

Australian television program highlights flammable cladding crisis

Paul Bartizan**14 September 2017**

“Four Corners,” the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s flagship television current affairs program, last week screened a disturbing exposure of the widespread use of flammable cladding in Australia’s deregulated construction industry.

Made in response to the June 14 London Grenfell Tower fire, the 40-minute program recalled the dangerous 2014 Lacrosse apartment fire in Melbourne and brought together a range of experts—fire and building engineers and firefighters.

The program demonstrated that Australian authorities have been aware of the dangers of aluminium composite panel (ACP) cladding for more than a decade. Fire-testing conducted by the program revealed that all these products, including the “safest,” catch fire, with life-threatening consequences.

While no one was killed in the Lacrosse blaze, which involved combustible ACP cladding, it rapidly spread up one side of the 23-storey building.

Fire engineer Tony Enright told the program that the polyethylene (PE) present in the ACP cladding on the Grenfell and Lacrosse buildings releases the same energy as petrol when ignited. PE is one-and-a-half times denser than petrol. Every square metre of cladding has an equivalent fire energy of 3.5 litres of petrol.

Enright said he was only able to dissuade some clients from using the cheapest and most dangerous cladding by posing the question: “Do you want to wrap it in petrol?” The “Four Corners” program explained that, in fact, many Australian buildings have been “wrapped in petrol.”

Preliminary state governments’ audits conducted since the Grenfell Tower estimate that thousands of buildings are covered with PE-core ACP cladding. Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) Assistant

Chief Officer Adam Dalrymple suggested that many more buildings are involved.

Australian governments—state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National alike—have covered up the scale of the problem, anxious not to undermine confidence in the increasingly fragile property market (see: “Australian governments continue to cover-up unsafe buildings”).

New South Wales Innovation and Better Regulation Minister Matt Kean downplayed the dangers, telling the program: “We don’t know that the cladding on buildings in this state that’s been identified is unsafe. If it is unsafe, we don’t know whether or not there are appropriate systems and processes that will ensure that that cladding is safe.”

Translated into plain English, this means that numerous buildings clad with PE-core ACP cladding have been deemed “safe” by local government regulators in order to avoid its removal.

Several firefighters spoke about the Lacrosse blaze, explaining the new challenges posed by cladding fires. The fire started on the eighth floor and spread up 13 floors, and down to the sixth floor, in just eight minutes. Lumps of molten cladding rained from the building. Luckily, the absence of wind prevented flames spreading horizontally across the building. Internal sprinklers stopped the fire engulfing apartment interiors.

MFB senior station officer Tim Erikson said the fire was “completely outside of anything that we were prepared for or expecting.” MFB chief Dalrymple said a building like Lacrosse would “normally have a two-appliance response” but six appliances were needed, including “an aerial appliance, a ladder platform with 26 metres reach.”

ACP cladding suppliers told “Four Corners” the product became popular with architects in the early

1990s. By 2000, one of the major manufacturers, Mitsubishi, ceased using PE core due to its flammability. Other suppliers, however, continued to sell the product.

An Australian supplier who visited the Alucobond factory in Germany in 2007 discovered that although the company had developed fire-resistant cladding, it continued exporting the flammable product to Australia. When he asked why, he was told: “We don’t have to [stop the exports] and it’s cheaper to stay with polyethylene.” At that time, PE panels were about \$11 cheaper per square metre than the fire-resistant product.

“Four Corners” tested three ACP samples in a laboratory cauldron heated to 750 degrees Celsius. The first sample, 100 percent PE core, ignited almost immediately. Two other “fire resistant” panels, with varying proportions of flame retardant and mineral fillers, added to their cores were tested. Both caught fire, albeit more slowly than the one with a 100 percent PE core.

“Four Corners” also highlighted the widespread use of polystyrene foam cladding covered in a thin acrylic rendering on three- to eight-storey apartment buildings. Phil Dwyer, who heads the Builders Collective lobby group, said that when this product caught fire it “melts like a marshmallow.” He warned the product was being used extensively “because it’s a cheap means of construction, and when it’s [covered] with an acrylic render over it, it looks like concrete.”

Grenfell Tower had PE-core ACP cladding on the outside. Underneath that was a 150-millimetre layer of rigid plastic foam made of Polyisocyanurate (PIR). The foam provided insulation, yet when it burnt it gave off deadly hydrogen cyanide gas, adding to the death toll. Burning polystyrene is not as poisonous as burning PIR foam but is widely used for cost-cutting reasons.

“Four Corners” broadcast a few minutes from a Senate committee inquiry into “Non-Conforming Building Products.” Established in 2015, after the Lacrosse fire, the inquiry is not expected to hand down its final report until April, almost three and a half years after that blaze.

The show featured testimony from Stephen Goddard, president of the Owners Corporation Network, which represents apartment owners. He bluntly told the inquiry: “I have more consumer protection buying a refrigerator than for a \$1.5 million apartment.”

Goddard explained that the financial responsibility for replacing non-compliant combustible cladding and rectifying other construction problems is dumped on apartment owners. Builders and developers had little statutory responsibility.

Other comments by Goddard at the Senate inquiry, however, were not used by “Four Corners.” He told the hearing that government authorities were responsible for the situation facing residents and there was no real enforcement of building regulations. “There is no punishment to be extended for the failure to deliver the BCA [Building Code of Australia]. If that were the case, we would not be sitting here,” he said.

Directly addressing the senators running the inquiry, he declared: “You now know our lives are in jeopardy... You have seen in the United Kingdom the level of loss of life that you are facing. Your failure to act has dire consequences.”

“Four Corners” provided a brief overview of building deregulation and the privatisation of building certification. It failed to explain that this involved a decades-long, bipartisan erosion of construction industry safety standards by Liberal-National and Labor governments at the behest of property developers and construction companies.

The show’s exposure of the potentially catastrophic situation facing thousands of people living or working in buildings wrapped in flammable cladding across Australia was damning. Those politically responsible, however, were let off the hook.

The author also recommends:

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[10 August 2017]

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[12 July 2017]

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