

Second phase of Grenfell inquiry delayed for a year

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As the first phase of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry concluded, its chair, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, announced that its next phase is unlikely to go ahead until autumn 2019 at the earliest.

The first phase concluded more than a year after its first session in September 2017. The inquiry has strict limitations about what can be discussed and when, with the first phase only taking witness and expert testimony regarding the night of the June 14, 2017 fire that killed 72 people.

Hearings for the second phase, which will focus on the circumstances and critical decisions which enabled the fire to occur, had been expected to begin in early 2019, but will probably not take place until late 2019, or even 2020.

According to Moore-Bick, there are still more than 200,000 documents that “need to be reviewed, redacted and digested” and then disclosed to core participants before phase two can even begin, with this process unlikely to be completed before autumn next year. In his concluding remarks to the last session of phase one, he said that, given “the scale of the preparations that have to be carried out, I think it unlikely that it will be possible to start phase two hearings before the end of next year.”

This means that it will have been two and a half years since the devastating fire by the time the second phase even begins. Without giving a date, Moore-Bick said that that his interim report on phase one will only be released “as soon as possible”. In all likelihood, this will not take place until well into next year. Given that every estimate made so far by the inquiry in relation to timing has been short, it could be years hence before a final report sees the light of day.

The claims that it is not possible to continue the inquiry for another year are part of a well-rehearsed charade, played out ever since the inquiry was commissioned by Prime Minister Theresa May. The inquiry has been

repeatedly pushed back, with initial assurances that an interim report would take place in the months after the fire. This was reneged on and a pledge that there would be a report produced by Easter this year was scrapped as hearings did not even begin until June. Supposedly insurmountable barriers to the efficient progression of the inquiry are repeatedly thrown up to justify the endless delays and to avoid any conclusions being made.

As with previous official inquiries, the ruling elite plans to drag out the Grenfell inquiry for as long as possible in the hope of dissipating public anger, and to facilitate their cover-up. In the case of the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster, it took 27 years for a jury to rule that the 96 Liverpool fans that died had been unlawfully killed, and a further year before six of those culpable were even charged. By this point many of the guilty parties were either dead or nearing the end of their lives.

The inquiry 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 in the first place. Despite its marginally broader scope, even when phase two does begin, it will still be confined to the narrow terms of reference set out at the start of the inquiry.

At its outset, Moore-Bick insisted on excluding all issues of a “social, economic and political nature” from the inquiry, which would instead be “limited to the cause, how it spread, and preventing a future blaze”—so providing “a small measure of solace.” 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.”

The inquiry whitewash parallels what is a virtually non-existent “criminal investigation” into the fire being carried out by the Metropolitan Police. In July, the Met announced that they had undertaken a grand total of three

interviews under caution in relation to the blaze, with no further information released since then. No arrests have been made, let alone charges laid against any individual or company for the social murder of 72 people.

What is in effect a suspension of the inquiry for another year is further proof of the fact that the inquiry and the concurrent police investigation are not aimed at revealing the truth but concealing it. The Conservative government does not intend to hold the guilty to account, but to protect the criminals in central and local government and the corporate entities who signed off on the “refurbishment” of Grenfell that turned a relatively safe concrete structure into a death trap.

One of the guilty parties is Arconic, and the last day of the inquiry heard testimony from the US company which manufactured the combustible cladding added to the tower in its 2016 refurbishment. In a combative and callously indifferent statement, Arconic’s lawyer, Stephen Hockman QC, told the inquiry that the spread of the devastating inferno was not the result of the flammable panels it manufactured, but due to the combination of materials used in the refurbishment, including plastic window frames and the insulation.

Hockman also declared that a “simple fire extinguisher in his hands [Behailu Kebede, resident of flat 16 where the fire broke out] would have made a big difference to the outcome.” He singled out the fire doors, ventilation system and the lack of sprinklers in the building, stating that had these been correctly in place then “the fire would have penetrated the building much less rapidly and thus all or at least much of the tragic loss of life would have been spared.”

While it is correct that the presence of basic fire safety features such as fire extinguishers, sprinklers and correctly installed fire doors that meet required specifications would have greatly helped in the containment of the fire, this defence only serves as a devastating indictment of the political and corporate criminals responsible for the fire. The fact is that such basic safety features were not in place, endangering the lives of hundreds of Grenfell Tower residents, with this situation then compounded by surrounding the structure in highly flammable material manufactured by Arconic.

It is well-known that the fire was massively accelerated by the flammable cladding on the building and that the cladding was commissioned by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) to prettify the building and cut costs.

The fact that Arconic felt emboldened enough to deliver

such a self-serving and unremorseful denial of responsibility for the spread of the fire, indicates that it feels safe in the knowledge that the inquiry will do nothing to bring those who are guilty to justice.

For the RBKC and its corporate partners in the housing sector it is now very much business as usual. While 11 families who were formerly residents of Grenfell Tower remain in “emergency” accommodation hotels 18 months after the fire, RBKC recently granted permission for a private developer to build the world’s most expensive care home complex. Just two miles from Grenfell Tower, 142 mostly one-bedroom and two-bedroom retirement homes will be constructed, some of which will be rented out for as much as £10,000 a month. Their sale value is calculated at an average of £3.6 million apiece. The luxury development costing half a billion pounds will also include three townhouses that will be sold for approximately £12 million.

The Socialist Equality Party and Grenfell Fire Forum repeat our insistence that those guilty of social murder at Grenfell Tower must be arrested and charged. We will continue to expose the inquiry and to campaign, along with local residents, to bring out the truth and establish justice for the victims of the Grenfell atrocity.

- 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 Grenfell Fire Forum will be holding the next of its regular meetings on Saturday January 26, 2019 at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend. Details below:

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting

Saturday January 26, 4 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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