

UK: May forced to call public inquiry into Grenfell Tower fire

By Robert Stevens
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In the face of growing anger locally and nationally at the scale of the death and destruction in the inferno that consumed Grenfell Tower in West London, Prime Minister Theresa May was forced to call a public inquiry.

With many people still to be accounted for from a block that was home to between 500 and 600 people, London's Metropolitan Police announced that the death toll from Wednesday's fire had reached 17. According to several accounts, many or even all who lived on the highest floors perished.

The police said such was the difficulty in searching the blackened and scorched 24-storey shell that finding and identifying the remaining victims could take weeks. Of the people who managed to escape or were rescued by emergency services, nearly 30 are being treated in six hospitals, with 17 in critical condition.

Nine firefighters were hurt in the rescue. Fire Commander Dany Cotton said she was "concerned longer term about the mental impact on a lot of people who were here. People saw and heard things on a scale they have never seen before."

The deaths are the political responsibility of the government, the local authorities and big business. The Grenfell Action Group (GAG) and residents have been warning of the risk of a serious fire at the flats for more than a decade. Just seven months ago, the GAG warned that failings in the estate management organisation's health and safety practices were a "recipe for a future major disaster." These warnings were dismissed by Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), which manages the property on their behalf.

The anger among residents is palpable. In some cases, local residents have denounced and even chased

off representatives from the media reporting from the scene, as they are viewed as mouthpieces of those responsible for the fire and deaths. One male resident speaking to the *Guardian* said, "They really don't care about working class citizens."

A young woman pointed at the destroyed tower and said, "A building like that wouldn't fly in a rich area. But because everyone who lives here is poor and working class, that's why it's happened."

Maria Virgo, who has lived opposite Grenfell Tower for 11 years, told the BBC, "There's a lot of separation between classes and people are telling me that it's down to social cleansing." Virgo said of an estate which is adjacent to some of the most affluent areas in the capital, "This area's always been working class. It's starting to become a bit less so now, and the working class are feeling that they're being left without a voice."

Another resident, Christina Simmons, said "They don't listen to us. We're being neglected and ignored. I'm bloody angry."

May announced the inquiry once safely back in Downing Street after carrying out a perfunctory visit to the Grenfell site. Her handlers ensured she was in and out of the area in just 30 minutes, not daring to meet a single local resident.

Such is the ruling elite's visceral hatred of the working class victims of the fire that she would not guarantee when asked if the families would be rehoused in Kensington and Chelsea. She said through gritted teeth only that "the government will make *every effort* to ensure that they are rehoused in London, and as close as possible to home."

Fully 600 firefighters' jobs and 10 fire stations were lost when Boris Johnson—May's foreign secretary—and then-London mayor ran the capital. The cuts resulted in

response times of firefighters rising in more than half of London's wards. Johnson issued the obligatory crocodile tears over the victims of the Grenfell fire. However, a clip shows a Labour Party London Assembly member telling Johnson in 2013, "How can cutting fire stations, cutting fire engines, cutting firefighters' posts not be a reduction in fire coverage?" The Assembly member continued, "You've lied to the people of London in your election." In reply Johnson said, "Oh, get stuffed."

Another item circulating on social media is a list of 312 Conservative MPs who refused to support a parliamentary bill last year that would have forced landlords to ensure their properties were "fit for human habitation." At least 71 were themselves private landlords.

The Tories blocked recommendations from coroner's reports into two tower block fires in London and Southampton in 2009 that included proposals to have information for firefighters on site about complex tower blocks, to encourage the wider use of sprinkler systems and a review of fire safety regulations.

Despite residents demanding it for years, no centralised fire safety system existed in Grenfell Tower as the result of such callous disregard for the living conditions of the working class. A report by the trade journal *Inside Housing* claimed that fire safeguards were temporarily removed from Grenfell Tower during refurbishments in 2016. It is not clear whether the "fire-stopping systems," designed to prevent the spread of fire between floors, were replaced.

Anti-Tory sentiment was evidenced in Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's warm welcome when he visited the Grenfell estate. However, Labour is implicated just as much as the Tories in the horrific deaths at Grenfell and in other fires.

In 1999, under the Labour government of Tony Blair, a Parliamentary Select Committee promised an urgent review of building regulations governing the design and installation of external cladding on tower blocks after a fatal fire in Ayrshire, Scotland that noted "one of the main areas of concern was the cavity between the cladding and the concrete, or other material, behind it. This created an air channel that contributed to the rapid upward spread of fire."

Most of London's borough councils are Labour-run. Camden council in northwest London had to admit that

it was now conducting "additional fire safety checks" of tower blocks after it emerged that the firm responsible for the cladding and another firm involved in the "refurbishment" of Grenfell Tower were also involved in recladding five blocks consisting of 706 homes in Camden.

There are around 4,000 high-rise residential towers in the UK. Based on an estimate of around 500 people living in a block, this represents at least two million residents. Many are clad with the same cheap or similar materials as Grenfell. The vast majority do not have sprinkler systems and other centralised alarm systems.

Announcing a "full, independent public inquiry" that "needs to produce an interim report by the end of this summer at the latest," May continued, "We need to ensure that this tragedy is fully investigated."

Nothing of the sort will ever happen. As with every public inquiry called by the ruling elite it will end in a whitewash.

In 1989, 96 Liverpool football club supporters were crushed to death at Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield, as a result of police opening a main gate and directing them into two already dangerously overcrowded terraces. The official report into the deaths ordered by the then-Tory government resulted in no one being charged, made to stand trial, or even disciplined. It took 27 years for the families of the victims to even have the truth uncovered, let alone secure prosecutions, through the findings of the Hillsborough Independent Panel in the face of bitter hostility from successive Tory and Labour governments.

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