and take up the presidency of the Construction Industry Board, instead of leaving it to Raynsford? A small point, perhaps, but add up everything and it looks as if construction has slipped down the pecking order.

At that suggestion, Raynsford frowns. "I think they are wrong. There is no question of construction being downgraded. Quite the opposite.

"We have a department headed by the deputy prime minister, who has far greater clout at cabinet, and I think I am reasonably well known as someone who has taken a close interest in the industry.

"Anyone who thinks there is no commitment from the government is utterly misguided."

So is his boss genuinely interested in construction? Raynsford appears taken aback at this question. "Yes, of course. If you think of the projects he's been involved with since becoming deputy prime minister, virtually all of them have

been construction projects." It was, he says, Prescott's idea to set up the efficiency taskforce, after talks with Sir John. Details of its remit and makeup are still sketchy. "It will look at a whole range of issues relating to the way in which construction contracts operate and at ways in which we can improve efficiency."

Raynsford also wants to see a bigger role for the CIB. "Obviously, it's had a very delicate task to date, gaining consensus, bringing people together who've not had a track record of working together.

"But it's got to be braver and move on. It's got to establish its authority as a voice for the industry and become a body that is not slow in recognising the weaknesses and failings of the industry."

As for the Latham legislation, Raynsford rejects criticism of the latest draft of the scheme, claiming most of the comments are based on "misunderstanding" and are "frankly wrong".

"I've seen suggestions that the timetable is too rigid, and that it won't be possible for the adjudicator to deal with complex cases in 28 days. Those making these comments are obviously not aware of the provision for allowing extra time in such cases."

The public school-educated, Cambridge history graduate, now 52, has also come in for harsh words from those in the industry who would like to see new legislation on other aspects of the Latham report, such as trust funds and latent defects liability. The critics accuse him of changing his mind on support for these new laws. "I've done no U-turns at all," he says crossly. "I said last year that the most important thing was to get the proposed legislation into effect rather than to hanker after elements like trust funds that might be desirable but controversial.

"In my view, the real challenge for the industry is to make the new arrangements work. If they don't, we need to look again."

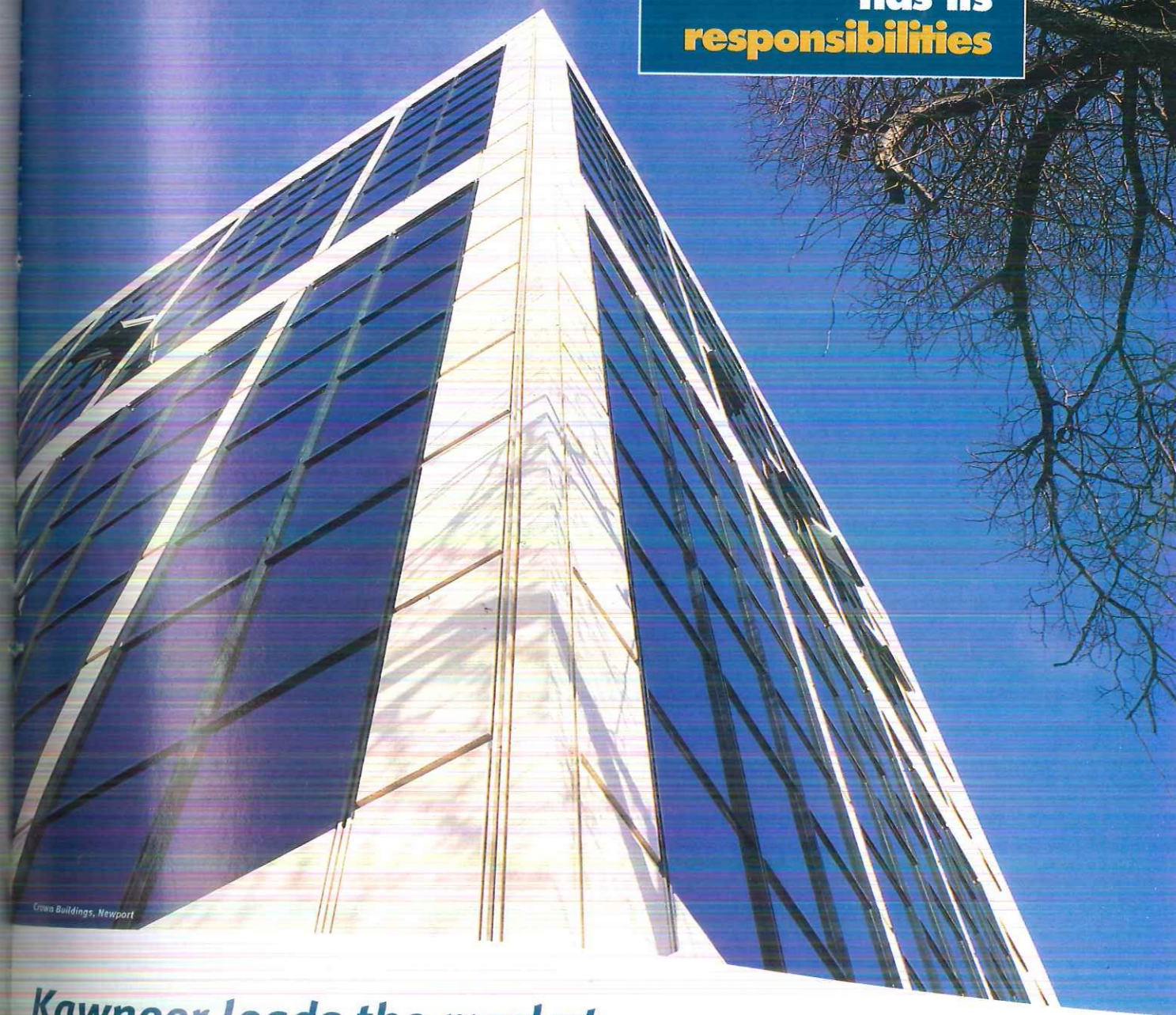
Overseeing the construction of the Millennium Dome is another controversial but clearly rewarding task. The Greenwich MP has been an unwavering friend of the project since its conception. "I expect a fundamental U-turn by those who have been negative about it. It's an extremely important showcase project of which the industry will be proud," he says.

As to how beneficial Eland House will be to the reputation of the industry, the jury is still out. Meanwhile, Raynsford amuses himself with his own less-than-serious theory on why it is impossible to have a cradle up to clean the windows. The automatic blinds that cut out glare might decapitate the window cleaner, he says.

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