

Council condemned for “disgusting” treatment of Grenfell fire survivors

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Hundreds of protesters demanding justice for those killed in the Grenfell fire, including survivors, protested outside Kensington Town Hall Wednesday evening as representatives of the Kensington and Chelsea Council sat in full session for the first time since the June 14 inferno.

Protesters brought homemade banners with slogans including, “Justice for Grenfell—We Demand the Truth.” A large banner read, in reference to the Conservative-run council, “The Royal Murderers of Kensington and Chelsea” (the area is a royal borough).

A heavy police and security guard presence was mobilised outside and inside the council hall, part of moves by council officials to try to ensure that as few as possible would be able to enter and observe proceedings.

Last month, then Conservative council leader Nicholas Paget-Brown attempted to ban survivors, local residents and the media from attending the first meeting of the council to be held since the fire. Paget-Brown insisted that to allow the public entry would “likely result in disorder” and closed the meeting down within minutes.

The latest attempt to silence growing hostility to the council and police—who continued to drip-feed information about their “criminal investigation”—was opposed by protesters who demanded that more survivors be allowed in.

The public gallery of the council chamber was packed with about 70 survivors and an additional room was set aside for another 150 people from the local community. They spoke of the “disgusting” treatment being meted out to the “forgotten” survivors of the fire.

The meeting saw Elizabeth Campbell formally elected as council leader, following the resignation of Paget-Brown last month. Shouts of “Murderers,”

“Shame on you” and “Resign” echoed from the public gallery as councillors raised their hands in support of her appointment. One survivor, Mahad Egal, described the inhumane treatment of survivors by the council since the fire and told Campbell, “You’ve let the dead down. Now you’re going to come for the living ... step down and resign.”

Campbell could hardly be heard and had to stop several times as she declared, “We meet at a time of unimaginable grief and sorrow. The Grenfell fire is the biggest civilian disaster in this country for a generation. ... I am truly sorry that we did not do more to help you when you needed it the most.”

These are crocodile tears. During her time as Cabinet Member for Family and Children’s Services (May 2013 to May 2017), Campbell oversaw a one-third cut in the department’s budget, which included the axing of after-school and holiday care for the most vulnerable children.

She employed similar insincere, scripted words following the disastrous cost-cutting exercise involving the outsourcing of school transport in 2014, declaring, “It is upsetting that so many have had cause for complaint. We are driving very hard to bring things up to the expected standard and nothing short of that will be acceptable.” She added, “I want to apologise to those service users who have been affected and hope they will recognise that our intentions are honourable.”

Due to the anger and outrage of residents at the council, Labour Party opposition leader Robert Atkinson put on a left face—repeating the call for commissioners to take over the running of the council, which the Labour Kensington MP Emma Dent Coad branded “not fit for purpose.”

Several motions proposed by councillors were due to be discussed, including a petition by more than 1,500

people for the entire leadership of Kensington and Chelsea Council to resign.

However, where Labour councils are in power, austerity and cost-cutting have been just as ruthless as anything carried out by the Tories. Moreover, Labour are fully behind Prime Minister Theresa May's bogus public inquiry, which is aimed at ensuring a cover-up, with those responsible in ruling circles evading justice.

Behind Campbell's handwringing, the council's contempt for the survivors of Grenfell and local residents is revealed in the fact that only a fifth of the survivors have been temporarily rehoused. Despite Campbell acknowledging that the council, located in the wealthiest area of London, has a spending reserve of £274 million, she said that just 400 social houses will be acquired or built in the borough in the next five years, the equivalent of 80 a year.

Campbell and the other Tory councillors refused to stand down and, under conditions of a local and national crisis, began an extended summer's vacation with the full council not scheduled to meet again until October 25.

A number of survivors and other local residents were allowed to address the meeting.

An Iranian woman held up the key to her 10th floor Grenfell Tower flat as she declared, "I'm here to represent those who died innocently and they are powder now—the bodies' powder. And those survivors who are burning inside themselves ... nobody hears them and nobody listens to them.

"They say they understand us but the truth of the matter is they don't. Every time I look at this key I ask, what is the difference between us human beings? Why do you judge people because of what they've got—their wealth? Why don't you care about human beings right here?"

A woman who said her young niece had died in the fire explained that members of her family were unable to speak in public because "their pain is too huge" and that councillors should be "embarrassed" by their "totally inadequate" response.

She was backed up by several Grenfell residents who recounted the terrible treatment they have received since the fire. One said he had been consigned to a hotel room with just one double bed for him, his wife and three children. "I was forgotten about" by the authorities, he explained. "You know who's done

something for us? The residents of north Kensington. Our community. Our neighbours."

Another said the way the fire victims' families had been treated was "disgusting," declaring, "We've been swept under the carpet."

One man said the families of the deceased "are being treated like cattle."

The ongoing trauma suffered by the local population was evident as the meeting ended abruptly due to a resident, who had just finished speaking, collapsing to the ground. According to the *Evening Standard*, "A female companion said that she had collapsed multiple times since the fire."



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