

Grenfell Tower fire survivors reject local authority, police cover-up

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Survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire responded with contempt to Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council (RBKC) leader Elizabeth Campbell and Metropolitan Police representatives at a meeting held Wednesday evening at Notting Hill Methodist Church.

What was described as a “community public meeting” was the fourth of the Grenfell Response Unit to be held over the last month. The Unit was set up by Theresa May’s Conservative government, supposedly to keep survivors and local residents informed of the measures being taken in the aftermath of the fire. Instead it has been used as a means of dissipating anger, while the authorities do nothing of significance to alleviate suffering or to bring the guilty to account.

Representatives of the Met have attended every one of the meetings to provide updates on their criminal investigation, but have refused to provide any details whatsoever. Six weeks after the fire, not a single person has been charged, let alone arrested, for a crime in which at least 80 people died a terrible death.

This time, Kensington and Chelsea’s Police Commander Ellie O’Connor stated that all information was *sub judice*. O’Connor said the police were maintaining that around 80 people had died, “because that’s what we believe. We do say it might go up, but we don’t believe it will go up substantially.”

Residents decried the refusal of the platform to provide any further information on the fatality figure. Ramiro Urbano, whose 12-year-old daughter Jessica perished in the fire, said, “Why are you so scared of going beyond that number? For us, the figures don’t add up.”

Another asked if the figure of 80 was being maintained because the police feared the social consequences of admitting that the number who died was higher than the 96 who were crushed to death at

Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield in 1989, as the result of police decisions.

Campbell and other councillors present are entirely insulated from the social catastrophe they inflicted on a working class population, which they want to see driven out of the borough.

Earlier this month, Campbell was forced to admit, “I’ve never been inside a high-rise building.” Campbell and her husband, Colin, a property developer, own a family home in an affluent area near King’s Road in Chelsea, estimated to be worth £6 million.

On Tuesday, London’s *Evening Standard* revealed that she also owns a £1 million second home on the Isle of Wight. The riverside property was “originally bought through a family trust and a company registered to an offshore tax haven.” The farmhouse, located in the village of Hamstead, was bought in 1996 “by Ridewell Holdings Limited, a company based in the British Virgin Islands,” the newspaper reported. Ridewell Holdings Limited was, in turn, “owned by a family trust set up by the Kensington and Chelsea council leader’s late father. The property was kept in the fund for more than two decades.”

Campbell and her husband are connected to the highest echelons of the British ruling elite. The *Standard* reported that the Isle of Wight property is “20 miles west along the coast from the Royal Yacht Squadron, a club founded in London in the 1800s for which Mrs. Campbell’s husband, Colin, is a listed director.”

Founded in 1815, the Royal Yacht Squadron (RYS) is one of the most prestigious upper-class institutions in the world. It has the Queen as its patron, enabling its invitation-only members to fly the White Ensign of the Royal Navy. The RYS boasts of the “unbroken royal

association with the Squadron,” with the club’s home, Cowes Castle, “built in 1539 as part of Henry VIII’s chain of coastal defences, protecting the Island from invasion and the naval dockyard at Portsmouth from attack.”

In her comments to the meeting, Campbell said that although the council’s initial response to the fire had been “shameful,” this was now being rectified. The council had bought over 100 “units” of accommodation of various types, she claimed, and these would be offered as social housing to those made homeless.

Over 1,000 properties in the borough are currently uninhabited, many of them owned by the wealthy.

Survivors have been offered inferior accommodation to that in which they lived at Grenfell Tower. Moreover, hundreds of homeless residents—the vast majority forced to live, weeks later, in cramped conditions in hotels with their entire families—also complain they are being offered alternative accommodation outside the borough. This is why, despite the council’s claim that it has made 169 offers of accommodation, just 44 have been accepted and only 11 households actually rehoused.

The callous attitude of the council was summed up by RBKC deputy leader Kim Taylor-Smith. He regaled the meeting with complaints that the hostile attitude expressed by local residents was affecting his delicate nature. “I’ve heard many people asking me to resign,” he said. After the recent full council meeting he was “asked that same question; resign, resign, resign.” He then shouted at those heckling him, “You can shout as much as you like. ... Shouting is not going to help.” The council was having trouble rehousing former Grenfell residents because it had to “go at the speed” of residents, he complained.

One of those Taylor-Smith included in his rant was Ramiro Urbano, who walked out as a result of his treatment. In response, a volunteer stood up and denounced the Tory in an impassioned statement: “You’ve just spoken to that gentleman who lost his child. You look like you’re fed up. Can you imagine how everyone else is feeling?”

She demanded that Taylor-Smith issue an immediate apology to the meeting.

The meeting was also attended by several health officials, including Yvonne Doyle from Public Health England. Since the fire, many residents have

complained about the worsening pollution in the area. It is well documented that the fire produced vast quantities of deadly hydrogen cyanide from the flammable cladding, in which it was encased, as well as other toxic fumes. Yet Doyle claimed that air quality monitoring statistics around the local area showed dangerous particulates at levels well below those considered dangerous. This attempt at reassurance fell on deaf ears, with a number of residents angrily recounting how their health had continued to deteriorate since the fire.

Stephen, a resident who lives just 70 yards away from the tower, said to Doyle that he was asthmatic: “I do not believe your statistics. My chest is wheezing and I have been woken up in the night by disturbances.”

He added, “Every day I use my asthma pump more and more. When I look at my window ledge, it is black with dust from Grenfell Tower.”

He and other residents had been disturbed by the actions of police officers around the tower. “It’s anti-social. I’m telling police officers off at 3 a.m. to stop kicking an empty Coke can around. I had one police officer laughing at 3 a.m. like a hyena.”



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