

The Grenfell fire: Class politics versus identity politics

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The most striking feature of the response from survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire and by local residents is the near universal understanding that this was a crime committed by the ruling class against the working class.

In the days and weeks after the fire, workers and young people of all nationalities, skin colours and religions have united to help victims and provide food, clothing, shelter and other support in the face of government inaction, callousness and indifference.

Last week, the police and local council called a public meeting at St Clements Church in yet another attempt to fob off local residents' demands that arrests be made. Outside the meeting, one resident summed up the anger: "There is no connection between the upper class and working class whatsoever, and that divide is getting bigger and bigger, and in Kensington and Chelsea it's the biggest divide you'll ever see."

This class approach is anathema to the various proponents of identity politics, who have for decades sought to filter every issue of British society through the prism of race, religion, gender and sexuality. Their deliberate effort to conceal the essential class questions and sow divisions within the working class while furthering their own careers is exemplified by their response to Grenfell.

Prime Minister Theresa May was forced to call a public inquiry in the face of widespread public anger at the massive loss of life. However, its purpose is to allow the Conservative government—in the time-honoured tradition of the British ruling elite—to mount a cover-up and ensure that those responsible evade justice. Appointed to lead the inquiry is the former High Court judge, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, who made clear that no serious investigation will be forthcoming when he stated: "I've been asked to undertake this inquiry on the basis that it would be pretty well limited to the problems surrounding the start of the fire and its rapid development, in order to make recommendations as to how this sort of thing can be prevented in the future."

May's public inquiry and its limited terms of reference have been widely denounced by Grenfell survivors and residents of the Lancaster West housing estate.

Moore-Bick's record in the judicial sanctioning of social cleansing policies means he is part of the very establishment whose assault on social housing tenants produced the fire that claimed so many lives. However, according to the BME [Black Minority Ethnic] Lawyers4Grenfell, an umbrella group that includes among others the Association of Muslim Lawyers, the Society of Black Lawyers, Operation Black Vote, NHS BME Network and Society of Asian Lawyers, a central problem with May's inquiry is Moore-Bick's skin colour.

The group has called on May to remove him and appoint someone with a background representing the "diverse" local population. In a press release issued by BMELawyers4Grenfell on July 3, Peter Herbert, Chair of the Society of Black Lawyers stated, "This government is well aware that the Grenfell community has lost confidence in the white male middle class model but continues to impose this in appointing a Chair who has little or no personal or professional insight into the cultural, religious, and

ethnic diversity represented by the Grenfell community."

BMELawyers4Grenfell were instrumental in arranging the Grenfell Tower meeting called by Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, Diane Abbott, on 29 June. The meeting was addressed by Abbott and David Lammy, two of Labour's most prominent black MPs, along with local Labour MP Emma Coad Dent, whose constituency includes Grenfell Tower, and shadow Justice Minister Richard Burgon.

One hundred and fifty survivors attended the meeting, and BMELawyers4Grenfell reported that "survivors, residents, family members and supporters denounced the abject failure of the Government and the local authority to provide answers, their repeated misinformation regarding rehousing of residents and the alleged support provided, and discussed a list of demands that remain unmet."

The overarching focus on race and religion, however, provided Abbott and Lammy with an opportunity to conceal the rotten political role of the Labour Party in helping to create the appalling social conditions that led to Grenfell—through its embrace of austerity and privatisation—as well as to aid party leader Jeremy Corbyn in his attempts to lend credence to May's bogus inquiry.

First, the meeting's recommendations became the basis for Corbyn sending a letter to May on how the inquiry could be reconfigured to lend it a much-needed veneer of credibility. Second, the press release suggested that the best way to lend the inquiry credibility was to incorporate various BME advocates into its proceedings.

The press release cites Ranjit Sond, President of the Society of Asian Lawyers, as insisting, "It must be noted that the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry and the Scarman Report only managed to build the confidence of the local community by conducting a detailed consultation *sitting as they did with a diverse panel of advisers who helped them develop the trust of the victims and survivors. The appointment of a diverse panel of experts that understands not only the surrounding technical matters, but the need of the local community is essential to the success of this Inquiry*" [emphasis added].

To underscore the message that a more diverse racial mix to the proceedings would help sell the inquiry to a sceptical and hostile population, Lammy told *Sky News* that Moore-Bick, "is a white, upper-middle class man... It is a shame we couldn't find a woman to lead this inquiry or indeed an ethnic minority to lead the inquiry in 2017."

The sole purpose of such rhetoric is to conceal the fact that May's inquiry, whatever the gender or ethnic background of the judge leading it, will be a political whitewash.

Within hours of the fire, and with only a small number of the dead identified, major efforts were already being made to make racism the central issue in the Grenfell tragedy. On June 15, the day after the fire, Skylar Baker-Jordan, Contributing Editor of *Gay UK Magazine*, wrote an article for the UK edition of the *Huffington Post*, set up by Arianna Huffington (estimated wealth \$35 million).

Baker-Jordan wrote, "Most of those who perished, or who lost

everything in the flames, were Black and Minority Ethnic people,” before having to acknowledge “and they were all poor (the nature of living on a council estate).”

Addressing the social cleansing in London, he continued this theme saying such policies meant the “poor (who are often, though not always, BME) are pushed out of quality housing in favour of regenerating the city for affluent and largely white renters and buyers.”

After stating that there are “loads of poor white people too,” he continued, “But studies have shown that whilst 20% of white people are low income, this number increases for ethnic minorities.”

Baker-Jordan insisted, “In the case of Grenfell Tower, we can’t ignore the presence of so many poor BME people,” asserting that it confirms “the local government and parliament cares more about rich white people than poor Black and Brown people,” etc., etc.

All of which is to conceal the fundamental class divide.

In central London, around half of all housing, much of it luxury apartments and town houses, is owned by overseas investors, many of them absentee. Kensington and Chelsea Council could not care less what the colour of the skin of these super-rich residents is, or whether the poor are white, black or Asian.

Baker-Jordan’s piece was then cited in the *Guardian* on July 6 by Kevin Gulliver, a leading identity politics advocate. His article was headlined, “Britain’s housing crisis is racist—we need to talk about it.” It states that 36 percent of people accepted as statutorily homeless in England during 2016-17 “were from a BME background.”

While this is a higher proportion than the presence of ethnic minorities in the general population, the most basic fact to be drawn from this statistic is that 64 percent of those accepted as homeless—almost two thirds—are not BME and that homelessness hits the working class and poor of whatever ethnic background.

Gulliver continues, “What is surprising is how little this disproportionate level of housing need on racial grounds has registered in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire, where the majority of residents were from a BME background.”

He notes favourably the proliferation of BME community-controlled housing associations since 1986, which “continue to play a small but crucial role in offering alternative housing solutions to BME communities.”

However, he asserts, “despite these advances, race remains a defining characteristic in the nation’s housing system.”

The attempt to portray the housing crisis as the product of racism is reactionary and divisive. The lack of decent, affordable social housing for the working class is the result not of skin colour, but of the stranglehold of the capitalist class over society’s resources.

But for those who promote identity politics over class, real material interests are at stake. Among the central preoccupations of the upper middle-class layers who utilise issues of race and gender—regardless of whether they themselves are black or white, male or female—are the rewards to be made from being part of this milieu.

BME Housing organisations were initiated under the Thatcher government following the Brixton riots in 1981. A report handed down by Lord Scarman in November of that year recommended a series of measures, including the recruitment of ethnic minorities into the police force and other forms of “positive discrimination”. Today there are 70 BME Housing organisations nationally. Yet the housing crisis for every section of the working class is worse than ever.

Gulliver is the Director of the Human City Institute (HCI), one of the compilers of a June 2017 publication of BMENational—the representative body for BME housing organisations. The Human City Institute web site notes, “Since HCI was re-shaped as a research charity and think-tank in 2008, it has undertaken work valued at more than £1.5m in cash and ‘in kind’, with income from sponsors, grant-making trusts, public bodies and

sales.”

Their document, “Deep Roots, Diverse Communities, Dedicated Service: The Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Housing Sector’s Offer,” boasts:

“Black and Minority (BME) housing sector is a small but crucial and influential element in the make-up of the housing market in England. It houses almost 250,000 people in 66,000 homes, representing about 3% of the social housing stock.” It adds, “The sector has been active for more than three decades, supported by governments of all political stripes...”

The report continues, noting that the “BME housing sector works with more than 1,000 public, private and third sector partners to provide housing, for community investment and to promote community cohesion.” These partnerships, it states, “are most frequent in Greater London, where forty-three BME housing organisations of all shapes and sizes manage 20,650 homes.”

Currently, 70 associations manage “66,000 homes, with an estimated annual turnover of £600m and controlling assets valued at around £1.8bn.”

Last October, Gulliver wrote on the *24housing* web site, “Over the next ten years, the BME housing association-controlled stock could reasonably expect to expand by net 15,000 homes, including shared ownership and starter homes as well as social and affordable rent. This would see stock growth of about one quarter, or 2 to 3 per cent each year.”

Control over these assets means that involvement in such associations offers a very comfortable lifestyle—for some.

There are 3,500 people employed directly by the 70 associations—one for every 20 or so houses managed, with those at management level earning a tidy sum. One of the 70 organisations, Arawak Walton, boasts that it is the “largest independent black and minority ethnic (BME) Housing Association in the North West, with an asset base of around £57 million and turnover in the region of £5 million.” Employing 26 office staff, its accounts for the year ending March 2016 show that two of its full-time officers took home between £60,000 and £70,000, while another was paid between £90,000 and £100,000.

The BME sector has been supported by successive Conservative-led and Labour governments precisely because it pits BME workers against white workers in a scramble for an ever-dwindling stock of substandard social housing.

The demand that racial discrimination in housing is answered by policies based on “positive discrimination” or “affirmative action” only reinforces racial divisions and cuts across the necessary struggle for the provision of housing as social right for all. This demand, to be realised through a unified struggle and against the advocates of racial politics, is the answer the working class must give to the Grenfell Tower inferno.



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