

As official Grenfell Tower inquiry opens, UK fire safety provisions under attack

John Vassilopoulos
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The official inquiry into the June 14 Grenfell tower inferno in west London opens today. Far from illuminating the truth or holding anyone accountable for the deaths of at least 80 people—three months after the fire no official death toll has been established—the inquiry will be a whitewash.

Its aim is to cover for the very political parties and their corporate backers, whose economic and political decisions turned the building into a death trap. Any examination of the social context for the fire, and the state of social housing in general, has been ruled off limits.

Meanwhile, the attack on public safety proceeds unabated. A recent investigation by the *Guardian* reveals that the number of fire safety officers in the UK has been reduced by 25 percent, from 924 to 680, since 2011.

This is part of the government's wider agenda to slash the fire service budget. According to a November 2015 National Audit Office report, cuts of between 26 and 39 percent have been made in fire services across the country, resulting in an average 17 percent real terms reduction in spending power. Further cuts of 20 percent are expected to be implemented by 2020.

The result has been devastating. Since 2010, 11,000 firefighters' jobs have been axed nationally (19 percent of the entire firefighting workforce) and dozens of stations shut down. In London alone, 10 fire stations have been closed, 27 fire engines axed and more than 600 firefighters' posts eliminated. This has meant that average response times by firefighters in England have risen by 31 seconds since 2010.

Fire safety officers inspect high-risk buildings to make sure they adhere to safety legislation. When they uncover derelictions of duty by landlords and find buildings unsafe, they are able to enforce action to

remedy the problem.

The investigation noted that in 2010-11, there were 84,575 fire safety audits in England. By 2015-16, this had fallen by 25 percent to 63,201. Enforcement notices against landlords fell by 45 percent over the same period.

The government's justification for the cuts has been the reduction of fire-related deaths as well as the fall in fire incidents in recent years.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Arnold Tarling, a chartered surveyor and fire safety expert, said that the fall in the death rate has less to do with government policy and more to do with the improvement in technology that has made many consumer products, such as electronics, safer.

The only significant government intervention was, according to Tarling, the regulation of the manufacture of furniture, which meant that many deaths caused by highly flammable toxic materials in furniture disappeared.

There is no doubt that any improvement to the death rate due to fires will be undermined by the government's cuts and may even lead to an increase in fire-related deaths.

There is a parallel between cuts to the fire service and the sharp rise in fire related deaths in 2015, 303 compared to the 264 who died the previous year—an increase of 15 percent. This was the largest jump since 1995. A government report published in August 2016 sought to downplay this hike, asserting, "It's too early to say whether the increase in 2015/16 is a one-off fluctuation or a change in the longer-term trend."

This was just months before the Grenfell inferno.

Asked whether another Grenfell-type disaster could happen again Tarling stated, "I wouldn't be surprised if it happened. You just have to have the wrong

circumstances [in place] ...We saw a 'blip' in Lakanal House fire [south London] in 2009, we saw a 'blip' in Grenfell and we will see more blips."

Cuts to the fire service budget and the complete disregard for public safety must be seen in conjunction with the deregulation of the building industry by successive governments, which have led to a compromise in fire safety. "Everything's been privatised," explained Tarling.

"We've lost all the people who knew what they were doing. We've lost the [government] architects' department [and] surveyors' department... [former Tory Prime Minister] Margaret Thatcher got rid of the Greater London Council and the district surveyor. Big mistake. She was also responsible for getting rid of Section 20 of the London Building Act."

Passed in 1939, Section 20 was an extension of existing fire safety legislation, ensuring that this also applied to any building over 30 metres in height or any building over 25 metres in height which had a volume over 930 square metres. Both Grenfell Tower and Lakanal House were in fact Section 20 buildings.

The original laws, enshrined in the centuries old London Building Act, were drafted by Sir Christopher Wren in 1667 in the aftermath of the Great Fire of London to ensure that a similar catastrophe did not occur again in the capital. The act specified that the outside of buildings had to be fireproof.

The legislation and all successive amendments remained in force and were administered by the district surveyor until the GLC was abolished in 1986.

The London Building Act was then replaced by the National Building Regulations, which crucially scrapped the stipulation that external walls had to have at least one hour of fire resistance, in order to prevent flames from spreading between flats or entering inside.

Tarling said the London Building Act was instrumental in limiting the damage inflicted by the German Luftwaffe on London during World War Two: "All flammable materials outside buildings were banned, which is why when the Germans came and dropped their phosphorus bombs on docklands it didn't turn into a firestorm like Dresden. It saved us because everything was behind stone, concrete, tile. It was completely safe. But that is no longer the case with all the deregulations. Section 20 of the London Building Act went kaput with Margaret Thatcher and all these

alterations would never have been allowed. Grenfell would never have happened, Lakanal would never have happened."

To emphasize the destructive potential of the cladding that was used on Grenfell, Tarling explained that "every kilo of polyethylene [the material that the cladding consists of], is equivalent to one-and-a-half kilos of petrol."

Tarling explained that the deregulation of the building industry has wider implications on fire safety beyond just high-rise social housing. They are only limiting it to "purely high-rise social blocks of flats."

He recounted his recent experience inspecting a private building. While there were good fire doors in place, the fire stopping above the doors did not reach the ceiling. "You might as well not have the doors there," he explained, adding, "They're not addressing fire-stopping in buildings."

"They're not addressing low rise properties. They're only dealing with high rise. Why does this stuff suddenly become safe under 18 metres?"

Nor is the issue of safety merely confined to flammable cladding: "In the aftermath of Grenfell we had a timber-frame hospital burn down," explained Tarling, referring to the blaze at Weybridge District Hospital. "The top floor disappeared in 14 minutes. The only reason that didn't reach the news is because it happened at night and no one was in there so nobody died. Had that been during the day how would you get the disabled people out from the top floor in 14 minutes?"



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