

A tragedy waiting to happen: alarm system non-existent in Australian backpacker hostel fire

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A Brisbane magistrate yesterday said that there was sufficient evidence to commit Robert Long to trial for arson and two counts of murder over the Palace Backpackers Hostel fire which took the lives of 15 young people last year in Queensland. Long, a 37-year-old itinerant fruit picker and former hostel resident, who has serious psychological problems, pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Magistrate Michael Halliday said he would reserve his decision until next week and allowed Long's lawyer, Craig Chowdhury, to call three witnesses before adjourning the nine-day committal hearing until Monday.

While media reports have focused on testimony from police, hostel residents and prisoners suggesting Long was responsible, the hearing has revealed that hostel managers turned off fire alarms before the tragic blaze. Above all, evidence at the committal highlights the fact that the 98-year-old timber hostel was a death trap with no basic safety standards. Those killed had no chance of escape; those who survived are lucky to be alive.

Childers' backpacker hostel, one of many ageing and unsafe buildings across Australia converted into cheap accommodation for young tourists and itinerant agricultural workers, was filled to capacity when the fire broke out just after midnight on June 23. Fire engulfed the wooden structure within 15 minutes of breaking out on the ground floor. The first call to the fire brigade was at 12.32 am and although firemen arrived six minutes later they were unable to prevent the death of 15 residents trapped inside.

The building accommodated 88 people in two and three-tiered bunks in small rooms with no fire extinguishers or sprinkler system. Fourteen of the victims were trapped in two adjoining rooms whose only exit led to a smoke-filled narrow staircase. Ten unsuccessfully tried to escape through a barred window after being blocked access to an exit by bunks.

Greg Reynolds, Queensland's coordinator of fire investigations, told the court the building was still smoldering when he arrived more than eight hours after the fire. He said temperatures in the upper level of the building would have reached between 450 and 500 degrees Celsius at the height of the blaze.

Five of the survivors told the hearing they were given no instructions on evacuation or fire safety procedures after checking into the hostel and that rules about smoking in the building were regularly broken.

Lauren Morris said she heard no smoke alarms but was woken by the sound of crackling and breaking glass. Dion O'Brien, from New Zealand, and Australian Darren Cameron, who were in a downstairs dormitory, also said they awoke to the sounds of breaking glass and explosions. When they tried to escape through the only fire exit, they found it blocked by a heavy bunk bed.

O'Brien, who gave his evidence over the telephone from Childers, told the court after moving the bed they had to unlock a double door. "I'm a

big guy and we had to use a lot of force [to open the door]," he said. He then helped kick down a padlocked gate that was stopping "yelling and screaming" backpackers from getting out of an alley next to the burning building.

Fire investigator Terry Casey, who was hired by solicitors acting for the insurers of the backpacker hostel, told the court the speed and intensity of the fire made it unlikely that an electrical malfunction or smoldering cigarette had caused the blaze. Long's lawyer, Craig Chowdhury, claimed this conclusion was based on conflicting evidence from traumatised witnesses. Under cross-examination by Chowdhury, Casey admitted that he could not rule out an electrical fault.

Sergeant Bob Graham, a police forensic officer, testified he had not been able to determine the cause of the fire but that his tests showed no accelerants were used to start the blaze.

Allan Faulks, from the Queensland Department of Mines and Energy, told the hearing he had inspected the hostel's alarm system after the fire and discovered the key lock switch was in the off position. Faulks said the alarm was not properly connected to electrical mains and would have had to rely on a back-up battery even if switched on.

Electrician Geoff Jarrett told the court he had checked the fire alarm system in mid-May, after reports it was going off at random. He cleaned several smoke detectors and was satisfied it was in good working order. When the hostel managers told him the alarms were still going off, for no apparent reason, "I said I'd get around there as soon as I could [but] I forgot all about it."

On January 10 hostel manager, Christian Atkinson, testified that the fire alarm system had been turned off two and a half weeks before the fire, after a series of false alarms. Atkinson said he could not recall whether he or fellow manager, John Dobe, had switched off the system. Both managers contacted Jarrett about the fault but when he did not come to the hostel failed to remind him about the fault. On the night of the blaze they told fire brigade officers that the alarm system was faulty and not working.

Dr John De Haan, an American forensic expert, said the blaze had been caused by several fires lit around the same time in the television and lounge room of the hostel. He said the fire was most likely to have been started by direct ignition to furniture in the room by an open flame like a match, cigarette lighter or candle.

De Haan also told the court a number of those killed in one of the upstairs rooms were trapped by bunk beds blocking doors. "The first floor room where a number of the fatalities occurred, the north doors of that room, were blocked by bunk beds ... and prevented those doors from being used," he said.

Two hostel residents have made statements linking Long to the fire and other witnesses claim to have seen him in the building on the night of the

blaze.

British backpacker Lisa Duffy, 27, testified from England by telephone that Long told her he was dying of lung cancer and had considered killing himself, but had decided he would make the most of the time he had left.

Duffy said Long had a problem with one of the hostel owners and was talking about setting up a rival business. Long then asked her to leave the back fire escape open so he could get in to bash another man he did not like. Duffy also claimed Long had admitted to cutting a second set of keys to the hostel before handing his set in.

Aaron Ellmers, a New Zealand backpacker and former hostel resident, testified Long threatened to burn down the hostel with everyone inside, weeks before the blaze. Ellmers said Long had become increasingly aggressive and one night told him he (Long) should burn the place down “with all you people in there”, and he would set alight garbage bins inside the hostel and the place would go up “just like that”.

While Long is now expected to be put on trial, the committal hearing has revealed many unanswered questions.

John Lundgren, a hostel resident, told the court he saw Long, whom he used to call the “Lounge Lizard”, smiling at the top of the stairs and holding a yellow can or bottle pouring a liquid into an 80 centimetre-tall plastic rubbish bin less than two hours before the fire.

Lundgren said Long became angry when he saw the backpacker watching him and walked down the stairs. “I don't know what he said but he snarled at me,” Lundgren said. “As he walked down the stairs he said ‘Shut your window’ and then he walked further down the stairs and said, ‘I'm going to get you’.”

But Lundgren provided this information only 12 days before his court appearance and six months after the fire. In a questionnaire issued to backpackers by police immediately after the fire Lundgren said he had not seen anything unusual on the night of the blaze.

When asked by Chowdhury why he did not tell police about the incident earlier, Lundgren said he had been stressed and traumatised and had simply forgotten. Lundgren also denied he had made up the story so he could receive victim's compensation. Police interviewed Lundgren after a bus driver, who had heard about Lundgren's allegations from a number of backpackers, contacted them.

Long's defence lawyer has also contested testimony from Mark Harris, Tony Boswell and Owen Cumming—three prisoners from Queensland's Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre. The prisoners gave evidence that Long told them in the remand centre last October that he had lit the fire and made it impossible for the backpackers to escape from the hostel by blocking an exit door. Chowdhury has alleged the prisoners fabricated their stories to get an earlier release.

One of the three, Mark Harris, who is due to be sentenced on armed robbery charges later this month, said Long told him he had stacked wood and chairs against the door of the Palace hostel “so the people couldn't get out”. But police scientific officer Sergeant Rob Graham earlier told the hearing he had found no stacks of chairs against any doors in the hostel after inspecting the burned remains of the building.

Harris said he had taken notes in his cell after each conversation with Long. He allegedly told Long he would organise someone to carry out a copycat arson “as a favour”, suggesting a replica fire could be used in court to argue that another backpacker may have been involved in the hostel blaze. Harris claimed Long told him: “Light it under the stairs or below the stairs”.

When questioned as to why he decided to collect information about Long and propose a copycat arson, Harris said: “I've done this for myself in regards to being a better person and a bit more of a humanitarian... If I can bring a conviction about for 15 murders, I don't see why I shouldn't be recognised.”

The court was also told in legal argument during the first days of the

hearing that Long had confessed to lighting the fire after being arrested by Special Emergency Response Team (SERT) officers on the banks of the Burrum River, south of Childers, five days after the fatal blaze. Under questioning Acting Police Chief Superintendent Ken Benjamin defended the way police handled Long's arrest and denied they had not mounted a “mad manhunt”.

Evidence presented at yesterday's hearing, however, revealed Long's alleged confession was made after he had been attacked by a police dog, was involved in a violent scuffle with a SERT officer and then wounded from a series of gunshots fired by another SERT member.

One SERT officer claimed Long said: “I'm dying anyway I started that fire”, before losing consciousness. The alleged confession was written on the back of a \$10-note by the SERT officer who fired the shots and who told the court he did not have a police notebook available at the time.

Under questioning he agreed with Chowdhury that by aiming at the chest, a shooter was aiming to kill. He told the court that after Long's confession he told another officer that he thought he had killed him.

But testimony given late yesterday by three defence witnesses raised other questions.

Dr Habibullah Janshad Khursandi, an orthopedic surgeon who examined Long testified he did not believe he had been shot. The doctor said he had treated Long for cuts to the arm, knee and ear, and for wrist fractures.

Kevin White, the general manager of the Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre and Anthony Voss, centre operations manager, said Long had been in isolation in the hospital only until October 17. But the hearing was told Terry O'Gorman, Long's former lawyer, had specifically asked White to keep Long in isolation because he feared he could be “verballed” by other prisoners in the remand centre. When asked why this request was ignored White told the court lawyers were not consulted when prisoners were moved.

Whether the fire was deliberately lit or not, the evidence presented shows that the Palace Backpackers Hostel victims died in a building lacking the most rudimentary safety standards or fire fighting equipment. Hostel management had no intention of fitting a sprinkler system, failed to provide fire extinguishers, and turned off the alarm system rather than ensure that smoke detector problems were immediately repaired.

Six months after the tragic loss of 15 young lives and numerous statements of sympathy by various state and federal politicians little has changed in the backpacker hostel industry. On January 3, one day after the Brisbane committal hearing began, a small backpacker hostel accommodating 10 people in the Sydney suburb of Bondi reopened the same day it had been ordered shut by fire inspectors.

Fire Brigade Inspector Ray Manser told one newspaper that rooms in the building were “not compartmented” and fire would rapidly spread through the house. “The fire would go into the ceiling, go through the plaster and drop into the next room. Smoke drops down from the ceiling and it is within a foot of the floor in 35 seconds.”

Hostel manager Ross Booth, whose company bought the property two months ago, organised new short-term tenancy arrangements to bypass the closure order and reopen as “leased flats”, which have less stringent fire regulations than hostels. He denied there was any risk and said the hostel owners would be submitting a development application to the council to have it officially licensed for backpacker use.



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