

UK: Tories seek to defuse anger over Grenfell fire ahead of official public inquiry

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Dame Judith Hackitt's Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety has evoked widespread outrage for failing to recommend that the type of highly flammable cladding installed on Grenfell Tower—and many other public and private buildings around the UK—should be banned.

The report was commissioned by Prime Minister Theresa May to run alongside and feed into the Moore-Bick inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire, scheduled to begin next week.

The 156-page report, published more than 11 months after last June's fire that killed at least 72 people, was denounced by the Grenfell families and other campaigners.

In its assessment of Hackitt's interim findings, the WSWs noted that she "favours only minor tinkering with regulations that are being ignored with impunity" by big business to facilitate their rampant profiteering. This appraisal has been confirmed.

This is a warning of what to expect from the official public inquiry now that it is due to finally begin its main evidence sessions. These will take place around two weeks later, after relatives and friends of those who perished memorialise their loved ones with individual portraits and tributes.

In the weeks leading up to the opening of the inquiry, May's Conservative government has mounted a sustained effort to dissipate anger and minimise any political fallout.

With not a single person or organisation having been brought to justice and some former Grenfell residents still living in hotel rooms, local election results this month saw the Tories hold onto Kensington and Chelsea Council but suffer dramatic reversals. The Labour Party vote went up by 27 percent, with the highest result in Notting Dale, where Grenfell Tower is

located.

More than 156,000 people signed a petition demanding that the government and the inquiry's judge, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, allow representatives from the local community to serve on a decision-making panel and other measures to prevent a whitewash.

The petition exceeded the 100,000 figure required, forcing the government to hold a debate this week, 11 months to the day since the fire.

Three days prior to the debate, on May 11, Speaker's House was opened up, with survivors and bereaved allowed to meet 100 MPs from all parties. They were told by the Conservative Speaker John Bercow to "show your strength by turning up on Monday and making sure that every last inch of legitimate seating space is taken up by people who are passionate for justice."

That same day, May said she had authorised the inquiry to have two panel members to serve alongside Moore-Bick. The identities of the two were not revealed. May posed with London artist Damel Carayol, who presented her with a print of his artwork, which is of the burnt-out tower with the caption *Grenfell Tower Eyesore!! Final Straw*. A clearly uncomfortable May described it as "powerful," with Downing Street stating that it would be hung there once space was found.

The debate on the petition began with MPs holding a 72-second silence for those who died in the fire, with Tory MP Paul Scully then reading out the names of all 72.

Tory MP Kevin Hollinrake, after a nauseating, self-serving tribute to the Grenfell families for "their determination, their composure and their steadfast approach to getting answers and finding solutions,"

made clear the real reasons for the government's pose of concern. "There is a clear need for additional panel members so that those affected have confidence in the system. ... We absolutely need confidence in the inquiry," he said.

Another Tory, Kwasi Kwarteng, said, "From my point of view, Grenfell is the biggest challenge that the government faces—forget Brexit and all the rest of it. ... I say to the government and to other Conservative Members: We have to be very sensitive. We have to not just give the impression but feel that we are battling on the side of the people who have been affected."

"The eyes of the world and certainly of people in London are watching us carefully," he warned.

On Wednesday, the government continued its PR offensive by announcing that central government will cover, at a cost estimated at £400 million, the removal of unsafe cladding in high-rise public housing blocks run by councils and housing associations. This comes after a year in which thousands of social housing tenants in over 300 blocks have been forced to live in dangerous, unsafe accommodation that the government refused to fund to make safe.

Just seven blocks have had their cladding replaced. No action was taken over residents living in privately owned towers, with May's spokesman saying only that building owners should "take responsibility for removing and replacing and to not pass the cost on to leaseholders."

The days of crocodile tears shed by the political representatives of the ruling elite were exposed by the publication of Hackitt's review.

Housing Secretary James Brokenshire again moved to placate anger at the report by stating, "Having listened carefully to concerns, the government will consult on banning the use of combustible materials in cladding systems on high-rise residential buildings."

The claim by the government, backed by Labour, that adding two panel members to the Grenfell fire inquiry will prevent a whitewash is false. The inquiry can only produce a cover-up as it has no powers of prosecution, with Moore-Bick specifically ruling out any evaluation of issues of a "social, economic and political nature" leading to the fire.

It is a fraud because it has been convened and will be overseen and directed by the same political representatives of big business responsible for turning

Grenfell Tower into a death trap.

The inquiry is to be held in two stages, with the first purely on technical issues relating to how the fire began and spread. Its second stage, the first time the two additional panel members will participate, is not set to begin until December at the earliest.

Nine of the 13 issues the inquiry will cover are to be taken during the second stage, which is set to last well into 2020—with the possibility of a final report not emerging until three years after the fire.

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, will be holding the next of its regular meetings on Saturday, May 26, at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend.

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting

Saturday May 26, 2 p.m.

Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk

London, W10 6SW (nearest tube: Latimer Road)

For further details visit facebook.com/Grenfellforum



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