

Second phase of Grenfell Tower Fire Inquiry resumes: the judicial fraud continues

Charles Hixson
26 September 2021

After five weeks' summer recess, over three years of hearings, and over four years since the June 2017 criminal fire that killed 72 people in a tower block in the middle of London, the Grenfell fire inquiry resumed this month with no end in sight.

With blanket immunity granted to all those associated with facilitating the disaster until the entire process finishes, demands are being made for immediate prosecution of those already revealed as culpable.

Testimony in the first week of Phase 2 came from Dr. Barbara Lane, who has already presented important evidence pointing to the criminality of those responsible for the fire. She severely criticised the work of fire risk assessor Carl Stokes during the 2014-2016 refurbishment of Grenfell Tower.

She blamed Stokes for failing to consider the external wall of the Tower, part of "a collective protective measure," when relying on it to prevent fire from spreading between flats. This omission would render the stay-in-place emergency policy unsuitable.

Her most devastating criticism dealt with the critical element of flammable cladding. Grenfell Tower was enveloped in highly flammable cladding during the "refurbishment," which was critical in allowing the spread a small fourth floor kitchen fire that engulfed the entire 24-storey building within minutes. Stokes had originally named this as a potential hazard in 2014, but in a June 2016 assessment, he removed it from the hazard list and labeled it "fire-rated." Lane said, "he should have read the fire strategy to understand what the materials were" and "to have information about the basic products used in the external wall to allow him to make that statement." She said "fire-rated" meant tested, and the walls hadn't been.

He should, said Lane, have left the cladding classified as a potential hazard and left it to the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) to sort out. KCTMO managed the building on behalf of the Conservative Party-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC). Instead, Stokes emailed them in April

2017 to say the cladding "complied with building regulations," an action Lane called "professionally reckless."

Lane noted that Stokes had failed to consider whether residents with disabilities had been identified along with plans to facilitate their evacuation. He had relied on a KCTMO database tracker system that was discontinued after September 2013, and never asked subsequently what had become of it. Despite Stokes' assertion that a legal framework existed to furnish a "means of escape," he had failed to identify dozens of vulnerable residents. Additionally, the Inquiry had previously heard that the Tower's lifts failed to meet "firefighting" standards and were unsuitable for evacuation. Stokes assumed they were suitable and failed to bring up the subject with the KCTMO.

The following week's sessions were devoted to closing statements from the central participants of modules 1 and 2, covering the Tower's refurbishment and the testing and marketing of cladding and insulation. Two groups of the bereaved were represented, with the assorted crimes and misdemeanors rehashed, and various organisations criticised for failing to identify materials as non-compliant and assuming others were responsible. These included Studio E Architects, lead contractor Rydon, cladding subcontractor Harley Facades, and fire engineer Exova.

Others blamed were the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, cladding manufacturer Arconic, and insulation providers Kingspan and Celotex. They were joined by the organisations which tested and certified the flammable products as safe, including the Building Research Establishment (BRE), the Local Authority Building Council (LABC), and British Board of Agreement (BBA).

Those criticised defended their roles by blaming poor and confusing building regulations which caused product manufacturers to insist their products were safe. They continued as before, pointing the finger at each other for failing to note the unsafe materials and practices which led to tragedy.

Last week heard testimony regarding the London Fire Brigade's response, with counsel questioning whether frontline firefighters had received sufficient training to deal with high-rise incidents. Water from a ground monitor near the tower, which was not used, could reach the 15th floor, and the aerial pumps could reach the top of the building.

Later in the week, ex-London Fire Brigade commissioner Ron Dobson testified he twice warned the government over the risk of external wall panels. Following South London's Lakeland Fire in 2009, he asked the government to warn housing companies to check building-envelope materials after Building Research Establishment's (BRE) tests showed the panels lacked "the necessary reaction to fire properties..." In 2012, he wrote police and fire minister Brandon Lewis, asking him to provide further safety guidance.

The concerns of Grenfell's residents were constantly dismissed as unfounded and irrelevant during the building's refurbishment. The illuminating new documentary, *Grenfell: The Untold Story*, shown on Channel 4 on September 8, showed how KCTMO's Peter Maddison and Kensington Tory Party MP Victoria Borwick treated members of the Grenfell Tower residents group with contempt.

Just as those Grenfell residents foresaw the imminent dangers facing them in their homes, millions now fear similar tragedies in their own buildings. Hundreds of thousands of people are still living in unsafe buildings enveloped in cladding similar to that which turned Grenfell into an inferno. Large numbers of people continue to live in unsafe conditions without having the means to make their homes safe. Those leaseholders risk being "fleeced" by unscrupulous "profiteering" landlords and builders, senior government adviser Dame Judith Hackitt warned last week. She advised all trying to make their homes safe from flammable cladding to insist on a second opinion on all proposals, warning, "There is a general lack of care for quality."

Hundreds of thousands of leaseholders currently have fire safety defects costing some £15 billion, of which only £5 billion is being offered by the government. They face bankruptcy, delays in starting families, mental health problems, and cannot move to take jobs.

Co-founder of the UK Cladding Action Group, Rituparna Saha, whose residence in Bromley in south London has flammable cladding, accused the government of "procrastination, incompetence and cover-up, at the expense of our financial stability and mental health."

The longer those responsible for Grenfell remain unprosecuted, the higher the likelihood of further disasters.

With such continuing admissions of incompetence and wrongdoing, the official Grenfell Inquiry's June 14

statement on the fourth anniversary of the fire offering their "deepest sympathy" rings hollow. "We shall continue to put every effort into uncovering the causes of the fire and remain determined to provide the answers which the community seeks."

This is an insult to the intelligence of the survivors and bereaved and all who seek justice for those who have lost lives. Everyone knows the causes of the fire. Decisions were taken in political and corporate circles to save money and increase profits that saw Grenfell Tower become a death trap.

Despite earlier promises, the government has refused to implement any of the main recommendations made after Phase 1 of the Inquiry. Since 1990 there have been 68 inquiries, with the Institute for Government noting that "only six have received a full follow-up by a select committee to ensure that government has acted."

This year saw the denial of any justice, after 32 years, for the deaths of 96 people at the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster. Despite many inquiries and inquests, including the 2012 Hillsborough Independent Panel report showing that police and football authorities were responsible for the deaths and a court verdict finding they were unlawfully killed, not a single person or organisation was ever held responsible.

Nabil Choucair, who lost six members of his family in the Grenfell fire, expressed the thinking of those increasingly doubtful that any justice can emerge from the hearings: "Four years on, I fear that those responsible for the fire are going to get away with murder. It's a shame that the public inquiry can't be stopped, and the criminal investigation is completed, and prosecutions put in place immediately."

The Socialist Equality Party and Grenfell Fire Forum calls for an immediate halt to the inquiry, which has no powers of prosecution, and for the Grenfell families to withdraw co-operation from it. Those guilty of heinous crimes must be arrested, prosecuted, and put on trial.

For further information visit the Grenfell Fire Forum.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact