UK government deregulation led to Grenfell Tower inferno

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The Grenfell Tower inferno reveals the appalling human cost of the UK's "light touch" regulation celebrated by successive Labour, Tory and Liberal Democrat governments.

For almost 40 years, the assault on health and safety regulations has gone hand in glove with Margaret Thatcher's notorious dictum that there is "no such thing as society."

One of Thatcher's first acts was to prevent local authorities from building homes on the grounds that the "market" would provide. This cleared the way for the huge growth in land and housing prices—and rampant speculation—that has turned London into the world's fifth most expensive city.

Accompanying this has been the dismantling of housing and planning regulations to reduce the cost "burden" to business.

In 1986, the Thatcher government scrapped the London Building Acts. This originated out of the Great Fire of London in 1666, which destroyed 80 percent of the city. Fully 70,000 of London's then 80,000 inhabitants lost their homes or premises. The exact loss of life is unknown.

According to the *Telegraph*, the Acts stipulated that "external walls must have at least one hour of fire resistance to prevent flames from spreading between flats or entering inside." But "those rules were replaced by the National Buildings Regulations and the crucial time stipulation was scrapped."

Grenfell Tower was completed in 1974 so its design was unaffected by this change. Significantly, however, the new regulations specified that external building materials would now only have to meet "Class O" regulations, and most crucially did not have to be non-combustible.

During a supposed refurbishment of the block in 2016, external cladding was added to improve the building's appearance when viewed from nearby luxury housing. A fire-resistant cladding option was rejected on the grounds of cost—a measly £5,000 difference. Moreover, it is reported that this combustible material was laid over the top of gas pipes.

Claims of ignorance as to the dangers posed do not wash. As far back as 1999, under Tony Blair's Labour government, parliament was informed of the potential risks of fire spreading via external cladding systems.

After the deaths of six people in the Lakanal House tower block fire in Camberwell, south London in 2009, the coroner, Judge Frances Kirkham, wrote to then-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Eric Pickles with recommendations including the installation of sprinkler systems. An estimated 4,000 tower blocks nationally were said to be at risk, with non-fire-resistant external panelling cited as a factor in the spread of fire.

Despite repeated assurances by former housing minister Gavin Barwell, now Theresa May's chief of staff, nothing was done. In 2014 then-Housing Minister Brandon Lewis rejected forcing construction companies to fit sprinkler systems, arguing, "The cost of fitting a fire sprinkler system may affect house building—something we want to encourage."

Only last year, fire chiefs wrote to local councils following an investigation into a fire at the Shepherd Court tower block, also in West London, in August. This had uncovered that external cladding helped the fire to spread. In its report into the blaze, Insurers RSA stated that flammable material in insulation panels "melts and ignites relatively easily" and can cause "extremely rapid fire spread and the release of large volumes of toxic smoke... This allows extensive and violent fire to spread, and makes firefighting almost impossible."

No action was taken.

This is not the result of "mistakes" and oversight. It is a deliberate policy. Consider the fact that only last year, the government junked the "expectation" that all new school buildings should be fitted with sprinklers. The expectation, which had been in force for only nine years, was not compulsory and was not retroactive, meaning that schools built before 2007 were exempt. Just 30 percent of new school buildings had actually obliged.

Sprinkler systems account for less than two percent of total construction costs. According to the Association of British Insurers, there had been 1,500 fires in schools and educational premises over that year. But even this was considered an unwelcome regulatory burden on corporations.

The dismantling of health and safety regulation was stepped up in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, which was used as an opportunity to further liberate big business from its regulatory shackles. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010 pledged a "one-in, one-out" rule, whereby no new regulation could be brought in unless another was junked.

Prime Minister David Cameron pledged, "I will kill off safety

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culture." Declaring "war" on the "excessive health and safety culture that has become an albatross around the neck of British businesses," he said, "We need to realise, collectively, that we cannot eliminate risk and that some accidents are inevitable."

Liberal Democrat Business Secretary in the coalition, Vince Cable, introduced a Cabinet "Star Chamber" charged with bringing "an end to the excessive regulation that is stifling business growth."

No less than two reviews were commissioned in two years to decide what regulations should be jettisoned, under Lord Young and Professor Löfstedt.

Cameron wrote to ministers in April 2011, "I want us to be the first government in modern history to leave office having reduced the overall burden of regulation, rather than increasing it."

The 21,000 statutory rules and regulations in force were to be slashed in half. All existing regulations were published on-line, sector-by-sector, with the invitation to "the public and interested parties" to say which should be scrapped.

Whereas in the past the assumption had been regulations should remain unless there was a "good case for getting rid of them," the government was changing "that presumption; we are changing the default setting," Cameron wrote.

Ministerial teams were held "personally accountable for the number of regulations contained within and coming out of departments, and the burden they impose… they must go, once and for all."

Cameron determined that "businesses will no longer have to report minor accidents; up to a million self-employed workers will be exempted from health and safety regulation completely; a new panel will give firms the right to challenge controversial inspection decisions; and from this month, the Health and Safety Executive begins the task of abolishing or consolidating up to half of existing regulations."

Corporations were no longer held to account automatically in the event of an accident, and insurers were instructed not to try to enforce "insane levels of compliance" on them.

In 2012, the "one in, one out" rule on deregulation became "one in, two out". By 2015, the government was celebrating that it had cut house-building regulations by 90 percent.

Following the Leave vote in last year's Brexit referendum, the financial oligarchy was salivating over the prospect of a "bonfire" of European Union regulation. The *Telegraph* celebrated Brexit as a "golden opportunity" "to get rid of as many regulations as possible."

"Free trade, competition and a state that sets light but well enforced rules: these are the best ways to ensure not only a healthy market but also a fair one," it pontificated.

Conservative ministers John Whittingdale and Michael Gove encouraged the Confederation of British Industry to draw up a list of regulations they wanted abolished or reformed.

May's so-called Brexit "Great Repeal Bill"—the transfer of EU-derived laws to UK bodies or ministers, provides for "Henry VIII clauses." These parliamentary procedures date back to the 16th century, when King Henry VIII effectively gave himself the powers to rule by decree. It enables ministers and civil servants to decide what regulations should be kept, amended or discarded without recourse to parliament.

John Longworth, former CBI director general urged the formation of another "Star Chamber" to oversee this process that is "not frightened to think the unthinkable."

As an indication of what is intended:

In January parliament voted down the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill. The Bill, which only applied to private households, sought to update 1957 legislation that required properties with an annual rent below £80 in London and £52 elsewhere to be fit for human habitation. The 1957 legislation was enforced against the background of notorious and ruthless slum landlord profiteers, such as Peter Rachman, who operated in the Notting Hill area, in which Grenfell Tower is located.

No homes in London now fall below that rental value. Still the Bill was rejected by a majority of 93, 72 of whom were private landlords, on the grounds that it would place "a huge burden" on landlords.

In February, the government celebrated the fruits of its anti-Red Tape challenge. Boasting that more than 2,400 pieces of regulation had been scrapped since the initiative began, it highlighted, "Businesses with good records have had fire safety inspections reduced from six hours to 45 minutes, allowing managers to quickly get back to their day job."

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