

UK government issues apology for Grenfell Tower fire, then blames construction industry

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15 December 2021

At the Grenfell fire inquiry, Jason Beer, QC, speaking on behalf of the Johnson government's Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), issued a formal apology for a lack of oversight which he claimed allowed local actors to violate regulations leading to 72 deaths in the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire.

His presentation was essentially the Conservative government's defence as the Grenfell inquiry enters its final section focusing on government actions. Beer sought to portray housing ministers as innocent victims of the construction industry and local officials:

"The Department is deeply sorry for its past failures in relation to its oversight of the system that regulated safety in the construction and refurbishment of high-rise buildings. It also deeply regrets past failures in relation to the superintendence of the building control bodies."

He added, "[Had there been a functional enforcement system with efficient assurance built in, non-compliance to the extent that gave rise to the Grenfell Tower tragedy may not have been possible."

The regulatory system, he admitted, was "unfit for purpose," and the department had assumed "that compliance was being monitored by qualified experts at the local level, and that non-compliance with the regulations would be identified by building control inspectors." That trust had been "misplaced and abused."

With the formalities out of the way, Beer quickly shifted the blame for the fire onto the construction industry. "No competent professional, acting in good faith, should have misunderstood or misapplied the statutory requirements", as set down in the Building Regulations and British Standards. If these had been followed, he argued, "a large-scale cladding fire could not have happened."

It was an astounding and brazen argument from the government, which under political parties of three different stripes—Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat—spent decades deregulating building construction and fire safety measures. The bereaved and survivors group Grenfell United responded, "It is a disingenuous attempt to carry on their

masquerade of innocence. We know government knew about the deadly materials and the consequences, but covered up the risks... Government enforced a system of de-regulation for financial gain."

End Our Cladding Scandal, representing leaseholders trapped in their homes with Grenfell-style ACM (aluminium composite material) cladding they cannot afford to fix, said Beer's testimony "confirmed what we have known for years: that residents have been betrayed by successive governments and civil servants for decades... Today, in one breath, the government has admitted that it presided over the unfit-for-purpose building safety system but, in the next, tried to avoid responsibility by blaming the construction and building control sectors for a lack of honesty and competence."

Beer's statement followed comments the previous day from Stephanie Barwise, QC, representing a group of the Tower's survivors and bereaved. She accused central government of instigating a deliberate and "prolonged period of concealment" of the dangers of combustible cladding, in "one of the major scandals of our time."

This was the product, Barwise said, of an "unbridled passion for deregulation." Three reports into two cladding firms in the 1990s were covered up, and the government balked at spending the estimated £500 million to fix the cost of dangerous cladding (currently estimated at £15 billion). In 2002, the government tested the same ACM cladding material later used on Grenfell; it failed five minutes into its 30-minute test, yet was not prohibited, which Barwise found "beggars belief."

After a 2009 high-rise fire at Lakanal House, in the London borough of Southwark which killed six people, the government suppressed information about its flammable cladding to "avoid giving the impression that we believe all buildings of this construction [are] inherently unsafe."

After promising to implement the coroner's recommendation encouraging the installation of sprinklers, nothing was done. Barwise characterised the government's attitude toward fires "as something to be covered up" so

building regulations including flammable materials wouldn't be disturbed.

The Inquiry, as it did in Phase 1, is taking every opportunity to shift responsibility for the tragic fire wholly onto the London Fire Brigade (LFB). At the end of November, London fire commissioner Andy Roe admitted that after Lakeland the LFB “knew there was a potential risk of wholesale failure of compartmentation.” This was a reference to the fact that high-rise tower blocks had been designed so that a fire in one flat will not easily spread to other flats. The events at Grenfell were “the most appalling example of institutional failure in recent British history, and we were part of that”.

Roe was made commissioner only last year, after his predecessor Dany Cotton retired early following Grenfell Inquiry chair Sir Martin Moore-Bick labelling the LFB an “institutional failure.” Speaking a few days before Roe, Cotton told the inquiry she had warned ministers about high-rise risks only months before Grenfell, writing of a “significant risk” of fires spreading between flats. She had also requested but not been granted a meeting with policing and fire minister Brandon Lewis “to make London a safer place to live.”

The WSWs has documented the inquiry's attempts to fix up the LFB as the overall culprit in the preventable deaths of 72 people in the tower. Two years ago, in a two-part series we analysed a report by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) detailing decades of government deregulation and cost-cutting.

Grenfell Tower was built between 1967 and 1974. The Labour Party was in office from 1964-1970. The FBU report noted that the risk of high-rise fires were well known to policy makers. The weak Fire Precautions Act 1971, which excluded high-rise buildings, was further weakened in 1980 under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. Its 1985 “Lifting the Burden” White Paper listed over 80 sets of regulations that could be scrapped to save money.

Thatcher's successor as Tory Prime Minister John Major (1990-1997) privatised the regulatory Building Research Establishment (BRE) and Tony Blair's Labour government (1997-2007) abolished the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC), passed the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 abolishing national standards of fire cover, and significantly cut the number of firefighters. These policies were continued by later Tory-led governments including the 2010-15 Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. Current Prime Minister Boris Johnson during his time as London Mayor from 2008/2016 closed ten fire stations and made other cuts, infamously telling protesting firefighters to “get stuffed.”

Given this history and the inquiry's previous testimony

damning the criminal activities of the companies supplying the materials, Barwise surveyed the wreckage of Britain's building regulatory bodies. The former government testing house British Research Establishment (BRE) “is a wholly flawed organisation which has effectively sponsored [Grenfell insulation manufacturer] Kingspan's activities for over a decade without raising the alarm, and has presided over a series of inadequate and dangerously misleading fire investigations.”

The private building control body National House Building Council (NHBC) was “at best gullible and at worst collusive when dealing with the manufacturers.” The Local Authority Building Council (LABC), which sold certificates for insulation makers Kingspan and Celotex, she called a “spineless members organisation.”

Jason Beer's laundry list of “accomplishments” and proposals of his department furnished at the end of his opening statement rang hollow. They included promises of new regulations of construction products and the implementation of new codes for assessors and national competence standards for people working in “higher risk buildings.” Given the broken promises the government has previously made to implement the inquiry's Phase 1 recommendations, and its failure in earmarking only £5 billion of the minimum £15 billion required to remove the flammable cladding that threatens the lives of over half a million leaseholders, all affected can only respond with contempt.

The Inquiry continued with an examination of how the Local Authority Building Control sold a series of certificates to Kingspan labelled “limited combustibility” while knowing this was misleading. Such detail is important but should be being heard at a criminal trial rather than at an impotent inquiry where witnesses are granted immunity and which has no powers of prosecution. Those demanding justice for the victims and Grenfell, and the bereaved must intervene to stop the proceedings, and demand immediate arrests and prosecutions of the guilty in corporate and political circles.

For further information visit the Grenfell Fire Forum .



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