

London Fire Brigade interviewed under caution by police over Grenfell Tower fire

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24 September 2019

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) have confirmed that they have been interviewed under caution by the Metropolitan Police as part of the ongoing police investigation into the Grenfell Tower fire.

The devastating inferno killed 72 men, women and children in June 2017, and left hundreds more homeless and deeply traumatized.

According to the LFB, it voluntarily gave a number of interviews to the police, who are investigating the fire service as a corporate body in relation to the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. After the LFB revealed it had been questioned, the Met confirmed last week that the total number of police interviews under caution in relation to the Grenfell Tower fire stood at 17.

Commenting on the police probe, LFB Commissioner Dany Cotton said: “As the fire and rescue service attending the Grenfell Tower fire it is entirely correct that we are part of the investigation. Hundreds of firefighters, officers and control officers have already provided voluntary police interviews and we will continue to do all we can to assist investigators.”

She continued: “The bereaved, survivors and residents need answers and we must all understand what happened and why, to prevent communities and emergency services from ever being placed in such impossible conditions ever again.”

The LFB has come under immense pressure from the powers that be and right-wing media since the fire, with a concerted campaign to demonise and scapegoat the fire service for its adherence to a “stay-put” policy at Grenfell. During the initial stages of the fire, the LFB told Grenfell tower residents to remain in their flats and await rescue. For this it is set to face “withering criticism” from the official public inquiry into the fire, announced inquiry chairman Sir Martin Moore-Bick in May.

That the LFB is questioned at this juncture—when not a single person in political and corporate circles has yet to be arrested and charged in relation to the deaths—only confirms that the ruling elite is aiming to shift the blame for the

catastrophic fire away the criminal negligence of the council, its Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) that managed the building, and the various corporations that turned a safe building into a death trap during a “refurbishment.”

To focus predominantly on alleged LFB management failings ignores numerous factors that contributed to the fire brigade being totally unprepared for the Grenfell fire, the scale of which was unlike anything London firefighters had ever dealt with before.

The LFB does have questions to address. The dangers of flammable cladding—which turned a small kitchen fire at Grenfell into an inferno that engulfed the entire building—have been known for many years, including by the LFB. Questions need to be answered about the “stay put” strategy and its implementation. Historically this policy was generally successful—before the advent of the mass cladding of buildings in highly flammable materials and myriad cuts in deregulation that made building interiors inherently unsafe.

In the first instance, the LFB was overstretched due to massive underfunding and cost cutting. Since 2008, funding cuts made the situation facing LFB a ticking time bomb, with then Conservative Mayor of London Boris Johnson, now prime minister, slashing £29 million in 2013 alone. As a result, by the time of the Grenfell fire it was no longer even policy to send, as routine, an aerial ladder to high-rise fires.

Secondly, the LFB’s use of the standard “stay put” policy was based on the premise that high-rise buildings, such as Grenfell Tower, are built to be compartmentalized as a series of concrete boxes that, if correctly constructed and maintained, are isolated from each other, preventing the spread of fire.

However, this principle had been fatally compromised in Grenfell Tower because of the application of the highly flammable cladding and insulation on its exterior and the state of the building internally, which was unsafe and did not even have a central alarm system or sprinklers. This put

firefighters in a near impossible situation, as they bravely tried to combat a rapidly spreading inferno which they had virtually no chance of bringing under control. Whatever the failures of management at LFB, firefighters were in no way responsible for the terrible death and destruction, as many Grenfell campaigners regularly attest.

The focus on the LFB's role in Grenfell conceals the fact that all the main factors that ensured such a horrific loss of life were present long before June 14, 2017. The investigation and Moore-Bick's parallel public inquiry are not aimed at revealing the truth but concealing it. They do not intend to hold the guilty to account, but to protect the criminals in central and local government and the corporate entities who bear direct responsibility for the deaths.

No further details have been disclosed by the police as to the identities of any of the other people or organisations who have been interviewed. The fact that LFB has been questioned only came to light because the fire service chose to make this information public, "in accordance with its [LFB's] commitments to transparency and to assisting [the investigation] in every way possible to prevent such a devastating fire from ever happening again," an LFB statement reads.

It remains unclear whether the other Met interviews have been conducted with multiple separate individuals, or if any of them hold positions of responsibility in the RBKC, the KCTMO, or in companies such as Rydon and Harley Facades, which oversaw and installed the flammable cladding resulting in the rapid spread of a small fire.

Other than a pro forma statement from the police declaring that the interviews relate to possible offences of gross negligence manslaughter, corporate manslaughter and health and safety breaches, no specific information has even been revealed about what these individuals or companies are being questioned in relation to. The Met have said only that just over 7,100 statements have been taken from witnesses, community and family members, emergency services personnel and others as part of its probe.

The slower than glacial pace of the police investigation into 72 deaths continues to beggar belief, with Matt Bonner, the senior investigating officer of Operation Northleigh—the name of the Grenfell investigation—stating last week, "I expect that this number [of interviews] will continue to rise in the forthcoming weeks and months as further progress is made."

More than 27 months on from the fire, not a single arrest has been made in relation to the social murder of so many people, let alone charges laid against any of the individuals or companies who bear direct responsibility for the catastrophe.

Nor are any likely to be if the ruling elite and its

institutions get their way. In March, the Met confirmed that they will not even consider pressing any charges regarding the deaths until "the latter part of 2021." They justified this by citing the need to wait for the government inquiry into Grenfell to complete its business.

However, the conclusion of the inquiry could be many years down the line. In May, another six-month delay to the inquiry was announced, with the publication of the first-phase report—initially tipped for release in spring this year—postponed until at least October. The second phase, dealing with the construction and refurbishment of Grenfell Tower and the circumstances and decisions leading up to the disaster, will not even begin to take evidence until 2020 and it could then last years.

The inquiry has been repeatedly pushed back, with initial assurances that an interim report would be presented in the months after the fire. This was reneged on. A pledge that there would be a report produced by Easter last year was scrapped as hearings did not even begin until June 2018. Supposedly insurmountable barriers to the efficient progression of the inquiry and the police investigation are repeatedly thrown up to justify endless delays and to avoid any conclusions being drawn or charges being laid.

The "criminal investigation" is a rotten charade and co-operation should be withdrawn from a public inquiry that, given its remit and strictly limited powers to do anything, can produce nothing but a cover-up.

All those culpable in the crime of social murder at Grenfell Tower must be immediately arrested, charged and brought to justice.

* Justice for Grenfell means no cover-up and no inquiry whitewash!

* Arrest the political and corporate criminals responsible!

* Stop scapegoating the firefighters!

* Quality public housing is a social right!

* For an emergency multibillion-pound public works programme to build schools, hospitals, public housing and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century!

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