

State of Tension - Britain & the Grenfell Tower Fire

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The fire is now precipitating a full-blown national crisis argues Jonathan Shafi, and instead of fear and racism people are showing strength and solidarity in times of crisis.

It is fair to speculate that crisis meetings are being held in the heart of the British State and very likely in the security and intelligence services. The crisis they face is not easily resolvable. It exists on many fronts and it is shaking the country. It would be wrong to imagine that behind the scenes everything is ticking over as normal. For this is anything but a normal situation.

The last few weeks have seen a political earthquake take place. The tremors will be felt for a long time to come. The man who had been demonised by the entirety of the system prevented Theresa May from extending her majority. Now she languishes without allies, trying desperately to cobble a deal with the DUP while in the process destroying the principles of the Good Friday agreement.

But they have no choice. That nightmare scenario overlaps into another one: Brexit. The reason for which they called the election on the first place. And, on top of that should they call another election, there is every likelihood that Jeremy Corbyn would win. The UK government has still not filed its positioning papers for the first round of negotiations on Monday.

Building, for some time and in various ways, has been a backlash against the ruling class. They have not been unaware of this, and have resorted to increasingly shrill divide and rule tactics, and to deploy weaponised propaganda against those who dare to challenge them.

But dare they did. But the old, tired, rusted out gun barrels of the Sun fell on deaf ears. And, their clapped out arguments were hidden from public debate. May couldn't meet members of the public never mind argue her case in front of the nation in a debate. Some say that is her weakness. Certainly, she's no leader - but the real weakness is the ideas and the vision of a party who have shown themselves only to be wreckless, and wretched. As one Tory MP admitted: 'that's the last time we will be honest with the public.'

"The campaign to toxify Corbyn failed in epic proportions. Amber Rudd, Home Secretary in an election marred by terrorists atrocities barely held on to her seat against a party whose leader had been covered with smears and allegations about his sympathising with terrorism from every corner of the establishment in ruthless and coordinated manner. The Tory party is left utterly humiliated. And yet - they must cling on."

This situation must involve a very high state of tension between a huge section of the population and the levers of official power. The media, the political class, the banks and the corporations now no longer have a hegemonic grip on ideas. Nor, more worryingly for them, do they have any obvious solutions. But now tension is boiling over to a real, deeply felt sense of anger and injustice. The type of anger that doesn't ever disappear. And the type of injustice that can't be diffused with the usual platitudes.

The fire is raising questions about everything. It seems to speak to the whole of the pre-existing crisis. The imbalance of power and wealth, the ambivalence of the ruling elite towards the lives of the working class majority, and the rapidly ebbing legitimacy of the ruling order. But more than that, the story and the meaning ascribed to the horror of the events in Grenfell Tower is not being set out by the elite, but by the people who live in the area who have rallied with courage and dignity.

People who have mobilised solidarity when others didn't. People who have spoken out in ferociously cutting terms about the nature of the housing and its faults. And about much more than that. About the class divide, and the way in which power is used to entrench the super-rich while people live in conditions that should be alien to a country with so much wealth. And neither should London have lost over 500 firefighters – who have been national heroes – thanks to Boris Johnson's austerity. For many, things have just gone too far.

And in this moment of national outrage, and of national grief, the government is simply nowhere to be seen. Theresa May cannot meet the residents. She can't because it is less of a humiliation not to meet them. That's how deep the ravine between the Prime Minister and the people really is. Government ministers have refused to give answers or appear on television. They know they have no answers that can prevent the tide of rising anger, to rise further still. They – who are meant to be the leadership of the country – are scurrying for cover from ordinary people who want answers to questions that have led to the death of their friends, family and neighbours. A death toll that is, it would seem, being held back from public knowledge as a means of preventing civil instability.

In all of this, they have failed to call for a national minutes silence. They apparently don't want people thinking about it if they can help it, far less joining an oppositional movement. They know a public enquiry won't be enough. They know that as each day passes they are increasingly sucked into the swamp. They may now be too late to call for a period of national mourning with any credibility.

There is no obvious replacement for May. She is now effectively a hostage of the state that needs someone to symbolically rally the country around. It has been Jeremy Corbyn – the “extremist Marxist” – who has been performing the function of Prime Minister. He's been asking the questions only he can raise given the complicity of the Tories, meeting residents, organising solidarity, bringing together community leaders. Bringing together the nation. This cannot be allowed to continue, they think as they deploy the Queen. Let's take it out of politics. But the crisis has a way of snowballing, as all it has done is raise the question: if it's secure enough for the Queen to visit, why is it not for the Prime Minister.

“The fire is now precipitating a full-blown national crisis for the ruling class. It punctuates a pre-existing social, political and economic calamity. Its rawness of emotion is tied inextricably to the fact that millions know this could have been avoided and that it is the failure of the system Theresa May represents.”

They have no leader, they are bunkered down and know they are widely despised. No one is waiting in the wings to save them. Every hour of every day that passes is a years worth of political combat compressed into a pressure cooker that is ready to explode. The deaths of those people are political, and having a political impact. Those who say it's not political are wilfully ignorant, or worse, accessories to covering up a crime.

But the deaths are first and foremost personal. They were family members, and friends. They had lives that really matter. They had their own stories and skills and strengths and weaknesses like all of us. They are members of a community, and an extension of all of us as human beings. They had dreams, and plans, and problems and stresses. Like everyone does. But the lives of and living

standards of working class people have been derided and dashed at every turn by the ruling elite. They are the ones who the technocrats and the corrupt political class want to clear out of the city to make way for the oligarchs, big business owners and the spivs. And so for years they have tried to destroy the solidarity of ordinary people.

But solidarity has come in droves. Faith barriers have been broken, much to the dismay of those who have been injecting poison into our national life. What thugs those well presented commentators who tried to drive a wedge in our society over skin colour and religion look now. Every race colour and creed has banded together in practical, on the ground ways. People are getting organised, in direct aid and in sending political message too.

And that message is not being delivered or devised by even Jeremy Corbyn, the leader around which a huge section of the population is looking towards. He is simply amplifying the concerns articulated by residents and local campaigners. That is an act of leadership. The whole country is watching and having it confirmed that a ruling elite and their system has done this. But crucially this is being told through the voices of the working class and the local community. Those people are on the frontline of the era of austerity and neoliberalism. Voices that have been shunned for decades. People that the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland now dares not meet.

This is not an ordinary moment. This is not going to go away. This is at a profound and fundamental level shaking this country to its very core. A demonstration has been called in London tonight. Those marching deserve and require the solidarity of us all.

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P.S.

* 16TH JUNE 2017:

<http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2017/06/16/state-of-tension/>