

Grenfell fire: Local resident Joe Delaney speaks out against attack by Andrew O'Hagan on those seeking justice

Alice Summers
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In its June 7 edition, the London Review of Books published a n almost 60,000- word article, "The Tower," on last year's Grenfell Tower inferno by journalist and novelist Andrew O'Hagan. The essay marked one year since the devastating fire that claimed 72 lives. It coincided with the opening days of the official inquiry during which fire survivors and relatives of those who died gave moving tributes to their loved ones.

O'Hagan's piece is characterised by vicious and dishonest misrepresentations and inaccuracies. It demonizes local activists, residents and firefighters, while offering up hymns of praise to the local Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council. World Socialist Web Site writer Alice Summers reviewed O'Hagan's essay [here](#).

The following is an interview conducted by Summers with Joe Delaney, who was one of the people interviewed by O'Hagan. Delaney is a local resident who, years before the Grenfell Tower fire, established a record of fighting for the right to decent and safe housing. He has sought justice for the victims and survivors of the Grenfell fire, earning him the respect of the entire local community in the North Kensington area of London. Having lived in a flat adjacent to Grenfell Tower, he was evacuated after the inferno that left behind a toxic and burned-out shell. Forced to live in hotel accommodation for months, he has only recently been temporarily rehoused by RBKC.

Alice Summers: O'Hagan's piece came out almost exactly a year after the fire, and at the same time as the opening of the inquiry, where survivors and family members were giving moving tributes to their lost loved ones. What do you think of the timing of this essay?

Joe Delaney: I think the main issue with the article is that it doesn't seem to know what it wants to be. It's caught halfway between an article and a book. If this had been a series of articles, with the first one coming out at the start of the inquiry and being about the victims, that would have gone down quite well. Then I don't think people would have felt so hurt about the subsequent parts had they come out in subsequent weeks.

O'Hagan seems to take the opinion of whomever he happens to be with at the time. It seems that, unfortunately for us, the last people he spoke to were the council workers. That's the opinion he's left with at the end, and that's the opinion that seems to have framed his whole argument, the whole direction and tone of his piece.

I can give you a very good example [of O'Hagan's bias towards the views expressed by the council staff]. In one part of O'Hagan's article he writes about how those who had lived in the tower were receiving £5,000 in the period immediately after the fire, and those who lived nearby were receiving £500. One of the phone calls I shared with O'Hagan was from the chap who lived next door to me [on the Lancaster West estate, adjacent to Grenfell Tower]. He went to pick up his £500 and the council said to him that he would only get £270, because he was a single person

and the £500 was only for families.

I spoke to the council about this, pointing out that on the council website it says that people will be getting £500. After telling me that giving only £270 was the new policy, I asked the council worker where this was written down. He responded that it wasn't. I asked him if this "policy" perhaps had something to do with the fact that my neighbour doesn't speak English very well, as I came to the council the same morning and got my £500 without problems. Other neighbours of mine who were also single people also got their £500. This smacked of equalities issues to me.

I had to browbeat the council worker into giving my neighbour the correct amount of money. I shared this call with O'Hagan specifically, as this confusion and arrogance typifies the council's response. It even goes against what central government was telling them to do: the leader of the council [Nicholas Paget-Brown] was standing next to Prime Minister Theresa May when this policy was announced. It's on their website that we get £500; it's on the central government website that we get £500. But yet somebody in their finance department just decided that he wanted to do things differently.

You can even see it from the way council staff speak in O'Hagan's piece; "Of course we care about these people, we're not horrible," etc. It's this paternalistic and patronising attitude. "Just be quiet, we know what's best, we care for you." But they were never treating people as equals; they were always treating the local residents as people that had to be managed. That's where the big problem is and that's what all of us have had, and still have, issues with. That's why the name of the Housing Management Group became the Tenant Management Organisation: originally it was an organisation managed by tenants, and in the end its design was to manage the tenants and keep them quiet.

AS: From reading O'Hagan's account you would not get that impression of the council. On multiple occasions in his essay he writes about times when council staff went out of their way to help survivors and local residents. In "The Tower" he writes that these staff received a lot of abuse and ingratitude. O'Hagan presents council officials as the real victims in this story. What do you think of O'Hagan's portrayal of the interactions between local residents and council employees in the immediate relief effort?

JD: On the ground council staff weren't the one's being blamed. It wasn't like there were lynch mobs when on the ground council staff were seen out and about. We have always understood that they are not the ones who make the decisions. It was organ grinders that we were interested in, not monkeys. O'Hagan makes out that there was this mob mentality, this mob rule that was dictating all of our decisions. It is completely unfair to us and totally mischaracterises the area. It makes all of us seem like we were just money grabbers looking for handouts.

People weren't housed in hotels the first night. Many people had to bed

down on the grass in that area. I was lucky as I was able to stay with a friend of mine. I had never seen the area that busy even during the [Notting Hill] Carnival. Another example of council mishandling is the fact that when it came to 5 p.m. that night [the day after the fire], all calls were handed over to a call centre in the North of England, which had no idea what it was doing when it came to Grenfell-related matters. They were dealing with people as standard homeless applications so many were told they didn't qualify for help. They were just treated as standard homeless cases.

AS: O'Hagan ends his account with the stories of two former Grenfell residents who have now been successfully re-housed. But he neglects to mention the fact that more than half of those who were made homeless by the fire still haven't been given permanent homes. What do you think of the fact that so many families still haven't been properly re-housed a year after the fire and of the fact that O'Hagan completely ignores this?

JD: It's just not the case [that the housing problem has been resolved]. If you are not in permanent housing, then there's still no stability for you and there is always this nagging worry that's always at the back of your mind. Are we going to be moved out any time soon? Where are we going to be moved to? When will it all finally be settled?

I was offered one place in all the time I was in the hotels. The first place I was offered is the one I'm in now; I took it straight away. I know that all the other survivors and local residents are like this too. After some people did accept offers it then turned out that the accommodation was substandard. Some properties have to be modified, decorated, or otherwise had to be brought up to decent home standards.

There were numerous other issues. For one person who moved into a new place, that place then burnt down. It was shown on the "Panorama" [BBC] piece that came out a few weeks ago. He had barely been in his place a week when it burnt down. The properties the council was offering us were hardly brilliant flats. The "luxury block" that was mentioned in the media had balconies that weren't properly fitted: the panels were loose and in some places you could easily fit a child's head through them.

AS: O'Hagan's account turns reality on its head. He tries to make out that the real victims of the fire were the senior council members who ended up losing their jobs, rather than those who lost their homes, their family members or even their lives in the blaze. He speaks about council leader, Nicholas Paget-Brown, and deputy leader Rock Feilding-Mellen in glowing terms. What do you think of the contrast between the way he presents the senior councillors and the way he presents local residents and survivors?

JD: These are people who should have lost their jobs in the months and years preceding the fire, because of the way they were treating people in the local community. They ignored issues that the community raised. [Grenfell Action Group member] Edward Daffarn and I would not be in the position that we are now—where councillors will not dare to take part in an interview or discussion with us—if they didn't know that we can bury them with facts.

I'm not just going to launch into a personal invective attack on these people; the worst I have done was jokingly compare a councillor to a character from Harry Potter—this is hardly serious or damaging, but they have not been so gracious towards us. We can prove that on certain dates they said that things would happen, but then in subsequent weeks and months that the complete opposite happened. Can they not see that it is this shoddy attitude towards public consultation that led to this disaster?

AS: O'Hagan is very critical of the Grenfell Action Group in particular. He tries to portray them as a lying and unpopular group. But he also mentions in his essay that the Grenfell Action Group didn't raise concerns over the flammable cladding, only over other issues such as exposed gas pipes and the proximity of the new school to the tower. We know that these issues were also very significant in allowing the spread of the flames and the smoke and in inhibiting the firefighters' rescue efforts. But

O'Hagan tries to present the Grenfell Action Group's safety concerns as paranoid complaints that had little relation to the actual disaster.

JD: When it is the council's side of the story that he presents, he writes that they weren't building experts so how could they possibly know that this fire was going to happen. But when it comes to the victims, he writes that they didn't know what they were talking about because they didn't predict exactly how the fire was going to happen. It's a ridiculous contrast that is completely unbalanced. Anyone who was actually affected by the fire is presented as a screaming maniac for taking a risk-averse attitude, whereas when it comes to everyone who had the power to actually make the necessary change, it is completely understood why they risked the lives of their constituents.

But it is their jobs to know these things. The burden of proof, the burden of being absolutely right, the burden of due diligence of care, or even of just being risk adverse is all on the victims in O'Hagan's view, not the council which has the resources and legal obligations to be so. When I've worked in the public sector, I often had troubleshooting roles or responsibilities as part of my job, but even when this isn't the case, if it is clear that something will not work or go wrong then I would always speak out. I'm not an expert in social services or education, any more than I am an expert in building control or planning, but you still try and apply a logical head to these issues.

The Grenfell fire was a perfect storm of problems. They were warned that the lack of fire access was going to cause problems, and it did. They were warned that the way that the building works were being undertaken, leaving exposed gas pipes, was going to be an issue, and the gas pipes were. There were so many different issues; the cladding is just one part of it. Maybe if the cladding had been the only issue in that building, this wouldn't have happened.

We were told that we couldn't have sprinklers in Grenfell Tower because they'd be at risk of vandalism. So while we couldn't have pipes of water exposed in the building, pipes of gas were perfectly acceptable. The impact and likelihood of risk wasn't being properly considered; this is what GAG [Grenfell Action Group] and others were highlighting. The incentive behind the job to undertake risk assessment and due diligence was completely the wrong way 'round. It's very easy to decide to take a chance of a risk if you're not the one who is actually going to face the consequences of that decision.

AS: O'Hagan also blames the fire brigade for the causing of all those deaths on June 14 by not responding in an adequate way and by sticking to the "stay put" advice. But he ignores the fact that the "stay put" policy would have worked had there been working fire doors, had there been proper compartmentalisation in the building.

JD: O'Hagan claims he went into this with an open mind and wanted to present a fair and balanced argument, but that is neither fair nor balanced. The landlords had a legal responsibility to ensure that its doors were adequate and could survive the correct amount of time under the circumstances of a fire. But they blatantly did not. Who else's fault is that? Also, could the firefighters on the ground decide to ignore "stay put" themselves? Blame those responsible for the policy, not those forced to implement it.

There were also many times that the council was told that the [Kensington and Chelsea] Tenant Management Organisation [KCTMO] were doing things in such a slipshod manner that their reports saying that the building was safe clearly can't be trusted. What due diligence did the council undertake to verify the information they were being given? Where there should have been decisions by the council to err on the side of caution, if it wasn't politically or ideologically convenient to do so, then they were sure as hell not going to do that.

AS: O'Hagan's article took him a year to write. Why do you think he dedicated so much time to slandering the North Kensington residents and exonerating the local council of any guilt?

JD: Like I said earlier, he has a very fair weather attitude: his opinion is the opinion of the last person he spoke to. It's disappointing. This piece is going to be remembered for a very long time. I certainly would not want my name to be associated with authoring it. I wouldn't have wanted to preempt things in the way O'Hagan has. It also contradicts the government's own findings.

Even the Grenfell Taskforce has condemned the council. And that's not a party/political matter; it was written by civil servants. The report from London Councils is even more scathing. Besides, it was a Conservative government that hung a Conservative council out to dry. What does that say about your bedfellows if that's what they do to you when you're under hassle?

The truth will start to really come out, about the way facts were ignored at the council, the way they didn't follow up on issues, corners were cut and decisions were taken about gentrifying the entire area. It's the same problem everywhere. And it's not just a Conservative issue. Gentrification and [lack of] affordable housing are a Labour and Conservative issue. That's why I have condemned both sides.

AS: O'Hagan himself makes reference to the fact that, like the Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Labour-run councils have also made cuts, have reduced their stock of social housing and have used the same cladding that was used on Grenfell Tower. But he turns this around to suggest that because other councils are also similarly criminal, it somehow reduces the guilt of the RBKC council.

JD: "What-aboutism" is no justification for what happened. It's a ridiculous argument to put forward: "everyone was doing it at the time so it's not fair that we are the ones who are punished." It's the "tobacco argument": "it was legal to sell so we did so and we had no duty to consider or publish proving that it causes cancer."

There were loads of issues raised regarding building standards. Even the standard terms and conditions of contracts that RBKC gets suppliers to sign state that contractors are under obligation to follow the law, and that any decisions where there is any kind of risk should be brought to the council's attention so they can decide an appropriate course of action. They can't now say that it wasn't their fault. Either their procedures were inadequate then or they're lying now. Either way, it's self-serving: it always suits the narrative they want to serve.

For RBKC to wail that it is not fair for them to be punished for this when councils everywhere did the same is utterly contemptible. No pun intended but RBKC are the ones who got their fingers burnt first. There's no use crying now.

O'Hagan clearly says he's not an expert on these matters, but neither are we. But locals, especially GAG, were still right about what was going to happen and the extent of damage that would occur. Just because he didn't like the message, the way it was presented, or by whom, is not a justification or reasonable excuse to shoot the messenger. Since the fire, I have often felt guilty because I wonder if events might have been different if I had complained louder or longer beforehand; I know others have felt the same way. Goodness knows how guilty we would feel if we hadn't even tried to put a stop to these problems given the tragedy that occurred.

The way O'Hagan tries to present local residents, it's as if being seen as too ignorant means you're not allowed a position and therefore not allowed to argue back, but equally if you seem articulate and educated you're not supposed to be there so you shouldn't have a position and don't have the right to argue back. It seems to me that his real motive is that he just doesn't want people to argue at all. It's a paternalistic and patronising attitude: "We know best, so just hush. You let the grown-ups do the talking and be grateful for what's dished out to you."

This attitude suits the council very well as they can use it to avoid scrutiny and remain unaccountable. Either locals are a feral mob who are too aggressive and uncouth to engage, or they are "agitators" from privileged backgrounds who have a wider agenda, which is served by

unfairly bashing the council.

The fact that O'Hagan refers to me as "a politician" in his piece shows this attitude clearly. I grew up on a council estate in that area, don't have a university education, and come from an Irish Traveller background—the most "political" I have ever been is voting, and my only agenda is to see the facts of this issue come to light to protect others and so those civilly and criminally liable are held properly accountable.

AS: At one point in his essay O'Hagan compares Grenfell Tower to Dickensian England: "In the eyes of some, the tower blocks are the continuation of the old habit of keeping minorities poorly housed. But, as always, it depends how you measure it. If the yardstick is the white people's mansions on Elgin Crescent, then yes. If it's Victorian pigsties, however, then improvement has definitely occurred [sic], albeit too slowly and for too few." What do you think of that?

JD: Exactly. "You're better off than people were 150 years ago, so what are you complaining about?" It beggars belief. Instead of looking at the gap between the rich and the poor, we should actually be looking at the gap between the poor and the *really* poor instead—and those at the bottom are inconvenient, ungrateful and unreasonable if they dare do otherwise.

This attitude is ridiculous and leads to inequalities not just of wealth, but in other areas too—we're back to the deserving and undeserving poor described by Dickens. This attitude was evident when the risk posed to the people who lived in Grenfell Tower was decided by ideology and convenience rather than reason or safety, and decided by people who would no doubt have demanded far higher standards had they lived in Grenfell Tower themselves as they "deserved" better.



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