

The ruling class's Christmas message to Grenfell survivors: You will get nothing from us

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On December 14, members of the Royal family, Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn attended the memorial service in St Paul's Cathedral, London, marking six months since the Grenfell Tower fire took at least 71 lives.

In her annual Christmas address, the queen declared, "Our thoughts and prayers are with all those who died and those who lost so much." Her speech was accompanied by footage of her visiting the site of the Grenfell fire in June, as she stated, "And here in London, who can forget the sheer awfulness of the Grenfell Tower fire?"

Not to be outdone, May issued her own "Christmas message," which included a reference to "The heroes in our emergency services whose courage and dedication so inspired the nation in response to tragedy at Grenfell Tower..."

These high-profile events bookended ten days during which the real attitude within ruling circles towards the victims of Grenfell and those who survived—of hostility and contempt—was made clear.

Three days before Christmas, May rejected a petition set up by survivor Adel Chaoui and backed by the Grenfell United group representing many survivors and their families and signed by 24,642 people. The petition requested that May use powers granted her under the "Inquiries Act 2005 to appoint additional panel members with decision making power to "avoid a collapse of confidence in the Inquiry's ability to discover the truth."

The petition expressed the well-founded concerns among Grenfell survivors and supporters that the public inquiry set up by the government under Sir Martin Moore-Bick will be a whitewash, designed to suppress, not reveal, the truth of the fire's origins.

Under the inquiry's remit, Moore-Bick has the exclusive oversight over the inquiry, including the right to

determine the questions that will be posed. The petition therefore demands:

"1. The Inquiry is not led by a judge alone. Panel members must be appointed with relevant background, expertise, experience, and a real understanding of the issues facing those affected.

"2. Legal representatives of bereaved families see all evidence from the start and are allowed to question witnesses at the hearings."

May framed her rejection as a response to Moore-Bick after the two days of procedural submissions, which opened the public inquiry on December 11 and 12.

He wrote on December 20 insisting, "I am and must remain completely independent of the government and in my view it would be wrong of me to take the initiative by advising the Prime Minister either to appoint additional members to the panel or not to do so, "while refusing the formal application that I should consult the core participants on the identity of potential additional panel members..."

May, given no advice by Moore-Bick, brushed aside the clearest expression of the Grenfell survivors' hopes. Writing back to Moore-Bick, she insisted that the Inquiry, as presently constructed, "has the necessary expertise to undertake its work."

She justified rejecting any changes by an awareness of "the need for the Inquiry to complete its initial report as quickly as reasonably possible."

This is a bogus claim. Every aspect of the investigation is being delayed as long as possible. Over six months after the disaster, none of the leading figures in the organisations centrally responsible for the inferno have even been questioned. No evidence is due to be heard by the inquiry until well into 2018 and the completion date for the first phase of the inquiry, originally set for Easter,

to has been pushed months back until Autumn.

Commenting on May's response, Adel Chaoui, who lost four relatives in the fire, noted, "Not only does the news continue to ignore our concerns, but it seems to have been timed deliberately, on the last working day for most law firms, to limit the time available for us to take legal advice and, or challenge the decision. Under the Inquiries Act we have 14 days to bring a legal challenge by way of judicial review of the Prime Minister's decision.

"Given the news was never going to be well received, the timing raises serious questions about the Prime Minister's judgment and intent. She demonstrated poor judgment and rank discourtesy in not having waited until the New Year to avoid upset during the holidays, but more concerning is the question of what could possibly be behind the intent to limit time available to respond?"

This is putting matters politely. The timing of May's announcement was both deliberate and cynical, with the clear intention of preventing legal challenges and burying the news amid the Christmas festivities. That this will necessarily cause further suffering and pain for many survivors, is, for May and for the wealthy and propertied class interests she serves, neither here nor there.

The Grenfell petitioners intend to continue. They aim to collect 100,000 signatures and force a parliamentary debate.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) also took advantage of the Christmas holiday. KCTMO is responsible for managing Grenfell Tower and around 10,000 other housing properties. Its chair, Fay Edwards, wrote to tenants just before Christmas to advise them that her organisation intended to hand over control of the housing stock back to RBKC.

The move, presented as part of an "urgent and thorough review of all the KCTMO's operations," was made in defiance of objections from residents and their legal advisers who have repeatedly demanded that KCTMO remain in charge of the housing stock to allow its role in creating the conditions for the disaster to be questioned during the inquiry. There are also concerns that data held by KCTMO might be harder to acquire and compensation claims or corporate manslaughter charges made harder to pursue if the organization, which will have no assets, is wound up.

Joe Delaney, a spokesperson for the Lancaster West Estate Residents Association, accused RBKC and KCTMO of a "cynical, unethical and completely

underhanded move. "He questioned why RBKC should be any better placed to run the housing stock than the KCTMO. He told the BBC that the council "hasn't even shown the capacity to deal with the Grenfell disaster, so how can they demonstrate that they have got capacity to bring stuff in-house at this time?"

He has a point.

RBKC will not, even now, organise the most elementary levels of support to many of those displaced and traumatised by the fire. The local authority told survivors that those still in hotel accommodation or serviced apartments would get an additional measly £140 to assist with Christmas expenses. Around 101 households, including 17 families with 34 children, are still living in hotels. Some had not received the additional payment by 22 December, while some were told the payments would not arrive until next year.

On December 23, the *Daily Mirror* produced a report that accurately depicts the vile hypocrisy behind all official proclamations of regret and sympathy over Grenfell.

Volunteers told the *Mirror* that there have been 24 suicide bids by people who survived or witnessed the fire. Alex Adewunmi, an assistant at the local Christian Tabernacle Centre, explained, "People here are angry and struggling to cope. They're suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The Government is not treating them fairly and the council are not doing as much as they should. They're not filling people's needs and they don't care. We've had to fill the void. It's madness."

He added: "Survivors are being offered homes that are not suitable and being told 'take it or leave it' by the local borough, even though it has £400 million in reserve. They're penny pinching and not giving these people the help they need."



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