

Flammable cladding: Australian governments continue the political whitewash

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In the aftermath of the June 14 Grenfell Tower fire disaster in London, Australian federal and state governments scrambled to cover up their inaction and culpability over the widespread use of dangerous aluminium composite panel cladding. Three months on, government officials continue to feign concern while issuing empty promises in an attempt to politically deflect widespread anger and concerns of residents and workers over at-risk buildings.

Contrary to their denials, Australian governments have been fully aware of the dangers of this material for years and have done nothing to prevent its use. In fact, the deregulation of building inspection and other vital aspects of the construction industry by federal and state governments, Liberal and Labor, during the mid-1990s opened the way for widespread use of dangerous materials and construction methods.

As the WSWs has explained in numerous articles, the dangerous character of this aluminium composite cladding has been well known to building safety experts and government authorities for at least two decades. This has been confirmed by several highly publicised blazes, including one at the 23-storey Lacrosse apartment tower in Melbourne in 2014. Three years since that fire the cladding remains in place and the building's residents face the same danger.

While various estimates have been made about the number of buildings in Australian cities covered with the cladding, very few have been publicly named and few details about any rectification works have been provided. This response is to ensure that nothing threatens the profitability of Australia's increasingly fragile housing bubble.

Two weeks ago, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) government announced that there was flammable cladding on the Centenary Hospital in Canberra and that it would be replaced. The women's and children's facility opened in 2012, three years after the ACT government declared it had clamped down on the use of flammable cladding.

In Queensland, the state Labor government claims it has initiated "Australia's best response" to the flammable cladding issue and declared that 44 buildings—23 government and 21 private constructions—are currently being investigated.

The Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane has up to 24,000 square metres of combustible cladding. Three other health

facilities in the state—Lady Cilento Children's Hospital in South Brisbane and hospitals in Cairns and Mackay—have also been named. Apart from these facilities, none of the remaining 40 buildings have been identified.

In Victoria, the state Labor government has established a taskforce headed by former Premier Ted Baillieu and former Deputy Premier John Thwaites, both of whom presided over governments that deregulated the building industry. An inner-city building audit conducted in response to the Lacrosse fire found that 87 out of 170 high-rise buildings were covered with flammable cladding. The audit results, however, are far from transparent.

Only 24 of the 87 identified buildings are listed on the Victorian Building Authority website. Audit findings tabulated in 19 cases state that the Municipal Building Surveyor (MBS) determined that these buildings were "safe for occupation" and "no further action" was required. Another four were deemed to be "safe for occupation" while the MBS "is determining the appropriate action."

Only one building, the Harvest Apartments in South Melbourne, was deemed "safe" conditional upon "certain works being undertaken." Details of these "works" are not provided.

The New South Wales Liberal government has established a Fire Safety and External Wall Cladding Taskforce. A database audit identified 1,011 buildings with potential flammable cladding. The list, however, has not been made public.

Conducted by the NSW Data Analytics Centre, the low-cost audit reportedly saved months of work. According to one media story, it involved "experts in demography, mathematics, data science and spatial analytics."

The team used "aluminium cladding" word searches of more than 170,000 records of "development approvals, geospatial surveys, and government-owned and managed residential properties from 1985." Irrespective of the value or veracity of this "word search" audit, it is not clear whether there have been any fire tests of the cladding on any of the identified buildings.

Following this audit, the NSW government in late July released a highly publicised "Ten-point plan for fire safety reforms." NSW Minister for Better Regulation Matt Kean claimed that it was the "toughest certification reform in

Australia” and that the Liberal government was “ensuring people are safe in their homes.”

The media and building safety peak bodies favourably responded to the government’s bogus claims. SkyNews declared that the NSW government was engaged in a “crack down on flammable cladding” while the Fire Protection Association Australia said the package was a “significant, positive step.”

Scrutiny of the plan, however, exposes it as another cynical manoeuvre and one that ensures the government does not have to rectify at-risk buildings and entrenches its strategy of making residents responsible for their own safety.

One proposal simply instructs “all government departments to audit their buildings and determine if they have aluminium cladding, with an initial focus on social housing.” The government is not committed, however, to do anything in terms of replacing the cladding, vacating dangerous buildings or providing accommodation to residents.

The plan also states that the government will contact strata (condominium) managers or the owners of buildings that may have dangerous cladding and “encourage them to inspect the cladding and installation of cladding.”

A new fire safety declaration will also “require high-rise residential buildings to inform state and local governments, as well as NSW Fire and Rescue if their building has cladding on it.” In other words, the onus is placed on building owners to identify and rectify problems.

To emphasise this point, Kean said, “We’re not proposing any changes to the defects rules at the moment.”

This is a clear commitment to property developers that they will not be held responsible for buildings with flammable cladding in line with modifications to building guarantee laws in 2015. That year the NSW government retrospectively slashed building defect warranties from six years to just two. This means that developers who erected buildings with flammable cladding more than two years old are not liable to pay for the removal of the dangerous material.

The plan also calls for a “comprehensive building product safety scheme.” This is so much hot air.

Regulations already exist on the use of flammable cladding but, as the ongoing Senate inquiry into non-conforming building products has revealed, enforcement and policing of these laws are either totally inadequate or non-existent.

Witness after witness at the Senate inquiry revealed the widespread use of fraudulent product safety certificates and that when government authorities have been notified they failed to prosecute anyone.

Flammable cladding, in fact, is legally installed on buildings and approved as “safe” on the basis of performance-based building certification rules. These weaker certification rules were introduced by the Australian government in the 1990s to cut building costs and boost profits for property developers and the construction industry.

Under the NSW government’s ten-point plan, NSW Fire and Rescue are directed to visit flammable-clad buildings “to prepare for a potential fire” and “provide additional information to building owners.” Given that external fires on high-rise buildings cannot be extinguished due to the restricted reach of firefighting equipment, this measure amounts to the fire brigade telling residents and occupants that their buildings could catch fire.

The NSW government plan also states that it will speed up “reforms to toughen the regulation of building certifiers.” This is another bogus pledge.

The reality is that governments across Australia have created the conditions for the use of dangerous building materials by weakening the regulatory framework through privatisation, self-regulation and performance-based solutions.

Taken together, the NSW government’s ten-point plan and the various proclamations made by other state governments and the federal administration will do nothing to change to the current situation where thousands of people work and live in unsafe buildings.

The principal concern of Australia’s political elite is to dissipate the growing popular anger and concerns following the Grenfell disaster and ensure that the profits of the banks, the construction industry and property developers are maintained.

The author recommends:

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