

After Grenfell Tower fire:

May government admits hundreds more UK tower blocks potentially clad in combustible material

By Robert Stevens
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The Conservative government has revealed that 600 high rise buildings have “similar” cladding to Grenfell Tower, west London where the inferno on June 14 claimed the lives of at least 79 people.

A Downing Street spokeswoman added that samples from some tower blocks had been tested and “so far, three samples have been found to be combustible.”

The revelations came just minutes after Prime Minister Theresa May made a statement to parliament on the fire in west London.

With the final death toll still unknown and public anger growing, May has called a public inquiry into the fire as part of the Conservative government’s attempt to cover up its own role and that of its corporate friends in mass murder.

Organised under the 2005 Inquiries Act, the terms and scope of the inquiry—which could take years to complete—will be fully controlled by the government. Its purpose is to divert social and political discontent into safe channels and to forestall the necessary criminal proceedings and the immediate arrest and charging of those responsible. The phoney inquiry is being legitimised by all the parliamentary parties of the ruling elite, including the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn.

May was forced to speak precisely because the news was about to break that 600 tower blocks in the UK are covered in cladding, with many potentially clad in the same combustible material as Grenfell. This played a critical role in the spread of the fire, which in a matter of minutes became an inferno engulfing 24 storeys from the single fourth-floor apartment where it is understood to have originated.

May began her speech by stating that she had just received “an important update, which I felt was essential to bring to the attention of the House this morning.”

The “government have arranged to test cladding in all

relevant tower blocks as a precaution. Shortly before I came to the Chamber, I was informed that a number of these tests have come back as combustible.”

These admissions underscore the systematic nature of the criminality imperilling the very lives of huge numbers of working class people, which led directly to the deaths of the Grenfell residents.

In response to immediate expressions of public outrage, the government tried to backtrack with a communities department spokesman saying, “The situation is that 600 buildings have cladding. It is not similar, it is all types of cladding.”

However, in the next breath the spokesman confirmed that they did not know just how many of the 600 had aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding—the type used on Grenfell. He said, “Of those 600, some of those would have ACM; we want to test them to see if they have ACM.”

In the last week, the powers-that-be have played down the numbers who have died in an attempt to quell mounting anger. Now the number of people exposed to the same flammable cladding is also being micromanaged.

After first saying seven high-rise blocks of flats in four local authority areas in England had combustible cladding, Communities and Local Government Secretary Sajid Javid later informed MPs that it was 11, across eight local authorities.

It was confirmed that nine tower blocks in Salford, in northwest England, are clad in similar material that may be combustible, as well as flats in the deprived north London borough of Tottenham.

Even as May was speaking, residents living in 700 flats in five tower blocks on the Chalcots estate in the Swiss Cottage area of the capital received a letter from Camden council informing them that their cladding was the same as Grenfell Tower.

This would be immediately removed, it said. According to the chairman of the residents' association of one of the blocks, Burnham House, "immediately" means that work to *begin* removal will only start in six weeks' time.

In Barnet, which has 24 high rises, samples of panelling are being taken from three tower blocks, not being immediately removed as should be the case, after it emerged that rain-screen panels are similar to those installed at Grenfell.

Despite these grave dangers to public safety, social housing tenants across London and nationally are not being immediately rehoused.

No centralised emergency action is being taken to remove dangerous material from tower blocks, with May saying only that the government had the capacity to "test more than 100 buildings a day" for the type of cladding used.

Local authorities are being asked to check the cladding used on their blocks on an entirely ad hoc basis, even as it is confirmed that combustible cladding surrounds many high rises in the UK, making them death traps. It could take many months for cash-strapped local authorities to establish the nature of the cladding used on tower blocks they control.

Moreover, this only applies to housing under the control of local authorities and not private developments.

This is without addressing the absence of fire-sprinklers in many high-rises, and that most have only a single entrance/exit. Given the vast scale of the remedial work required to make tower blocks anywhere near safe, involving rehousing around 2 million people, May refused to say if the government would provide the necessary billions of pounds in funding.

Asked the question several times in parliament, May responded vaguely, "We are looking at a variety of ways in which we can ensure that that is indeed the case."

This continues the utter disregard for the lives of working-class residents that led to the Grenfell deaths. Prior to the fire, the management organisation which ran Grenfell on behalf of Tory-run Kensington and Chelsea council were warned repeatedly that lives were endangered in a building that lacked any essential safety standards and which housed an estimated 600 people.

May declared in parliament, "We cannot and will not ask people to live in unsafe homes."

She was only able to issue such a bare-faced lie without challenge because her "inquiry" is being legitimised by Corbyn, who went out of his way to again endorse it.

The victims and their families had been "let down, both in the immediate aftermath and so cruelly beforehand, and the public inquiry must establish the extent and by whom," he said.

Despite May's statement admitting that cladding from

other tower blocks was combustible, Corbyn never once referenced this in his reply. Instead, he stated in terms chosen to be as anodyne as possible that "Grenfell Tower residents and the north Kensington community deserve answers, and thousands and thousands of people living in tower blocks around the country need very urgent reassurance."

Neither did Corbyn demand to know what had emerged from the Metropolitan Police's "criminal investigation" launched a week ago. So far not a single person has been arrested or charged in connection to an incident in which scores of people, including many children, have died.

Instead, virtually the entirety of Corbyn's reply was framed as advice to May as to what the inquiry should focus on, such as "the appalling failure of the fire alarms at Grenfell Tower," so that it can be more convincingly sold to a population horrified and angered at the terrible deaths.

His support for May's bogus proceedings is rendered doubly obscene by the fact that the previous day—in response to the Queen's Speech—Corbyn said the government was one "without a majority, without a mandate, without a serious legislative programme, led by a Prime Minister who's lost her political authority and is struggling even today to stitch together a deal [with the Democratic Unionist Party] to stay in office."

Corbyn will make no statement linking the Grenfell inferno with political opposition to May because of the risk of arousing a genuine mass movement against a widely despised government that he might be unable to control. Instead, he is using the occasion to prove to the ruling class that Labour under his leadership can be trusted to run its affairs should May's government fall.

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