

UK Conservative government votes down Grenfell Tower safety recommendations as inquiry resumes

By Charles Hixson
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An amendment to the Fire Safety Bill, which would have incorporated safety recommendations called for at the end of Phase 1 of the Grenfell Inquiry, was soundly defeated last Monday night in Parliament.

The devastating fire in June 2017 at the tower block in London's Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea of Kensington claimed 72 lives due to unsafe cladding and other safety failures—eventually resulting in the setting up of the Grenfell Inquiry.

First published in October 2019, the recommendations would require building managers and owners to share information about design and wall materials with the Fire and Rescue Service, to make building residents familiar with evacuation and fire safety instructions, and to undertake periodic inspections of individual flat entrance doors and lifts. At the time, Housing Secretary James Brokenshire promised to implement all recommendations “without delay” and “in full.”

Now, as Minister of State for Security at the Home Office, Brokenshire insists that the bill must be voted into law before changes can be made. Because current consultations on fire safety will not conclude until October 12, he argued Labour's amendments could “not hasten any more than what the government is intending and proposing.” More detail was needed.

These pathetic justifications were immediately seized upon by Labour spokespersons pretending to be shocked by the Tories' “shameful U-turn” and “broken commitment.”

Shadow Minister for Policing and Fire, Sarah Jones MP, complained, “This is a shameful U-turn from government. They have broken a solemn promise to take action following the Grenfell Inquiry. ... Labour will continue to press the government to do the right thing.”

A fuller statement came in a *Guardian* article last Wednesday, by former Kensington Labour MP Emma Dent Coad, who saw the tower burn four days after winning her seat. She recounted her “face-to-face meetings” with

ministers Sajid Javid, James Brokenshire, Robert Jenrick, Esther McVey and Nick Hurd along with then Prime Minister Theresa May. “They all listened,” she recalled, “heads tilted, furrowed brows. Every one of them committed to support the recommendations emerging from the Grenfell public inquiry.”

Continuing to relate her utter surprise over Tory MP's votes against the amendment, she continued, “Shame on them all. And shame on Felicity Buchanan, the current MP for Kensington, for voting with them.” Dent Coad cited the words of a friend who contacted her—“We've wasted three years”—and finished by claiming, “This government has made fools of us all.”

But who is *she* fooling? In 2017, five days after Sir Martin Moore-Bick was chosen to head an inquiry that would clearly be limited in scope and was clearly a creature of the Tory government, Dent Coad initially called for his resignation. What in the meantime did she think the Inquiry could accomplish under this skewed mandate?

In a September 15, 2017 statement, the Socialist Equality Party (UK) exposed Moore-Bick's claims of impartiality and the entire agenda of the Inquiry. “What impartiality! The inquiry was set up by the Conservative government, whose policies of austerity, deregulation and privatisation provided the framework for the Grenfell catastrophe. This same government has determined the inquiry's remit and appointed Moore-Bick as its chairman. Moreover, the inquiry's leading personnel are drawn from government departments ...”

None of this stopped the Labour Party—including leader until April this year Jeremy Corbyn—from supporting the whitewash to this day.

The inquiry was paused for five weeks to allow the corporate parties responsible for the Grenfell atrocity to take advantage of various villas in paradise locations during the summer holidays. But on Monday, it was the resumption of what Richard Millett QC, lead counsel to the Inquiry,

previously described as the “merry-go-round of buck-passing.”

Managing surveyor Zak Maynard of Rydon, the main contracting firm overseeing the “refurbishment” of Grenfell—that transformed it into a death trap—said in his testimony Monday that he knew his company planned to retain £200,000 in savings rather than passing it along to the Tenant Management Organisation (TMO). The TMO managed the building on behalf of the local authority.

Along with cladding subcontractor Harley, Rydon had saved some £577,000 in the agreement between the firms. However, the full extent of the savings was allegedly omitted from the TMO, with Rydon claiming Harley had saved £376,175. Maynard claimed it was not his job to question the arrangement: “That was the figure that Rydon had agreed to provide as a saving, so it wasn’t my position to question that. It had been decided above me.”

As for Harley, its boss Ray Bailey spent Tuesday and Wednesday fighting off accusations that they had pressed for the highly flammable aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding to be used on Grenfell’s refurbishment before the project even started. He denied that he led in the selection of materials or that he advocated the use of ACM: “There were a number of different products being talked about, over which I had no control at all, and I think Studio E [architects] didn’t have a lot of control.”

Claiming he did not know the contracted cladding material would burn, Bailey insisted his company was not “ultimately” responsible for ensuring they met building regulations, despite receiving a letter of terms from the main contractor stating he had responsibility for design and “compliances.” During his testimony, Bailey was accused of simply delegating fire safety checks of the insulation to “the very person who had made it and was selling it.” He argued that his company was convinced by insulation maker Celotex that the combustible foam met regulations.

Bailey said the “Class 0” qualification for the Celotex product allowed him to assume it had limited combustibility throughout rather than just on the surface. “I think this is the conclusion ... it’s quite widespread throughout the industry.” He speculated that the designation had originated when “some industry self-interest body created this false class.”

Bailey hired his 25-year-old son Ben as Grenfell project manager in February 2015. When asked by Millett what experience his son had, Bailey reported that his son had also been project manager two years previously at Merit House—which had also used Alucobond rainscreen cladding, a type of ACM.

Another close tie was examined when Harley’s Mark Harris testified on Thursday. After Reynobond material had

been chosen for the refurbished walls, UK sales manager at Arconic, Debbie French, thanked Harris for his “hard work and perseverance in putting Reynobond forward,” promising “lunch or dinner at some point.” When in October 2013, lead architect Bruce Sounes asked him for budget cladding options, Harris presented only Reynobond. When asked if he had enjoyed a “cosy relationship” with Arconic, he simply claimed, “There’s no interest to Harley in having a much lesser content value—it was the client budget that drove it away from that so we were just being helpful.”

Anger is growing in the Grenfell community in North Kensington at the Grenfell Fire whitewash. Last month, survivors group Grenfell United refused to meet with Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick, citing his close relationship with property developers and failure to implement Phase 1 recommendations. They wrote, “Bereaved families and survivors sat with you and opened their hearts, and your actions have thrown that back in our faces.”

These events are a further devastating indictment of an inquiry designed to delay and prevent the prosecution of those responsible for social murder at Grenfell. It has no powers of prosecution and has, in alliance with the Tories ensured that anyone among the corporations being testimony is immune from future prosecuting!

Now even Moore-Bick’s toothless “suggestions”—that tower block tenants be granted a few minimal safety rights, are, after being “welcomed” by the government—tossed into the bin. The Socialist Equality Party calls on Grenfell survivors, the bereaved and their supporters to withdraw all cooperation with the inquiry, insist on its shutdown and demand the immediate arrest and criminal prosecution of the guilty parties.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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