

Still no justice as phase one of Grenfell Tower fire inquiry closes

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Almost 18 months after the Grenfell Tower fire of June 14, 2017, which resulted in the deaths of 72 people, the warnings of the Socialist Equality Party and the Grenfell Fire Forum that the official inquiry would be a whitewash have been confirmed.

Phase one of the inquiry, taking witness and expert testimony regarding the night of the fire, will complete within days, more than a year after its first hearing in September 2017. It has been a harrowing experience for those who gave evidence and anyone following proceedings—except for the guilty who should have been forced to hear this testimony before a judge and jury.

Since the fire, there have been 13 convictions for fraudulent appropriation of funds, with an additional six people arrested and charged on suspicion of a public order offence in relation to a vile video in which an effigy of the Tower was set alight on Bonfire Night. In relation to the fire itself, however, not a single person has been charged or even arrested.

In July, it was reported that the police had interviewed under caution a grand total of three people. This is despite the fact everyone knows that the fire was accelerated by the flammable cladding on the building, commissioned by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) to cut costs. The resulting rapid spread of the fire meant that standard firefighting operational procedures for tower blocks, including the “stay put” policy advising residents to remain in their apartments, were fatally undermined.

It has subsequently emerged that the safety certificates issued for the building were factually incorrect. Evidence continues to mount of corporate criminality and culpability, with accusations that insulation manufacturer Celotex “knowingly misled buyers” about the safety certification of its products.

Robert Black, head of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO)—that managed Grenfell on behalf of RBKC—sent a memo to his

colleagues at 6 a.m. on June 14, 2017, as the Tower was still burning, saying, “We need to pull some of this together pretty fast in terms of health and safety compliance. We need all the information about the refurbishment as this will be a primary focus.”

The Conservative government promised after the fire that it would do whatever was necessary to make the UK’s tower blocks safe. Last month, it finally announced regulations banning the use of combustible materials on new buildings over 18 metres high and powers for local authorities to remove aluminium composite (ACM) cladding from private high-rise buildings, the cost to be reclaimed ultimately from building owners. However, this regulation does not cover existing buildings or new hotels and hostels meaning that the fixtures, fittings, sealants and glues used on Grenfell Tower can continue to be used.

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) has made recommendations on sprinklers, alarms and escape routes for all residential high-rise buildings that have also not yet been considered. This follows considerable evidence to the inquiry pointing to major health and safety shortcomings of the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, which contributed enormously to the disaster.

No funds have been made available to councils to install sprinkler systems, and many councils have not been provided with funding to remove and replace highly flammable cladding from tower blocks. Instead, the government is calling on councils already facing devastating budget cuts to spend millions on remedial works to private buildings. It has promised to meet the costs if private developers will not, but no funding has been allocated and there are no timeframes in place. No penalties have been introduced to ensure the action is taken seriously.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has committed to financial support for councils acting against private owners to remove ACM

cladding. But freeholders look likely to challenge legally new costs for removing cladding because the previous building guidance was unclear.

The majority of councils across London and in urbanised areas nationally are Labour Party-run, and evidence of Labour's complicity in implementing unsafe building regulations and use of dangerous materials continues to emerge. Labour-run Salford City Council in the north of England oversees the highest concentration of towers covered with ACM cladding (29) in the country.

In June, the government announced a joint expert inspection team to assist councils because of the slow progress of repairs of towers in the private sector. This week, Housing Secretary James Brokenshire admitted that taskforce has not started work yet and will not begin until next year. Of 183 private high-rise blocks found to have unsafe cladding, only five have so far been repaired. There are still no clear plans for 50 buildings considered unsafe. All 27 hotel towers with ACM cladding remain untouched.

This has all taken place as the "full, independent public inquiry" promised by Prime Minister Theresa May, that "needs to produce an interim report by the end of this summer [2017] at the latest," has been in session.

The inquiry was never intended to bring the guilty to justice. It is a fraud because it was convened, and is being overseen and directed, by the very capitalist state apparatus and its political representatives that are responsible for turning Grenfell Tower into a death trap. The inquiry was called under the 2005 Inquiries Act, which stipulates, "An inquiry panel is not to rule on, and has no power to determine, any person's civil or criminal liability."

Its chair, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, stated that it would be "limited to the cause, how it spread, and preventing a future blaze"—providing "a small measure of solace." He recommended excluding issues of a "social, economic and political nature" and May was only too happy to accept. Phony "consultation" meetings were held in advance to legitimise the inquiry. Asked about prosecuting the guilty, Moore-Bick said "An inquiry is designed to find out what happened. I have no power to do anything in relation to criminal responsibility."

There was initially huge scepticism among the families of victims, survivors and local residents about the inquiry. The efforts of the trade unions and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn were directed towards legitimising May's cover-up. Corbyn backed May's initial proposal, but when popular hostility made this problematic he wrote to her

suggesting a two-stage inquiry—the first along Moore-Bick's lines, the second to cover national issues. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) also overcame its stated concerns about not discussing broader political issues so it could "participate as fully as possible." When the inquiry began, the unions and Labour argued for full support, claiming that such appeals to the capitalist state were the way to achieve justice.

Moore-Bick then rejected submissions to appoint a local resident as assessor to the inquiry on the grounds that it would undermine his impartiality! In contrast, KPMG, one of the world's biggest business restructuring and advisory firms, was forced to step down a month into the inquiry from its role as the inquiry's project management adviser. KPMG had previously acted as auditor to three of the bodies under investigation, RBKC, Rydon, the main contractor on the refurbishment of the Tower in 2015/2016, and Celotex.

The SEP described the Grenfell Tower fire as an act of "social murder." We repeat our insistence that those guilty of social murder at Grenfell Tower must be arrested and charged. Those instrumental in the decision to add the cladding to Grenfell must also be arrested and charged. We demand:

- Justice for Grenfell means no cover-up and no inquiry whitewash!
- Arrest the political and corporate criminals responsible!
- Stop the scapegoating of firefighters!
- Quality public housing is a social right!
- For an emergency multibillion-pound programme of public works to build schools, hospitals, public housing and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century!

The author recommends:

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry and the case for socialism
[15 September 2017]



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