

Initial Grenfell fire inquiry report to make “withering criticism” of London Fire Brigade

Tom Pearce
6 May 2019

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) is set to face heavy criticism from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, aiding the Conservative government in shifting blame from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) and other guilty corporate parties.

The official Grenfell inquiry is preparing its final first phase report on the events of the night of the inferno which cost 72 lives for publication in June.

The *Daily Telegraph* reports that letters are being sent out by inquiry head, Justice Martin Moore-Bick, to those people and organisations being criticised as part of a process known as Maxwellisation—to enable them to respond to findings before the complete report is issued.

One such letter is being sent to fire chiefs, “warning them they face withering criticism over their handling of the Grenfell Tower disaster.”

The LFB has come under immense pressure since the inquiry began, with a concerted campaign by the ruling elite to shift responsibility for Grenfell away from the negligence of the council, its Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, and various corporations that turned a safe building into a death trap during a “refurbishment.”

June is being cited as the tentative date for the end of the first phase, but the *Telegraph* felt obliged to note, “The legal process can take many months—it is suggested the Maxwellisation letters in the Chilcott Inquiry into the Iraq War took years—meaning the Grenfell report risks being delayed by several months.”

To set the stage to heap blame on firefighters for the deaths, the media has focused on comments made to the inquiry by LFB Commissioner Dany Cotton.

Cotton said she “would not change anything we did on the night.” To make clear that she was referring to the extraordinary circumstances confronted by

firefighters, she added, “I wouldn’t develop a training package for a space shuttle to land in front of the Shard [a famous London landmark].”

The LFB does have questions it must answer. Cotton’s statement refers to the impact the installation of flammable cladding had on turning a small kitchen fire into an inferno that engulfed the entire building. And though firefighters may not have been aware of the dangers posed on the night, the dangers were known years in advance—including by the LFB.

In 2009, the first warning of the tragedy to come was at Lakanal House in Camberwell, London, in which six people were killed. Responding to Cotton, Grenfell United, which represents many of the victims, wrote, “To not prepare for a repeat of Lakanal House and say chances are like a space ship on the Shard is flippant and disrespectful.”

But to focus exclusively on alleged LFB management failings ignores numerous factors that contributed to it being unprepared for a fire, the scale of which was unlike anything London firefighters had ever dealt with before.

In the first instance, the LFB was overstretched due to underfunding and cost cutting. Since 2008, funding cuts made the situation facing LFB a ticking time bomb, with then Conservative Mayor of London Boris Johnson slashing £29 million in 2013 alone. As a result, it was no longer even policy to send, as routine, an aerial ladder to high-rise fires.

At a protest that year at City Hall, a firefighter demanded of Johnson, “Will you accept responsibility in a criminal court when people die as a result of your cuts?” The following year, 10 fire stations were closed in the capital and nearly 600 firefighters’ jobs lost.

Secondly, during the initial firefighting operation at Grenfell, the LFB used the standard “stay put”

policy—based on the premise that high-rise buildings such as Grenfell Tower are built to be compartmentalized as a series of concrete boxes that, if correctly constructed and maintained, are isolated from each other, preventing the spread of fire.

However, this principle had been fatally compromised in Grenfell Tower because of the application of the highly flammable cladding and insulation on its exterior. The cladding acted as fuel, spreading the fire across multiple floors so that the building was rapidly engulfed. Moreover, the interior of the building was unsafe, including having just one stairwell that rapidly became filled with toxic, deadly smoke.

Grenfell Tower was so dangerously compromised that a “catastrophic event” was only a matter of time, as the Grenfell Action Group warned RBKC just months earlier.

Yet, in February for example, Channel Four aired a documentary, *Grenfell: Did the Fire Brigade Fail?* that started from the flawed premise of Moore-Bick’s inquiry that an informed judgment can be made based solely on an examination of what happened on the night of the fire. It concluded that 55 out of the 72 who died did so because they got the wrong advice from the LFB.

This conceals the fact that *all* the main factors that ensured such a horrific loss of life were present long before June 14, 2017.

So blatant is the scapegoating of firefighters that Fire Brigades Union General Secretary Matt Wrack—who has so far co-operated to the hilt with Moore-Bick’s inquiry—stated ahead of the documentary’s airing, “The views I am expressing are being expressed more bluntly in fire stations, that this is in danger of turning into a stitch-up of firefighters... the only thing they did on the night was turn up to put a fire out and yet they are the people that have come under most scrutiny so far.”

He added, “The stark, staring obvious problem is how can you wrap a building in flammable material like that? Everyone asked that within hours and yet we won’t even look at that in three years and before they [the inquiry] start to reach conclusions on it, it could quite easily be 2021.”

This was a reference to the fact that Moore-Bick’s inquiry has been halted on the basis that before the second phase begins, hundreds of thousands of

documents need to be scrutinized by all parties. The second phase, dealing with the construction and refurbishment of Grenfell Tower and the circumstances and decisions leading up to the disaster, will not even begin to take evidence until 2020 and it could then last years.

Proceeding along the same glacial pace, the Metropolitan Police announced, as the first phase of the inquiry ended, that it could “take years, not months” to conclude its own investigation.

The Met has not yet arrested anyone in relation to the social murder of 72 people and said in March that no-one will be even be considered for arrest, possibly for years hence, as the “police investigation must take into account any findings or reports produced by the [Grenfell Tower] Inquiry, *including its final report* .” [emphasis added]

Only then and only if “the police investigation concludes there is sufficient evidence to consider criminal charges” would the Met submit a file “to the CPS for its consideration.”

The Socialist Equality Party and Grenfell Fire Forum demand that those responsible for social murder at Grenfell Tower be arrested and charged.

* Justice for Grenfell means no cover-up and no inquiry whitewash!

* Arrest the political and corporate criminals responsible!

* Stop scapegoating the firefighters!

* Quality public housing is a social right!

* For an emergency multibillion-pound public works programme to build schools, hospitals, public housing and all the infrastructure required in the 21st century!

For further details visit: facebook.com/Grenfellforum

The author recommends:

London Metropolitan Police cite Grenfell Inquiry to justify not pressing criminal charges: End collaboration with the inquiry now!

[9 March 2019]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact