

Grenfell Tower fire: BBC Panorama reveals corporate criminality

By Paul Bond
24 May 2018

As the official Grenfell Tower Inquiry opened, *Panorama* special *Grenfell: Who Is To Blame*, with reporting by Richard Bilton of the BBC, offers a devastating indictment of the corporate forces responsible for the June 14, 2017 inferno that claimed 72 lives.

Grenfell Tower was covered in flammable cladding and insulation materials that had never been tested together. Bilton's investigation draws out how companies were denying their responsibility for testing, jeopardising the safety of many thousands living in social and privately-owned housing tower blocks.

Bilton accuses manufacturer Celotex of having "knowingly misled buyers" about the safety and testing history of the insulation material. The formula for the Celotex product that received the safety certificate was different and *safer* than the product used at Grenfell Tower.

Bilton was at the scene shortly after the fire and has returned regularly to speak to survivors, including Mahad Egal, Luca Branislav and Maria Rahman. Of the three survivors interviewed, Mahad is still in temporary accommodation with his family. Luca, who rescued a woman from the blaze, is shown in distressing scenes having to move back again into temporary hotel accommodation following a fire next door to his new flat. Maria, whose brother Hesham perished, is traumatised, tearfully saying she only wants justice for all those who died.

Bilton's starting point is the 2014 refurbishment—which covered Grenfell Tower in highly flammable material—as he seeks to identify those responsible. Architect Andrzej Kuszell's design had created the gaps that allowed the fire to spread. Even given the relaxation of building regulations, says Bilton, it was Kuszell's job to make his plans safe and he failed.

Lead construction company Rydon was paid £8.7 million to refurbish Grenfell Tower between 2014 and

2016, winning the contract by undercutting rival bids. Central to this was cutting costs by using cheaper materials. They failed to fill the gaps at the side of the windows, allowing the fire to spread.

Bilton states that it was Rydon's suggestion to swap non-combustible materials for cheaper, flammable, substitutes. Fire expert Arnold Tarling, describing the fire as "totally avoidable," said the company had opted to use a "highly flammable material that is also highly toxic when burned." This was "utterly wicked," he said.

As the building was to use a new combination of cladding and insulation materials, says Bilton, Rydon were legally responsible for conducting safety tests, and "we don't think they did."

Bilton has to doorstep his corporate targets, as none answered his questions via emails or responded to telephone calls requesting interviews. In person, most refused to make any comment. Rydon's chief executive and largest shareholder Robert Bond, thought to have been paid a salary of £424,000 in 2016, is the exception. Asked whether it was not his company's job to make Grenfell Tower safe, he protests, "We did."

Bond denies that Rydon had been required to conduct safety tests, saying the cladding was specified by the council and approved by Building Control and by the architect.

The complacency was breathtaking: testing was not required, he said, because the materials were "deemed to comply."

Rydon simply worked to the existing "regulatory framework," which explains why they decided not to set aside money for potential losses or expenses related to the fire. Their September 2017 accounts stated bluntly, "[N]o provision has been made in the accounts for any matters arising from these tragic events."

Bilton states that there was no question that the materials used on Grenfell Tower should have been

tested, and said, “We think it’s illegal that it wasn’t.”

The cladding and insulation materials had never been tested *together*. The makers of both products knew they were being combined at Grenfell Tower, but did not warn of risks.

Panorama tested both the cladding and the insulation. When the cladding gets hot its plastic centre melts and burns, immediately igniting the highly flammable insulation. Bilton sums it up, “The more you look at what was on Grenfell Tower, the more horrifying it becomes.”

When the programme showed footage of fire tests being conducted on the insulation material used at Grenfell, Bilton has to explain that this was the actual rate of fire spread: “It’s not sped up.” Later we see footage of Grenfell shot by firefighters and their shock at the rapid spread of the fire.

Professor Richard Hull, Professor of Chemistry and Fire Science at the University of Central Lancashire, notes that the fire began on the fourth floor and spread up 24 floors in just 15 minutes.

Hull, an expert in the behaviour and suitability of fire retardants for plastics, explained that there was so much flammable material on Grenfell Tower that it was the equivalent of four large petrol tankers burning at the same time.

The rate of fire spread was compounded by the toxic smoke released. This contained hydrogen cyanide, which is 20 times more toxic than carbon monoxide.

All this raises questions about what safety tests Celotex’s product *had* passed. Bilton said insulation had passed safety tests for use in specific conditions, but Celotex “knowingly misled buyers” about its suitability, claiming it was appropriate for refurbishing buildings taller than 18 metres when it was not. The company also claimed it was suitable for use with a range of cladding panels when it was not.

Celotex had been warned that their marketing was misleading, but continued with it.

The insulation used on Grenfell Tower had *never* been tested for use on tower blocks. When the safety certificate was issued, Celotex had been using a different formula, containing extra fire retardant. Bilton spells it out: “We think a more flammable version was then sold for public use,” adding, “We have been advised that the company’s behaviour could amount to corporate manslaughter.”

Bilton attempted to get answers out of Robert Black, CEO of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) at the time of the fire. KCTMO had overseen cost-cutting measures and ignored warnings

from residents and Grenfell Action Group about the potentially “catastrophic” implications.

As with Robert Bond, Black said KCTMO were just operating within existing frameworks. KCTMO were managing Grenfell Tower for The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council, he said, and relied on the advice of experts.

Black had signed the planning application.

Walking down the street with him in an attempt to get answers, Bilton asked Black whether this was a planning application on the cheap, saying the survivors of Grenfell wanted to know the answer. Black refused to answer, stating that he would appear at the public inquiry.

Everything Bilton revealed confirms the characterisation of Grenfell Tower as an act of social murder perpetrated by the corporate and political elite. The gutting of building and safety regulations, cost-cutting and profiteering came at the cost of many lives.

The documentary states that corporate manslaughter charges *may* be brought forward to deal with such criminality. However, corporations only end up with a slap on the wrist while individuals responsible evade justice.

The programme powerfully documents the determination by the working-class community to establish justice. Early on, we see a large placard put up immediately after the fire, asking, “Why do we the working class have to suffer again?” As Hesham Rahman’s sister, Maria, pledges, “Not years. I will not wait years.”

The documentary, reflecting the anger among the victims and bereaved and millions of workers and youth, ends with Bilton stating that on Monday, “the Public Inquiry finally heard evidence for the first time, but the government still hasn’t banned flammable cladding and insulation. No change. No arrests. No peace for Grenfell’s victims.”

The programme is available in the UK for the next 11 months.

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