

Great Britain: Six months after the Grenfell Tower Fire

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More than six months after the horrific fire in London's Grenfell Tower, which in mid-June 2017 killed 81 and wounded countless more in mind as well as in body. the ruins of the 20-story block still stand as a potent symbol of social injustice in one of the richest areas in Britain. And this neighborhood's domination by wealth has undoubtedly influenced many aspects of the investigation into that unspeakable disaster.

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As for the Inquiry into the fire, when its Chair remarked that he hoped it would provide "a small measure of solace" for the victims' families, one journalist justly commented: "It's an error of gargantuan, class-ridden insensitivity to talk in such terms to people some of whom have survived an inferno and have lost everything." [1]

One particularly outrageous example of such insensitivity was the revelation in mid-September 2017 that the chief executive of the organization "managing" the block was still being paid his full six-figure salary, despite being forced to resign in the wake of the carnage. [2]

But overshadowing even this iniquity is the decision by the judge in charge of the Grenfell Inquiry — the far from plebeian Sir Martin Moore-Bick — to ban Grenfell tenants themselves from giving evidence to the inquiry. What would they know about it, after all?

Just before the initial hearing held by the Inquiry, which began on December 4, 2017, the campaigning organization Inquest called for the bereaved and survivors to be placed at its heart, rather than having their voices effectively "silenced."

GT survivor Adel Chaoui, who had lost family members in the inferno, argued, "We fear the prime minister's current position does not go far enough to assure us that we'll have access to a balanced and unbiased inquiry... We urge her to reconsider." In fact, many of the families have warned Prime Minister Teresa May that they might not participate in the public inquiry unless the judge makes it more inclusive.

Unlike Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who did what almost any other human being would have done — talked to and sympathised with survivors — May restricted her interactions to the firefighters on the scene.

Writing in January 2018, six months after the disaster, it's hard to know where to start regarding the

fate of those who survived. The ill-fated tower block (Britspeak for high-rise apartment building) stood in the middle of one of the richest areas in London and indeed of the whole country.

The relationship between the ultra-rich of south Kensington and people like the Grenfell Tower tenants is summed up by an elderly tenant who, asked whether the two groups ever mixed, replied “Oh no. We worked for them.” Significantly, differences in life expectancy between different parts of the borough can be as much as 20 years.

Such upper-class domination was evident in the composition of the local council and, until recently, parliamentary constituency. While the area was unexpectedly won by a Labour candidate in the June 2017 parliamentary election, the council remains stubbornly Conservative, with the polished accents of its representatives undermining their claims of solidarity and empathy with Grenfell tenants.

Yet the lack of social privilege has not prevented GT tenants from organizing effectively. Even pre-disaster, a Grenfell Tower Action group existed and had argued among other things for sprinkler systems to be installed in their tower block and others.

The difference these might have made hardly needs emphasising — but the same is true of only too many other aspects of this tragedy. Members of the first firefighting crews to reach the Tower later expressed marked frustration over the time it had taken to send backup fire engines to the scene, hampering their efforts to evacuate more people from the burning ruins.

Fire Brigade Union (FBU) leader Matt Wrack commented that this may have been caused by closures of local fire stations, adding that cuts to firefighter numbers and “a decades-long process of fire safety deregulation” should be a key part of any inquiry into the disaster. [3]

“Lucky but Vulnerable...”

Apart from its immediate horrific consequences, the Grenfell Tower fire also raises more fundamental and long-term questions over “social housing,” as council housing is now euphemistically known.

While the Chief Executive of the Tenant Participatory Advisory Service insisted that “We’re seeing a shift — the voices of tenants are finally being listened to, particularly in matters of safety and regulation,” a council tenant commented that “To be a social housing tenant today is to feel lucky but vulnerable. Fewer and fewer people now have a secure tenancy and the Grenfell tragedy has made us question the safety of those homes we do have...[and] has highlighted how few properties are available.” [4]

Yet above the chorus of condemnation, class relations in Britain remain inviolate. With a “Tory” (Conservative) government still nominally in charge, there is a reluctance to address the issues raised by the Grenfell disaster through any further use of supposedly “limited” public funds, with the refusal of additional resources to councils aiming at measures to prevent a Grenfell in their own back yards.

For example, housing minister Alok Sharma turned down a request by Nottingham city council for £6m (roughly \$14 million) to install sprinkler systems in all its tower blocks, arguing that the work was “additional, not essential.” In this environment it seems likely that funds for such “additional” concerns will be drawn from the people rather than their representatives.

Wandsworth council in south London, for example, has stated that the £24m needed for fire safety

work will come from leaseholders' service charges, at a cost of up to £4,000 each — very possibly to the very “ordinary” residents themselves!

Along the same lines, it was revealed in early 2018 that Robert Black, chief executive of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, is still receiving his full six-figure salary while he “helps” the TMO respond to the many simultaneous investigations into the disaster.

Cruel Hope

More lamentable, of course, than any of these post-disaster catastrophes is the tale of the fire itself — how it came about, and its (avoidable) toll in terms of victims of all ages and circumstances.

While the fire raged, for example, police helicopters hovering above the tower offered the “cruel hope” of rescue, with tenants rushing up to the top floors in a desperate search for safety. As one desperate survivor asked later: “Why were they going to the top when they should have been going down? They [my family] were let down...”

An Evening Standard reporter reported on the date of the fire itself (14th June), “I got a call at around 1:30 a.m. that there was a fire in west London...The radio was reporting that there was a terrible fire at Grenfell Tower...When I arrived it was a horrible, nightmare scene. About a third of the tower was alight...”

“Rubbish was falling and I could hear screams from the building — I felt helpless, there was nothing I could do. I can’t emphasise how brave the fire brigade were — I’ve never seen anything like it...[A]t that stage, we didn’t know if the tower would collapse...I’ve covered loads of tragedies, but that ranks as one of the worst.” [5]

Yet according to FBU leader Matt Wrack, the first fire crews to reach the tower were “frustrated at the time it took to send back-up engines” This was a result of cuts, of fire stations closed and fire engines axed. Ten fire stations had closed in London and more than 550 firefighters had lost their jobs.

The fire and its terrible consequences have of course raised much wider social issues than fire safety per se. David Lammy, Member of Parliament for the working-class London district of Tottenham, wrote some months afterwards: “This atrocity [has] forced us to consider things that for far too long we have been happy to ignore — the state of social housing, the human cost of the creeping privatisation of services... the atrophy of local government in the face of budget cuts, together with rampant commercialisation and gentrification.”

Any such reconsideration didn’t last long, as Lammy noted: “Within a couple of days the dog whistle sounded in social media...and in parts of the broadcast and print media. Grenfell Tower residents were illegal immigrants, unwelcome, the underclass.”

Even worse, if anything, is his conclusion that “What strikes me when I speak to Grenfell survivors is the lack of dignity and humanity in the way they have been treated...It is not right that parents are sharing rooms with their teenage children and that the bereaved have no...place to call their own and no place to grieve.” [6]

Along similar lines, months after the disaster in January 2018 Socialist Worker could report that “Grenfell fire survivors [are] angry at delays and obstructions,” [7] while at about the same time the auditing company KPMG — clearly more used to dealing with the affairs of multi-million-dollar

businesses — was dismissed from the Inquiry when concerns were raised over potential “conflict of interests.”

The company is also auditor for (a) the owners of Celotex, which produced the insulation used in the Tower, and (b) both the Royal Borough (so-called) of Kensington and Chelsea, not to mention (c) Rydon Group, the contractor which had last “refurbished” Grenfell Tower. According to the newly elected local Labour MP Emma Dent Coad, [8] this was ‘yet another example of the government’s deafness to local needs.’ [9]

“Not Very Important” People?

Indeed, Rydon itself has tarnished its reputation through association with the various blunders involved in maintenance of the Tower.

As one writer to my own local paper pointed out, people fighting for the maintenance of a neighborhood hospital, the Whittington, were “shocked” by the decision of its board to employ Ryhurst, a subsidiary of Rydon. Speaking for herself and fellow activists, she writes, “We are really shocked at the irresponsible, insensitive and immoral decision of the board to employ...a company that may possibly be facing charges of corporate manslaughter.” [10]

Equally outrageous was a leaflet recently sent to K&C residents by the Conservative council leadership which asked people to “rate how important to you and your family” the Grenfell Tower disaster and other “local issues” are, from 0 — “not very important” to 10 -- “very important.”

For many of the impossibly wealthy residents of the borough, it appears there are “very important issues” that have nothing to do with the unnecessary deaths of more than 80 working-class people.

The refusal of the current “lame duck” Tory government to produce the funds necessary to avoid future disasters is another indication of such class carelessness. Four months after Grenfell, “[t]he government is failing to release funds to improve the fire safety of dozens of tower blocks following the Grenfell Tower disaster, despite promising that a lack of financial resources should not hinder essential works.”(11)

This mirrors the fate of Grenfell Tower ex-residents themselves. Only a tiny proportion of survivors have been able to obtain anything remotely comparable to their previous, hardly luxurious accommodations.

Despite a surplus of almost £300m in council funds, only 26 of the families made homeless by the disaster have been permanently housed. Meanwhile 203 households, including 226 children, remain in hotels or bed-and-breakfast accommodations.

The main form of “housing” has been in hotel rooms, of which the following is only one highly graphic example:

“Most nights Ibtisam and her five children go to sleep squeezed into two double beds, next to each other in their small hotel room in central London. She shares one bed with her 12-year-old and 13-year-old daughters, her two younger sons, four and six, share the other, and the 11-year-old boy sleeps on a mattress on the floor. While Ibtisam’s response is stoical: ‘I don’t want to complain,’ it is clear that the situation is causing major difficulties; there’s nowhere for the children to do their homework, nowhere to wash clothes, nowhere to cook. Added to this is a perception that public sympathy is on the decline: “People think we are spoilt, living in hotels, that we are being picky...”

which of course is the opposite of the truth: “We just want to get out and get on with our lives.” (12)

Even more seriously, and very recently, comes news that some Grenfell Tower residents may be faced with the threat of deportation on the grounds of “illegal” immigration, as reported in early February 2018 by the UK Guardian.

Lasting Damage

A psychologist leading the response to the tragedy notes that the emotional impact of Grenfell has spread far beyond those immediately involved, with at least 11,000 people possibly affected. More than 1300 have been treated by the Central and North West London NHS Trust (CNWL) since the tragedy, mainly for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the CNWL Director has commented that it could be years before the full mental health toll of the tragedy would be revealed.

But any return to “normality” seems blocked by countless examples of insensitivity to local people’s situation. Late in 2017, the location of Wornington College, the branch of Kensington and Chelsea College closest to the Grenfell site, has posed concerns to ex-tenants, many of whom (or whose children) were students there.

Threats to close K & C through merging it with another west London college have mobilized Grenfell tenants, who have now managed to “stall” the merger. Although the future is still uncertain on this issue, the effective resistance of these newly-formed activists marks a positive turn in local politics for the area. [11]

As can be seen from the dates of the various articles cited, concern over and interest in the Grenfell Tower tragedy has continued here for many months. But the underlying factors — the sustained neglect of and failure to renew council housing, notably under the Tory government — have remained firmly in place.

The era of the tower-block is long past, and perhaps that’s something to be thankful for, but with its passing has also come the demise of council housing in general. It has been replaced by what is now known as “social housing.” This is a euphemism that includes housing association accommodation, which is considerably less affordable.

Such policies in no way guarantee a return to the low-rent, secure housing opportunities available in the 1950s and early ’60s. That relatively benevolent Keynesian era was replaced with Margaret Thatcher’s siren call to council tenants giving them the “right to buy” their council flats and houses. Unfortunately too many responded, fatally undermining the availability of genuinely “affordable” housing.

For all its faults, and recognizing only too clearly the unspeakable tragedy of its — literal — fall, Grenfell Tower embodied that comparatively generous era. Let’s hope that today’s Corbynistas, helped along by the ineptitude of the current Tory government, can bring back at least some of the comparatively generous social benefits offered during the postwar period.

Better still, of course, would be an upsurge that swept away all the double-talking politicians whose “reforms” have been so wounding to Grenfell tenants and their counterparts all over this less-than-United Kingdom.

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P.S.

* Against the Current:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/5250>

Footnotes

- [1] We need an alternative to the Grenfell Tower inquiry,” Letters, Guardian 9/18/17
- [2] Robert Booth and Amelia Gentleman, “Grenfell Tower fire: executive still on full pay despite resignation,” Guardian 9/13/17.
- [3] Amelia Gentleman, “Grenfell Tower fire crews voice frustration over engine delays,” Guardian 10/3/17, 12.
- [4] Dawn Foster, “Change can’t come soon enough...’, Guardian supplement, Rebuilding Social Housing,” 9/29/17, 3.
- [5] Quoted from the Evening Standard in a Guardian review of 2017, 12/28/17
- [6] David Lammy, “Those responsible for the horror of Grenfell must pay,’ Guardian 12/26/17.
- [7] “Grenfell fire survivors angry at delays and obstructions,” Socialist Worker 1/3/18, 6.
- [8] Significantly, voters in the 2017 General Election, which took place only days before the fire, had elected a Labour MP in the constituency for the first time in its history.
- [9] Diane Taylor, “KPMG loses Grenfell role over ‘conflict of interest.’ “ Guardian 1/8/18, 11.
- [10] Shirley Franklin and others, “Shocked by Grenfell Tower company’s role at hospital,” Letters, Islington Tribune, 1/5/18, 13.
- [11] Colin Waugh, “Save Wornington College,” Post-16 Educator, January-March 2018, 9