

Nearly five years after the fire, the Grenfell Tower Inquiry has changed nothing

Charles Hixson**1 June 2022**

Nearly five years after the horrific fire that killed 72 people in London's Grenfell Tower and the government inquiry that began three months later, barely anything has changed.

Despite testimony revealing the criminal wrongdoing of manufacturers and builders, and the corruption and negligence of government officials, not a single prosecution has been brought forward nor a significant piece of legislation adopted incorporating the recommendations of the inquiry's Phase 1 report.

All those in corporate and political circles responsible for the Grenfell atrocity were given guarantees of immunity from prosecution by the inquiry.

The inquiry is now concluding its Phase 2 hearings, with a remit to establish why the fire took place, and is set to conclude in July—around one month after the June 14 anniversary. A report will then be written on its five years of deliberations. There have been 18 weeks of Phase 2 hearings this year, serving only to magnify the crimes previously revealed. This included Module 6, examining the role of central government in undermining fire regulations before the fire.

Testimony showed that the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government (2010-15) considered scrapping building control entirely as part of its red tape review; that senior fire engineer John Lewis of the National House Building Council suspected cladding manufacturer Kingspan of "concealing failed fire tests" years before Grenfell, admitting to the "corrupting influence of the desire to collaborate with industry; and that the government rejected basic competency standards for fire risk assessors to avoid "burdens on business."

Witnesses testified that the government had failed to heed the lessons of the 2009 Lakandal House fire, which also involved non-compliant highly combustible cladding, leading to the deaths of six people in south London. The Building Research Establishment (BRE) simply dismissed the findings of a report into the Lakandal fire and Stephen Williams, the minister responsible for building regulations in

the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), never bothered to read the document.

When the inquiry began Module 4 in mid-April, focusing on the response of local and central government in the immediate aftermath of the fire, lawyers for the bereaved told the inquiry that those searching for their loved ones were treated like criminals and that Conservative Party-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council officials sought to "instil fear" about Grenfell survivors as its response to the fire "collapsed."

Given the council's complete failure to offer any humane response to the survivors of the fire, anger erupted in the local community, with hundreds of people storming Kensington Town Hall on June 16, 2017, to demand those responsible for the deaths be brought to justice.

Providing aid to the fire victims and bringing those responsible to justice was the furthest thing from the minds of Prime Minister Theresa May's government, concerned above all with the social fallout. Meetings in the Cabinet Office briefing rooms on June 16 included several members of staff from Downing Street but were also attended by officials from the Ministry of Defence.

Senior civil servant Mark Sedwill emailed that the RBKC was "completely out of their depth" and "we should have prompted a DCLG intervention earlier." The following day Sedwill, who formerly served as May's national security advisor at the Home Office, suggested designating someone as "gold minister" to handle the situation: "They would have to drop everything else. I fear this will become our New Orleans otherwise." This expressed the government's concern above all with a similar outbreak of social unrest that had occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the United States.

In questioning Katherine Hammond, former director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS), inquiry lead counsel Richard Millett QC asked, "Did his presence [Sedwill's] indicate to you something of what was really going on, namely that there was a national security concern which required his expertise?" Millett added, "The reason I ask

you is because we know from earlier evidence that there had been civil unrest in Kensington, at the town hall, I think, before Mr Sedwill entered the scene, and there is, in his own words, a reference to Hurricane Katrina, ‘our New Orleans’.” Hammond denied that Sedwill’s intervention was required due to the threat of civil unrest.

In order to divert popular anger into safe, controllable channels, May established the official inquiry. The Tory government has since spent years ignoring its findings, despite initial promises to adopt suggested legislation. This is even as thousands of buildings in London and nationwide remain serious fire hazards.

Latest government statistics show that 111 buildings over 18 metres with the same ACM (aluminium composite material) that spread the fire on Grenfell Tower have still not completed remediation. Of these 58 have yet to have their cladding removed, and 31 have had no work done on them at all. Residents in these blocks have lived in fear of another Grenfell for years, with all remedial work initially scheduled for completion by June 2020.

The government boasts to have implemented about half of the inquiry’s recommendations. But these include standard advice such as having “all fire and rescue services ensure that their personnel at all levels understand the risk of fire taking hold in the external walls of high-rise buildings” and ensuring “that the owner and manager of every high-rise residential building be required by law to provide their local fire and rescue service with information about the design of its external walls.”

Even the office of London Mayor Sadiq Khan, an advocate of the capital’s super-rich property developers, said it was “extremely concerned” about the consequences of inaction, and about ministers having “failed to complete a single recommendation.”

Last month, Home Secretary Priti Patel said the government would retain the “stay put” emergency fire policy that played a major role in the mass death at Grenfell, including 41 percent of its disabled residents. She claimed the legal obligation on building owners to draw up personal emergency evacuation plans (PEEPs) for residents as recommended by the inquiry—would not be “proportionate” nor “practical” nor “safe” to implement, and that “stay put” was “generally safer.” Instead she suggested that fire services receive the location of disabled residents, but only in buildings known to be serious fire risks!

Savage cost-cutting and deregulation by successive governments led to Grenfell Tower being transformed from a safe building into a death trap. Cost is yet again cited as the reason why nothing will be changed. The Home Office consultation response paper on PEEPs states, “We calculate that for just a single member of staff to be on-site 24/7, it

would cost approximately £8,800 to £21,900 per building per month.”

Grenfell United, made up of the families of victims and survivors of the fire, denounced the Home Office report as “a disgrace”. London Fire Brigade commissioner Andy Roe said PEEPs was a “key recommendation”, adding, “It is vitally important that people feel safe in their homes and have certainty about how to leave their building.” At the same time, the LFB announced that more than 1,000 buildings in the capital have serious fire safety failings.

Summing up the government’s contempt for the victims of the inferno was the April testimony of Eric Pickles, former Secretary of State for the DCLG. He denied that adopting the coroner’s recommendations after the Lakanal fire would have prevented Grenfell, that the deregulation frenzy under Cameron had anything to do with the disaster and referred to 96 victims at Grenfell rather than 72—confusing it with the number killed in the Hillsborough disaster.

The final tally of those who died at Hillsborough was actually revised up to 97 with the July 2021 death of Andrew Devine. After over 30 years of hearings, coroners’ reports, inquests and an inquiry, not a single person was ever brought to justice for the Hillsborough deaths.

While discussing the deregulation frenzy of the Cameron government he served in, Pickles told Millett to “use your time wisely” as he had a busy day ahead. Millett retorted, “Your department was always subject to the deregulatory agenda and you are now seeking to recast that narrative and to underplay what was in truth an enthusiasm by your government for a deregulatory agenda, which led to a complete absence of proper checks and balances so far as concerns fire safety.”

Inside Housing reported that among the documents Millett produced was a letter from Pickles to Tory Chancellor George Osborne and Liberal Democrat deputy prime minister Nick Clegg “that outlined a plan for ‘regulatory ins and outs’ from his department.

“In a table, ‘Part B (Fire safety)’ was listed as an ‘overall regulation out’, with estimated savings of £25.4m per year.”

For further information visit the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook page



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