

The Fires that Foretold Grenfell—Documentary reveals how UK governments ignored lessons of previous fire tragedies

By Margo Miller
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Documentary directed by filmmaker Jamie Roberts and first shown on BBC Two, now available on BBC iPlayer.

The Fires that Foretold Grenfell, a well-researched, powerful documentary, is essential viewing for anyone seeking to understand the causes of and background to the June 2017 Grenfell fire tragedy. It includes harrowing interviews with survivors of five fires across the UK over a span of 45 years, their families and firefighters.

It demonstrates that the inferno which claimed 72 lives was not an accident, but a social crime. It was the result of the pro-big business policies of successive governments which ignored the lessons of five tragic fires, resulting in many avoidable deaths.

The voiceover explains that “previous disasters show that Grenfell was inevitable” given years of criminal neglect—including the tearing up building safety regulations and the authorities ignoring toothless inquiries—in pursuit of creating a business-friendly environment at the expense of people’s lives.

After each of the documented fires, instead of learning the lessons—don’t wrap buildings in flammable materials, install sprinklers in all high-rise buildings, scrap the stay-put policy in the event of a fire—Labour and Conservative governments callously shelved the recommendations.

Following the Summerland fire in Douglas, on the Isle of Man, which took place on the night of August 2, 1973, eyewitness Tina Brennan tells the camera “nothing like it should have ever happened again in the UK.” Fifty lives were lost in the fire, including 11 children, and 80 people were seriously injured in the blaze that, in intensity and ferocity, was likened to the Blitz.

The Summerland Holiday Park opened in May 1971, promising to be the Isle of Man’s answer to Benidorm. The park was able to cater for 10,000 tourists, with facilities spread over five floors, including a dance area, restaurants, public bars and spaces for holiday games. Despite the size of the building there was only one small entrance. The front of the building and roof were made of a transparent acrylic sheeting, Oroglass, designed to permit a sun tan even if it was raining outside.

The fire began when three boys smoking cigarettes accidentally set fire to a disused crazy golf kiosk. The kiosk collapsed against the building’s exterior—made from Galbestos that had limited fire resistance properties. The fire travelled unseen up the wall’s interior, igniting the flammable Oroglass on the roof. A catalogue of mistakes compounded the disaster. Some 3,000 people inside the building were told not to panic and stay put. The fire service was not alerted for 20 minutes, and the first call came from a taxi driver who saw the fire from outside the building. When the fire suddenly ignited in a huge explosion, and molten acrylic sheeting fell on the holiday makers below, pandemonium broke out. Fire doors were locked so people were trampled trying to escape through the front entrance.

Dancer Sally Naden, who worked at Summerland, says she saw a “waterfall of flames... I saw somebody throwing their child over the balcony, hoping somebody would catch it.”

A public inquiry into the fire ran from September 1973 to February 1974. Though there was criticism of the delay in evacuation and use of flammable materials, no one was held to account and the inquiry found the deaths were due to misadventure.

The inquiry, however, found the following:

1. The rapid-fire spread and high fatalities were due to the building being wrapped in highly flammable Oroglass.
2. The advice to stay put hindered the evacuation.
3. Corners were cut when the building was erected, such as omitting sprinklers, which had they been in place, would have meant a much smaller fire.

Firefighter Godfrey Cain, who was at the scene, said, “My view is, in a fire, get out.” In relation to Grenfell, he says, “[T]he mechanism of the fire was very similar to the Summerland fire 40-odd years ago.”

The final report recommended sprinklers in all large buildings and improved safety regulations. In 1975 the House of Commons passed the Summerland amendment stipulating that the external walls of all large buildings must be fire resistant. Had this been acted upon there would have been no Grenfell fire.

The programme deals with four major fires in tower blocks following the Summerland disaster and a pattern emerges. Recommendations on safety are ignored by builders and local and central government, or ditched. After each fire, an inquiry is held to appease public anger, but no one is charged, even though—as is shown in the programme—culpability is evident.

In the 1980s, Knowsley Heights in Huyton, Merseyside was the first tower block to be wrapped in combustible cladding. It was also the first block to go up in flames, in 1991. Fortunately, no one died. The Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher had gutted building regulations, reducing 300 pages to 16. It introduced guidance, known as Approved Document B, that determined what materials could be used in construction, but which did not require cladding to be inflammable.

Firefighter Les Skarrats, who fought the Knowsley Heights blaze, declares, “I despair of a country that wraps residential tower blocks in flammable materials.” That fire also revealed that the cladding used acted as a rainscreen, so water sprayed from the fire brigade’s hoses, “was just hitting the external cladding and bouncing away”

In 1999, a similar fate awaited Garnock Court in Irvine, North Ayrshire. One year before, Garnock Court had been given a facelift—and wrapped with deadly cladding. This time there was one fatality. A firefighter who attended the incident, Ian Murray, tells viewers, “That cladding should have never been on Grenfell Tower, on any building, especially on high rises.” The local *Herald* screamed out its headlines, “The cladding was to blame.”

A parliamentary select committee inquiry into the blaze made ten recommendations, including a ban on the use of combustible cladding on high rise buildings. John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister in Tony Blair’s 1997-2007 Labour government, received the final report, but it was “kicked into the long grass.” The official verdict from Blair’s government was that Thatcher’s Approved Document B was sufficiently robust.

In 2005, another fire at Harrow Court in Stevenage, Hertfordshire, led to three fatalities, including two firefighters and a woman they were attempting to rescue. There would have been more casualties had the residents not ignored the stay-put policy. The Fire Brigades Union called for a review of this policy, which depended on individual flats being hermetically sealed and protected from the spread of fire for up to an hour while residents awaited rescue. The refurbishment carried out during the cladding compromised compartmentalisation, permitting rapid fire spread, rendering the stay-put policy void.

The Blair Labour government rejected recommendations from the investigation following the fire to install sprinklers and end the stay-put policy.

In 2009, Lakanal House in Camberwell, London, was the scene of the next fire in a tower block encased in combustible

cladding. Six people were killed, including dressmaker Catherine Hickman, aged 31. The programme uses actors to re-enact Catherine’s final desperate 40 minutes as a 999 operator reassures her rescue is on the way. She died metres away from firefighters who were beaten back by the flames.

The coroner ruled Lakanal House abided by the building regulations in Approved Document B. The inquest did, however, recommend the retro-fitting of sprinklers in high rise blocks. The report went to Community Secretary Eric Pickles in David Cameron’s Conservative government, who wrote to local authorities merely requesting, but not making compulsory, the retro-fitting of sprinklers. Cash-strapped local authorities ignored the request.

Labour MP for Camberwell and Peckham, Harriet Harman, was a key figure in Blair’s government. She was Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and its chairman from June 2007 to September 2015—during the Lakanal fire and its aftermath—under leaders Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband.

We watch Harman condemn the stay-put policy, declaring, “None of us did enough.” This is duplicitous. Governments, including ones in which Harman was a central figure, took decisions that led to the avoidable deaths at Lakanal and later at Grenfell. Three years before the Lakanal fire, the Blair government updated Approved Document B. The guidance on cladding was changed, so that cladding tested for flammability would be subject to data testing only, which merely simulates the effects of fire on materials.

The Fires that Foretold Grenfell underscores the Socialist Equality Party’s indictment of the powers-that-be for social murder. The fires were the product of the unrestrained operation of the capitalist market, promoted by all the political parties in Westminster.

The Grenfell Fire Forum invites readers to its next meeting to discuss these vital issues on Saturday November 10, at 4 p.m. at the Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk, London W10 6SW (nearest tube Latimer Road).

For further details visit the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook page

To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>