

Two weeks after London's Grenfell Tower inferno, real death toll still concealed by Tory government

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Anger is growing over the government cover-up of the true scale of the Grenfell Tower inferno in west London. Two weeks after the catastrophic fire, the final death toll has yet to be revealed. Officially, at least 79 people perished, but given that more than 500 people lived in the building, the reality is that many more died.

The police say that 18 bodies have been identified, while 61 corpses remain unidentified.

While a paltry £5 million has been allocated to the survivors of the fire, all those who have lost loved ones and their homes in the inferno received a kick in the teeth this week with the news that the queen is to receive an extra £6 million in public funds. The equivalent of an 8 percent pay increase, the queen's annual income from the Sovereign Grant in 2018/19 rises to £82.2 million.

The amount handed over by tax payers through the Grant has nearly trebled from £31 million to £82 million in just the last six years. The queen herself has wealth of more than £300 million, but the overall assets of the royal family are estimated to be in the tens of billions of pounds.

What makes this pay-out even more obscene is that it is specifically allocated to assist in paying for the ongoing £369 million 10-year refurbishment of the Queen's main London residence, the 775-room Buckingham Palace. Just 4.5 miles separate Grenfell Tower and Buckingham Palace geographically, but the distance in terms of class and wealth is galactic.

While Buckingham Palace is being upgraded, no expense is spared on the royals' other residences. Their latest accounts show that almost £1 million was spent just on ceiling inspections of royal households. Another £1.2 million was doled out last year to replace 20 bespoke doors on Windsor Castle's orangery! The latter amount alone is just short of the *entire* amount made available so far to the Grenfell survivors from the £5 million discretionary fund.

Grenfell Tower was a death trap in which working class inhabitants suffered and perished horrifically. The 24-storey

building had no sprinkler system, no central alarm system, just one exit stairwell and exposed gas pipes. If this wasn't enough to guarantee disaster, it was covered externally with combustible insulation and cladding, which allowed a small fire on the fourth floor to engulf the entire building in minutes, filling it with deadly toxic fumes and leaving many residents with zero chance of escape.

The queen and her family have no such fears at Buckingham Palace. According to a job description given out by palace authorities, the royal family has a dedicated team of "Fire Safety and Access Control Officers, responsible for all aspects of fire safety..." Part of the "Fire Surveillance duties" of team members is to "monitor and respond to automatic fire detection and alarm systems across a number of sites." The team members carry out "regular fire safety inspections" and are "trained to provide 24/7 first aid cover to staff and residents of the Royal Households based in London."

Not only are the authorities concealing the death toll in Grenfell Tower, they have not bothered to estimate the numbers of people ordinarily living in the block, much less ascertain if family and friends were staying with them, or if they had guests that evening.

This is not accidental. It expresses the ruling class' visceral hatred and contempt for the working class.

It has long been the case that the imperialist powers do not release figures on the numbers slaughtered in their wars of aggression overseas. As with the victims of their policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere, those killed in the Grenfell Tower fire are looked upon by the ruling class as "collateral damage."

In opposition to this, residents are seeking to establish these vital facts independently. The *Guardian* reported Wednesday that Sajad Jamalvatan, a biomedical engineering student who lived on the third floor of the block, "has established a Whatsapp community of 86 families who escaped from the block, calling the group Grenfell United."

He believes, the newspaper reports, “that the actual number [of dead] is likely to be above 120.” Another survivors’ group, Justice 4 Grenfell, is also attempting to establish the true number of those who died.

The names of just eight of the dead have thus far been released by the police—seven adults and one child. Another 10 people have been identified, including four women, four men, one boy and one girl, but these have not yet been named at the request of their families.

The named child is five-year-old Isaac Paulos. Details released by the coroner reveal some of the horror of that night. Isaac lived with his family on Grenfell’s 18th floor and was found on the 13th floor. He and his family had managed to escape their flat and make it down five flights of stairs, only to be overcome by the fumes of the inferno, which, we now know, included deadly hydrogen cyanide released into the building by the inflammable cladding. Isaac could be identified only by his dental records, with the preliminary cause of death recorded as inhalation of toxic fire fumes.

In response to protests by the local community, including the storming of Kensington Town Hall in an effort to get answers from council officials, the government of Theresa May announced a public inquiry into the fire. This is a means by which the government and guilty parties hope to cover up their criminality and avoid any action being taken against those responsible in central and local government and among their accomplices in big business.

Government inaction, combined with the callous refusal to guarantee the survivors of the fire that they will be properly rehoused in the borough, is fuelling mounting anger and defiance. On Wednesday during a TV interview, Housing Minister Alok Sharma was confronted by Grenfell fire survivor Oluwaseun Talabi and other north Kensington residents.

After Sharma committed only to rehousing survivors in temporary accommodation in the borough or a neighbouring one, Talabi approached him angrily. Talabi, who managed to escape with his family from the 14th floor, said, “Stop it, please. I am not moving my child from here to here to here to here. I want permanent accommodation. If I don’t get permanent accommodation, I’m not going to accept it. I am not going to take any house you give me, it has to be suitable... I was happy in my house. I work hard, I work hard, I had a good house.”

It is now abundantly clear that the dangers at Grenfell Tower are not exceptional, but extend across the country. When it became clear that at least 600 other high rise blocks across England and Wales were clad in the same or similar material as that used at Grenfell, the government announced that tests would be carried out to ascertain the risk.

By Wednesday morning, cladding on 120 tower blocks in 37 local authorities in England had failed fire safety tests. This is a 100 percent failure rate. May was forced to admit during Prime Minister’s Questions in parliament later in the day that the cladding installed on Grenfell “was not compliant with the building regulations.”

Yet no one has been arrested. This even as it becomes clear that not only residences, but also essential public services such as hospitals and schools, are similarly threatened.

The *Daily Telegraph* reported being informed by the National Fire Chiefs Council that 38 National Health Service (NHS) sites have “similar characteristics to those of Grenfell, with nine found to be at greatest risk.”

This raises the possibility that an already over-stretched NHS could be faced with having to move thousands of patients, many seriously ill, out of these buildings. Yet again, the full details of this potential catastrophe are being concealed. The *Telegraph* reported that neither the National Fire Chiefs Council, “nor NHS Improvement—the watchdog which carried out the exercise—would name the sites or provide details of the findings.”

The newspaper stated that last weekend’s government request that all hospitals with inpatients undergo safety checks within 36 hours had been “met with chaos, with fire chiefs saying they could not cope with the volume of work on top of other efforts to protect public safety in the wake of Grenfell.” The pro-Tory newspaper reported this without reference to the fact that 11,000 firefighters nationally have been cut as a consequence of austerity measures over the last decade.

On top of this, fully 30,000 schools are now under review for fire safety, as well as more than 17,000 care homes and private hospitals. A major factor in the use of such cheap and combustible material on schools and hospitals will undoubtedly prove to be the proliferation of lucrative Private Finance Initiative contracts, which have allowed corporations to rake in billions of pounds of public funds.



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