

Grenfell fire inquiry continues scapegoating of London Fire Brigade

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From September 20 and stretching into November, the Grenfell Inquiry has heard a barrage of criticism of the London Fire Brigade's (LFB) role in fighting the Grenfell fire. The inferno on the night of June 14, 2017, killed 72 people in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea district of London.

The focus on the fire services is in the face of testimony implicating profiteers among building firms, suppliers and government officials in greed and wrongdoing related to the "refurbishment" of the tower just before the tragedy.

Phase 2 of the inquiry continues the disproportionate concentration already exhibited in Phase 1 on the efforts of a cash-strapped emergency organisation, LFB, to respond to a catastrophe created by rampant criminality in corporate and political circles.

On October 13, Dr. Paul Grimwood, principal fire engineer of the Kent Fire and Rescue Service (KFRS), claimed in his testimony that the LFB should not have been surprised by the blaze's spread outside the compartment of origin on the fourth floor and up the flammable facades. At Kent, he claimed, "we teach firefighters to expect failure. We expect a building to perform against the way it's designed to perform."

How can any organisation, let alone one of the critical emergency services relied on by the public, train for something it has no expectation of seeing?

Professor Chris Johnson, a communication expert, characterised the LFB as "a culture of making do and failing to tackle the limitations of existing radio systems in concrete structures."

The strength of the communication sets built into the firefighters breathing apparatus was a low one-watt to protect it from igniting, but risk assessments might have been made to enable better communication in a situation that saw "blind spots in the building" and a surfeit of radio messages. He asked why procurement for new technical equipment had stalled--an odd question to ask

about an organisation whose funding had been cut by 50 percent!

Steve McQuirk, who led the fire agencies in Greater Manchester, West Midlands and South Yorkshire, also argued that cladding behaviour should have come as no surprise at Grenfell. *Inside Housing* noted of his evidence that, "On training more generally, Mr McQuirk said the LFB training did not equip officers to think on their feet during an incident. He said they 'were trained to apply policies and models and that is not the same as being able to develop a tactical plan'—with "conformity to policy being the goal". McQuirk criticised the LFB for not putting an officer in charge of water supply and pressure, for not evacuating the building earlier, and for the lack of alarm systems.

José Torero, senior civil engineer professor at University College London and an expert who wrote reviews on the 9/11 fire, claimed the course of the fire was foreseeable: "What was missed is the consideration that building fabric was changing... Given the date of the refurbishment and everything that had happened in the past 10 years, I actually think that there is a measure of incompetence at all levels."

Again, the LFB is being criticised for not being aware of the criminal violations that had transformed a safe building into a death trap. He said the LFB had a "total disregard for technical competency and the understanding of building performance," was "not capable of delivering the role that society expects from it," and needed a "drastic culture change."

Even if the response of the LFB could be characterised as inadequate, testimony on October 28 made abundantly clear how and why its performance on the tragic night had been seriously compromised. Danny Friedman QC, representing the bereaved, survivors and residents of the tower, surveyed a long history of abuse by Labour governments that was central to the catastrophe.

In 2001, a senior civil servant to Labour fire minister Nick Raynsford advised him that fire policy “won’t take up too much of your time. The policy is one of benign neglect.”

Labour reforms in 2004 abolished the Central Fire Brigade Advisory Council, allowing local fire services to set their own targets. In 2010, the detailed inspection of fire authorities was replaced by a weaker peer review system.

Already seriously weakened by Labour, under a Conservative government in 2013 the training agency Fire Service College was outsourced to Capita, with responsibility for fire switching between administrative departments. After a 50 percent cut in staff, a senior civil servant reported in the same year that the government’s fire safety team “no longer have access to the necessary technical expertise” to produce effective policy.

Friedman recognized that firefighters were badly undermanned. In improving the LFB response to the fire, he said, “it is now obvious that better prevention, protection, policy and training would have done. Austerity prohibited these things...”

Referring to the Tory’s policy of “Localism” he said it “amounted to an abdication of the state’s general human rights duties to establish an effective legal and regulatory framework to protect life.”

Professor Leslie Thomas QC opened by reading extracts from 999 calls from the night. He stated that the “woeful” responses to them demonstrated “an absolute lack of awareness of the needs of the vulnerable.” He believed that “cuts and deregulation” led to “the inexperience, lack of training and dearth of real-time knowledge in the control room, as well as highlighting the poor communications to and from the incident ground.”

He noted a 2017 Fire Brigades Union (FBU) report saying control rooms were at “breaking point” because of “a decade of failed government policy characterised by cuts, mergers and underinvestment... We say this is relevant and pertinent in the light of the performance of the control room that night, working out of a smaller room in Stratford [East London], with no television, nothing to show them in real time what was happening...”

Speaking for the Fire Brigades Union, Martin Seaward reported that the control room dealing with Grenfell was not capable of receiving more than six calls at a time from trapped residents. Between 1.24 and 1.30 a.m. on the night of the fire, it received 20.

Friedman told the inquiry that the tragedy was a “human rights disaster.” He argued that violations

included the “rights to life of disabled and vulnerable residents” which were breached by the failure of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) to develop individual evacuation plans. Also, in deliberately limiting tenant interaction during the refurbishment, “consultation rights” were stymied as the authorities “discriminated against active residents.”

The KCTMO, which managed Grenfell Tower on behalf of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council, “were joined in seeing this refurbishment as an act of municipal generosity,” said Friedman, “not critical and long overdue investment, but a gift.” Such attitudes led to “unacceptable secrecy,” when “with greater transparency a campaign for compliance could have been pursued by residents to protect themselves.” Instead, they “were largely regarded as an inconvenience to be managed, rather than human beings.”

Stephanie Barwise QC claimed that despite having “sufficient funding” to carry out the safety work, a general “insufficient funding of social housing” had created a “defeatist strategy of make do and mend even if that meant compromising safety.”

Michael Mansfield QC, for a separate group of residents, described a “mindset” that failed to prioritise health and safety in the years preceding the fire. This he blamed on the 2010-2015 Conservative government of Prime Minister David Cameron. But the previous Labour government was equally culpable.

The inquiry has dragged on for nearly four and a half years (1,605 days) since first being announced and its end is nowhere in sight. Despite everyone knowing that it was rampant profiteering and criminality that led to the “catastrophe” predicted by Grenfell residents, no-one responsible has been prosecuted and put on trial.

Instead the inquiry is being used as the arena to firm up an agenda of pinning the blame almost exclusively on the London Fire Brigade. This charade needs to stop and the Grenfell families should end all co-operation with the inquiry. The culpable, who the inquiry has granted immunity to regarding anything they say, must be arrested and tried for their profit driven actions that saw the social murder of 72 people.



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