

Grenfell Tower fire public inquiry delivers its final whitewash

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More than six years after it opened, and seven years, two months and 21 days after the Grenfell tower inferno in London took the lives of 72 men, women and children, the public inquiry into this atrocity delivered its final report.

As was only to be expected from a state-sanctioned inquiry, the 1,700-page document is a whitewash. A few slapped wrists are administered to the companies involved, and governments going back to 1991 admonished for not learning the lessons of previous fires, and for their “decades of failure” over the issue of public buildings being clad in flammable material.

The first phase of proceedings, which reported its findings in October 2019, had a remit to investigate what caused the fire, concluding—as everyone already knew, even in the hours while the fire was still smouldering—that flammable cladding was chiefly responsible for the ferocity and speed of the blaze.

Just as two years were not required to establish that fact, neither were a further four required to establish the “root causes of the fire”, or how and why Grenfell Tower was transformed from a safe 1970s-built residential high-rise into a death trap by June 14, 2017.

The victims of Grenfell Tower died as the result of an act of social murder whose architects were companies aiming to cut costs in their refurbishment of the 24-storey building. Their accomplices were successive Conservative and Labour governments who deregulated the building industry on behalf of the capitalist class and created the lax environment for private profiteers to take advantage of.

As a result, a small fire that broke out behind a fridge in a fourth-floor flat was spread through a highly combustible cladding system to the 24th floor in around 30 minutes.

Sir Martin Moore-Bick, the chair of the inquiry and pillar of the British establishment—a former Lord Justice of Appeal and member of the Privy Council—said in the politest terms as he introduced the report, “The simple truth is the deaths were all avoidable and those who lived in the tower were badly failed.”

Belying its tame conclusions, much of the evidence compiled is utterly damning.

The refurbishment and cladding companies engaged in “deliberate and sustained strategies to manipulate the testing processes, misrepresent test data and mislead the market”. There was “systematic dishonesty” from the companies, resulting in hazardous materials being applied to the block.

Rydon, the main contractor in charge of the refurb, gave

“inadequate thought to fire safety, to which it displayed a casual attitude” and “failed to take proper steps to investigate [construction company] Harley’s competence ... it was complacent about the need for fire engineering advice”.

Arconic, the firm that manufactured the Grenfell Tower cladding, “deliberately concealed” the danger of the panels used on the tower. Celotex, which supplied most of the insulation, “embarked on a dishonest scheme to mislead customers”. The inquiry concluded that Kingspan knew its insulation product failed fire safety tests “disastrously” but continued to sell it for use in high-rise buildings.

The inclusion for blame in the inquiry report of the London Fire Brigade alongside these utter criminals is an outrage. From the outset, the inquiry has attempted to shift at least some of the blame in this way.

According to the report, the LFB did not learn the lessons from the Lakanal tower block fire of 2009, meaning there were “shortcomings in its ability to fight fires in high-rise buildings.” But as the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in response to the first phase, whatever mistakes of judgement were made on the night by the LFB, they were produced by years of cuts to the fire service and the impossible situation created at Grenfell by the private contractors.

In November 2016—eight months before the fire—the Grenfell Action Group, with Edward Daffarn and Francis O’Connor playing a leading role, issued a blog post sounding the alarm, “It is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO [Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation], and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders”.

They predicted, “Unfortunately, the Grenfell Action Group have reached the conclusion that only an incident that results in serious loss of life of KCTMO residents will allow the external scrutiny to occur that will shine a light on the practices that characterise the malign governance of this non-functioning organisation ...”

Moore-Bick’s response to this tragically prophetic warning says everything about the savage instincts of the British ruling class which the inquiry is supposed to conceal. He writes, “The TMO regarded some of the residents as militant troublemakers led on by a handful of vocal activists, principally Edward Daffarn, whose style they found offensive,” adding, “The result was a toxic

atmosphere fuelled by mistrust on both sides.”

What a filthy slander. There is no equivalence whatsoever between a campaign demanding that the basic safety and wellbeing of tenants be respected, and a management organisation indifferent to their concerns.

While naming in the vaguest terms “the government” as among those who “failed” the Grenfell victims, survivors and bereaved, Moore-Bick is at pains to avoid naming individuals responsible. The report states, “In the years between the fire at Knowsley Heights in 1991 and the fire at Grenfell Tower in 2017 there were many opportunities for the government to identify the risks posed by the use of combustible cladding panels and insulation, particularly to high-rise buildings, and to take action in relation to them.”

The report points to instances whereby the Blair Labour government (in 1999) and later Tory governments took actions creating the environment in which a Grenfell-type event was all but inevitable, yet the key actors in those governments, including Blair, Theresa May, and David “I will kill off safety culture” Cameron, are not held to account in any way.

One of the main political pyromaniacs responsible for Grenfell is Boris Johnson, the former Tory Mayor of London (2008-2016) and later prime minister. In 2013, Johnson infamously replied to a question put to him by the London Assembly member over cuts to fire services: “Will you accept responsibility in a criminal court when people die as a result of your cuts?” with “Get stuffed!” Protesting firefighters were present in the audience. The following year, 10 fire stations were closed in the capital and nearly 600 firefighters’ jobs lost.

Yet Johnson—who as prime minister could not contain his contempt for the safety and lives of millions of people during the height of the COVID pandemic, declaring, “Let the bodies pile high in their thousands!”—is not mentioned once in the entirety of the phase two report.

Former resident Natasha Elcock, who lost her uncle in the fire, read a statement on behalf of Grenfell United, which represents some of the affected families. They were “failed by calculated dishonesty and greed”, she said. “Above all, the judge concludes what we already knew. Every single loss of life that night was avoidable. Human life was never a priority, and we lost friends, neighbours and loved ones in the most horrific way—from greed, corruption, incompetence and negligence.”

The statement continued, “But justice has not been delivered. ... The system isn’t broken, it was built this way.”

Calling on Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour government to implement the recommendations which were “already three decades too late”, the group concluded, “We have an expectation that the Met Police and the CPS [Crown Prosecution Service] ensure that those who are truly responsible are held to account and brought to justice.”

In Parliament, Starmer issued a handwringing “apology on behalf of the British state,” saying, “It should never have happened.” But the extent of his action was to promise that the report’s 58 safety recommendations would be considered and to write to the companies involved in making Grenfell unsafe as a first step to ensuring they are awarded no more public sector contracts.

That they have continued to receive such contracts since the fire, further piling up their profits, is sickening. In total, these deals, including work for housing associations, have been worth £250 million over the last five years.

Across the country, just 1,088 of 4,374 buildings with dangerous cladding have been fixed with remedial work, leaving many thousands of people in death traps.

Maria Jafari, from the Grenfell Next of Kin group who lost her father, Ali Yawar Jafari, in the fire, was in tears as she denounced the inquiry report. “Seven years have passed, and we still have no justice and we have to fight again. I don’t know how many more years it’s going to take and nobody knows if we’re going to be alive for the justice.”

Hisam Choucair, who lost six family members in the fire, said, “This inquiry was forced on us ... For me, as a direct kin, this inquiry hasn’t taught me anything. In fact, it’s delayed the justice my family deserves.”

Shah Aghlani, who lost his mother and aunt at Grenfell, said of the inquiry, “If somebody wanted to create a system that prevents justice you could not have created a better system than what is in place now.”

These feelings of opposition to the entire official set-up—part of a carefully orchestrated response by the ruling elite to protect those responsible for the fire—will only grow.

Called by Theresa May’s Tory government, utilising the 2005 Inquiries Act enacted by the Blair government, the Grenfell Inquiry had “no power to determine, any person’s civil or criminal liability.” To date, not a single person has been arrested and charged by the Metropolitan Police, despite everyone knowing who the guilty parties are. After the inquiry handed down its report, the Metropolitan Police reiterated what it said months ago: that it must now take another 12-18 months to complete its own investigation, requiring it to consider Moore-Bick’s findings “line by line”.

The Socialist Equality Party, which called on the families and residents not to co-operate with Moore-Bick’s cover-up inquiry, demands that this drawn-out denial of justice be brought to an end and those responsible in corporate and political circles be arrested, charged and prosecuted for one of the landmark crimes of modern British history.



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