

Grenfell fire inquiry opens: No one faces police questioning until autumn 2018

Robert Stevens
13 December 2017

Two days of procedural hearings have confirmed that the official government inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire crowns a state-orchestrated cover-up.

The inquiry into the June 14 inferno that claimed, officially, the lives of least 71 people, was formally established August 15, but is yet to hear a single witness or disclose any evidence it has received. The procedure hearings were organised solely in order that “Core Participants” could discuss issues of case management, timetabling, sequencing of witnesses and evidence disclosure.

Led by its chairman, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, a renowned pillar of the establishment, the inquiry is the servant of the Conservative government. Moore-Bick—under the provisions of the 2005 Inquiries Act legislated by the Blair Labour government—has no powers to prosecute anyone in relation to Grenfell. The fraudulent character of the inquiry was epitomised by Moore-Bick’s prior insistence that issues of a “social, economic and political nature” will not feature in its deliberations.

The inquiry’s two-day meeting, ending yesterday, did at least underscore the scale of the cover-up being carried out by the Tory government and the Metropolitan Police. It will have been a great comfort to the guilty parties who managed Grenfell Tower and turned it into a death trap—the Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, its housing management company, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation and the corporations involved in installing the flammable exterior cladding that resulted in so many dying.

Counsel to the inquiry, Richard Millett QC, addressed Moore-Bick first, confirming that the first phase of the inquiry would deal only with “an investigation of the facts as they occurred on the night of the fire and into

the next day.” It would not report back to the government until Autumn 2018, rather than by Easter as originally promised.

The Metropolitan Police, a “core participant” in the inquiry, were invited to speak to “provide a brief update on the criminal investigation.” Speaking on behalf of the Met, Jeremy Johnson QC, said the police had now acquired 31 million documents and had possession of 2,500 physical exhibits. It had taken “2,332 witness statements from 1,144 witnesses, and 383 companies had been identified as having some involvement in or connection to the construction or refurbishment of Grenfell Tower. There were some 3,916 investigative tasks or lines of inquiry that had been generated,” said Johnson.

Reeling off this staggering total serves to hide the fundamental truth in plain sight—namely that the police have still not even questioned, let alone arrested a single person regarding this heinous crime.

Johnson confirmed that there was no prospect of anyone being questioned as a suspect until next autumn. To justify this criminal inaction, he claimed that “interviews of further witnesses or of suspects” could not take place until the forensic “careful analysis of every room within the tower, as well as every inch of the communal areas and, of course, importantly, the outside of the tower”—was completed—to be followed by a series of further forensic tests and reconstructions. Quite why the pursuit of normal lines of inquiry, such as questioning suspects, is conditional on such an inch-by-inch examination was never explained.

The first day of the hearing also heard statements from solicitors representing the families of the bereaved, survivors and those who lived locally. The attempt to reassure everyone that everything possible was being done to get to the truth was punctured by

Sam Stein QC, who spoke on behalf of 65 residents.

He said to Moore-Bick that those residents he represented “have lost loved ones, they have been injured, they have been poisoned by cyanide [emitted by the cheap, flammable clad that encased the Tower], they have been taken to hell itself... [W]e ask this inquiry the simple question: When will it start? When will the truth come out? When can we start seeing the defences and potential excuses which will be raised by companies and institutions at fault?”

He added, “Many of the core participants lost all of their belongings and are still living in temporary accommodation... Many are living in single hotel rooms and may well continue to do so over the Christmas period.”

There is no innocent explanation for the refusal of the police to even attempt to bring the guilty to justice. The police and the courts can act with extraordinary speed when it serves the interests of the ruling elite. In the immediate aftermath of the riots that erupted in London and nationally in 2011—following the police killing of Mark Duggan—the police arrested thousands of people and the government and the courts established a system of “assembly line” justice. Courts were empowered to work around the clock so that more than 3,000 people were rapidly charged—often for the most trivial offences. A staggering 1,292 people were jailed for a total of over 1,800 years.

In the present situation, the week prior to the procedural hearings, survivors launched a petition to demand that the blatantly undemocratic nature of the inquiry be changed. They are calling for Prime Minister Theresa May to appoint a panel of people they trust—with decision-making powers—to work alongside Moore-Bick. At present, the inquiry team consists of three Assessors, all establishment figures, who are working with Moore-Bick but who don’t have any decision-making powers.

Survivors also insist that, “Legal representatives of bereaved families see all evidence from the start and are allowed to question witnesses at the hearings.”

Presently all questions must be submitted in advance to Moore-Bick, who can decide which go through to the inquiry. On Tuesday, the families delivered to Downing Street the 16,000 signatures collected so far.

Several solicitors called on Moore-Bick to consider these demands. Leslie Thomas QC, representing 17

people, including some of those bereaved and former residents of the tower, asked Moore-Bick, “How many of them [the inquiry team] have lived in a tower block or a council estate or in social housing? That affects confidence. Confidence, or a lack of it, affects participation. And a lack of participation of the very people that matter affects justice. And a lack of justice is injustice.”

Responding to the calls, Moore-Bick refused to accept the necessity for a Panel, instead suggesting that he would consider establishing “a consultative panel” of local residents that would be able to advise him, but not make decisions in the inquiry.

On the final day of the procedural hearing, yet more evidence emerged of the inquiry’s political character. Exposing the claims of inquiry counsel Millett that it would oversee a “ruthlessly independent and effective investigation,” Fire Brigades Union barrister Martin Seaward called for Steven McGuirk, one of the key experts appointed by the inquiry, to stand down. Seaward said this was necessary as McGuirk would be “conflicted” and “compromised” in giving evidence.

Giving reasons why, Seaward said, “For example, he was in charge of Greater Manchester when recommendations were made from the Lakanal fire [in London] and one question would be whether those recommendations were carried out.” McGuirk was a former chief fire officer in Greater Manchester, with Seaward’s submission saying he had “been the principal adviser to local authorities on fire safety guidance.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact