

Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Survivor's statement reveals disdain for residents by the political and corporate elites

Paul Bond**17 October 2018**

The statement given by Edward Daffarn at the Grenfell Tower inquiry is an important demonstration of how residents were kept in the dark about decisions regarding the Tower and their fatal consequences.

Daffarn is a member of the Grenfell Action Group (GAG). GAG campaigned for greater transparency around building work and documented the actions of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC) and their Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) in relation to Grenfell Tower and other buildings on the Lancaster West Estate—often recording frustration at the lack of information available to residents.

Daffarn's evidence was read into the inquiry record last week. He writes, "Before the fire, as a result of my lived experience of dealing with the TMO, RBKC and [Grenfell Tower refurbishment contractor] Rydon, I was convinced we were at serious risk from a fire resulting in fatalities; it was the logical consequence of a non-functioning landlord which had inadequate oversight and accountability and which did not take sufficient care of Grenfell Tower residents' health and safety."

Edward Daffarn was not just a resident who should have been kept informed. He was actively trying to obtain information, which makes the obstacles he encountered all the more significant.

He moved into Grenfell Tower in 2001 on a Permanent Lifetime Tenancy. The "state of the residential amenity had declined," he notes, with the whole estate "left to fall into a semi slum-like state" through a policy of "managed decline." There was a "lack of adequate investment and general disregard for the welfare and well-being of residents."

Phase 1 of the Inquiry is curtailed to deal only with the events of the night of the fire, but the experiences of survivors and residents are drawing the necessary connections with the earlier refurbishment work, that resulted in a relatively safe building being turned into a death trap.

Daffarn lived on the 16th floor. That night he heard a neighbour's smoke alarm and hearing shouting outside, he got dressed and opened his front door where he met an inrush of smoke. He shut the door quickly and went back inside.

His instinct was to stay there, but a friend rang, telling him to leave urgently. He wrapped a wet towel around his nose and mouth and went onto the stairwell.

He could not at first find the emergency exit stairs. He began panicking, but a firefighter tapped his leg. Able to see the staircase he ran from the building.

He notes that "those affected by this fire have been treated appallingly. In the absence of support from local and national government—given their abdication of responsibility—it has been left to the local community coming together to support us."

GAG and its blog, written by Daffarn and Francis O'Connor, were set up "to expose issues within our community." Daffarn doubted it "would make a difference or actually change anything," but considered it "a historical document as to how in the fifth richest country in the world, in a borough with around £300 million in reserves, residents could be mistreated."

He lost his paper archive that night, but has email evidence of concerns raised well before the fire, covering the fabric of the building and the adjacent area. Daffarn and O'Connor had raised concerns that the development of land around the Tower might restrict emergency access before an academy school and leisure centre were built there.

In May 2013, electrical power surges caused residents problems. The RBKC Scrutiny Review absolved the Council and TMO of responsibility, without establishing the cause of the surges. Affected residents were paid £200 without any acceptance of liability by management.

RBKC claimed all necessary repair work had been done, but Daffarn was "not sure it ever was." Other witnesses shared his doubts.

Daffarn thought there was some fire safety advice in the TMO handbook in 2001, but after that did "not remember seeing advice given to residents as to what to do in the event of a fire until the residents themselves raised this as an issue."

Notices eventually went up advising of the "stay put" policy. This is standard for tower blocks, but Daffarn notes that it was undermined by the use of flammable materials in Grenfell Tower's cladding. He reported a lack of similar signs elsewhere on the estate.

He only received one Fire Risk Assessment. Other assessments were not circulated, as the TMO had no legal obligation to do so.

In November 2016, GAG blogged about “stay put,” predicting that, “it won’t be long before the words of this blog come back to haunt the KCTMO management and we will do everything in our power to ensure that those in authority know how long and how appallingly our landlord has ignored their responsibility to ensure the health and safety of their tenants and leaseholders. They can’t say that they haven’t been warned!”

Daffarn gives more detail of the specific refurbishment safety concerns. The question of cheap materials and poor workmanship in new kitchen windows had been raised before the fire. They were never properly sealed—during the fire, Antonio Roncolato, on the 10th floor, filmed smoke coming in through his closed windows.

The TMO acknowledged that problems were being reported. Residents were told Rydon had resolved the issues, and remaining problems would be covered by their defects guarantee. Residents were also told there would be a survey covering complaints, which “never materialised.”

Daffarn’s impressions speak volumes. When the flat doors were replaced in 2014, he was not convinced the new doors were more fire resistant than the old ones. He says he cannot prove this, but other residents make the same point, reporting a failure to answer their complaints. Daffarn also notes that in 2016 the TMO were served with London Fire Brigade enforcement notices for fire doors in other buildings.

The new doors were fitted with Perko self-closing devices. The device came out of Daffarn’s door soon after installation, preventing it from closing. To close the door, he had to remove the device.

RBKC Council then leader Nicholas Paget-Brown claimed after the fire that residents had chosen not to have sprinklers fitted so refurbishment works would be completed more quickly. Daffarn rejects this as “wrong. I was never asked if I wanted sprinklers to the Tower and I don’t know any other resident who was asked that question.”

Like other residents, Daffarn said pipework was boxed-in during the refurbishment without regard for access: during the fire “the boxing-in impeded my direct line of escape.”

The general disdain for residents had a direct effect on what happened during the fire. Knowing what has since been revealed about flammable cladding, Daffarn explained he had made some prior requests for information on this. These were about being kept involved in the process of the refurbishment, as at the time he “was not aware that the cladding materials posed a risk.”

Daffarn did not pursue the issue of cladding at the time because he was not told how the costs had been reduced over time, or that the materials had been changed.

He made several Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for

details of decisions by Rydon and the TMO. In some cases, the TMO claimed exemption from FOI legislation because it was an Arms-Length Management Organisation, not a direct public body. In other cases, it supplied the information.

Daffarn appends an email from Fola Kafidiya, head of Governance and Company Secretary at the TMO, claiming both simultaneously. She refused to release minutes of a meeting between Rydon and the TMO, both because the TMO is exempt and because “the disclosure of such commercial communication would, or would be likely to, prejudice the commercial interests of the contractor.”

In December 2014, O’Connor and Daffarn wrote an open letter protesting the failure to consult and release FOI minutes. They removed an initial mention of the cladding from their final version, a decision Daffarn said he regrets.

Edward Daffarn’s witness statement vindicates the fear of residents expressed in a November 20, 2016 GAG blogpost that “only an incident that results in serious loss of life of KCTMO residents will allow the external scrutiny to occur that will shine a light on the practices that characterise the malign governance of this non-functioning organisation.”

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, is holding its next meeting on November 10, at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend.

Details:

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting

Saturday, November 10, 4 p.m.

Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk

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

For more information, visit: facebook.com/Grenfellforum



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