

TWO weeks on and the blackened shell of Grenfell Tower still has the power to shock. The flowers and pictures of the missing against nearby railings and cars left parked in the street by owners who will never return to claim them, have an unbearable poignancy.

People in North Kensington have a right to be angry. But no one has a right to a monopoly on anger, or grief. And no politician, let alone Labour's Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, has cause to claim the moral high ground with his accusation that the victims were 'murdered by political decisions' made by the Tories.

For 15 years I have been campaigning to update building regulations in England to improve fire safety and to have sprinklers fitted routinely to council and other social housing, and I can't recall a single Government minister or Opposition frontbencher — Labour, Conservative or Lib Dem — who ever campaigned with us.

I first became involved at the request of fire chiefs after producing a BBC documentary on car crashes. I'd persuaded the then Roads Minister, Peter Bottomley, to set targets for reducing deaths on the roads.

Could I get similar political support to cut fire deaths? It turned out the answer was 'no'.

A Government department (under Labour) did help pilot my idea for ultra-low-cost sprinklers, but it never won official support. Time and again I lobbied politicians, time and again I was sent away empty-handed.

Three times I've addressed the Local Government Association (LGA) pointing out how the risks are disproportionate in subsidised housing — 'It's the poor wot gets the flame' — as three times they applauded and did nothing.

Among ministers I lobbied were Mike O'Brien (Lab), Alan Whitehead (Lab), John Prescott (Lab), Phil Hope (Lab), Jim Fitzpatrick (Lab), Parmjit Dhanda (Lab), Sadiq Khan (Lab), George Howarth (Lab) and Brandon Lewis (Con).

PHIL Hope was dismissive — 'I can't see what a broadcaster has to do with this' — even though I was accompanied by a fire chief. The others were polite and even sympathetic. But they all said 'no'.

Why? The blunt reality is that those politicians were simply doing as they were told.

Ministers are mostly here today, gone tomorrow, and few would claim to be expert in their briefs. Except for those who know it all because they are gripped by rigid ideology, most ministers do listen to their advisers. That is why the background to Grenfell Tower is much more complex than John McDonnell's intemperate smear would have us believe.

If there is any group whose actions allowed the catastrophe to happen it was these advisers. I say this with a heavy heart because there were senior firefighters among them. While I and many fire chiefs have been passionate about the need for sprinklers — and are angry about what has happened — not everyone agreed.

To be a chief fire officer, you sometimes need to be political. And to be the Government's chief fire and rescue adviser you have to be political.

Successive governments wanted to cut red tape, they all wanted to save money and — here's the key to why nothing was done — fire deaths were going down anyway.

How could advisers justify more regulation, let alone demand universal sprinkler systems, when the problem

For 15 years I led a campaign to install more fire sprinklers ... and NO minister, from ANY party was interested



by Nick Ross

was diminishing. Advisers were just trying to balance risk against cost and while I think they gave bad advice, they should not be cast as villains.

Even so it is ironic that one of them, Sir Ken Knight, who as former London fire-commissioner resisted our calls, is now in charge of making all public buildings safe as chairman of a new fire safety panel.

He had every chance to do so after the Lakanal House blaze in South London in 2009 in which six people died trapped in their homes. Then he said it was 'not considered practical or economically viable' to retrofit sprinklers in tower blocks. Will 80 confirmed deaths — and possibly more — at Grenfell now change his mind?

Four years ago I warned LGA councillors that 'every major advance in fire safety has been inspired by a startling tragedy. If there's another calamity there'll be another political panic and another belated political response.'

It took 11 dead in a blaze at the Rose & Crown in Saffron Walden in Essex 48 years ago to pave the way for building regulations in the Fire Precautions Act. The hotel had no proper alarm, no fire doors, no emergency exit signs, no extinguishers.

It took 56 dead at the Bradford Football Club fire in 1985 to inspire a raft of safety features for stadiums.

It took 31 dead in the King's Cross fire in 1987 before investment in London Underground to make it safer after decades of budget constraints.

As BBC1's Panorama revealed

last week, the All-party Parliamentary Fire and Rescue group specifically warned three years ago that those living in tower blocks such as Grenfell were 'at risk'.

This week it emerged that the London Fire Brigade wrote to all boroughs and councils warning them of the risk from cladding on tall buildings earlier this year following a fire in Shepherd's Bush. Why is it that always we have to be shocked out of complacency?

The task now is to make sure this never happens again, and finding blame is not the same as finding a solution.

First, we need to recognise how bad things are. The audit just conducted by the London borough of Camden shows just how lax fire safety has become, with 1,000 fire doors missing in tower blocks, exposed gas pipes, obstructed escape routes — and the use of non-fire-retardant cladding.

And yes, of course, we need an exhaustive inquiry into what went wrong at Grenfell Tower. But we know enough already not to prevaricate over two key decisions.

The first is to update building inspections and regulations — fast — and ensure that they are updated routinely. Never again should cladding or other materials be allowed to accumulate in buildings and infrastructure without having been tested for fire safety. To date, more than 95 buildings — including hospitals and student accommodation — are deemed at risk.

The second task is to follow the example of Wales where, from 2016, all new houses, flats,

care homes etc had to be fitted with fire suppression systems, usually sprinklers. Sprinklers are the gold standard in fire control. They are cheap, simple and effective. They are roughly the price of fitted carpets, even when retro-fitted.

In 95 per cent of cases where buildings are comprehensively protected a fire is controlled by sprinklers alone.

That means the fridge fire believed to have started the Grenfell blaze would almost certainly have been put out before firefighters arrived.

Even had it spread to the flammable cladding outside, it would have almost certainly failed to take hold in the apartments above. At very least, sprinklers would have washed down the toxic smoke and kept the temperatures low.

SPRINKLERS are not invincible. They can't function if the water supply fails. But — and this is the truth that makes me so angry no one ever dies from fire when a home is protected by automatic sprinklers. That's why in the US they're installing 40 million a year.

But let's not be persuaded that the risk is only in high-rise towers. There are 300-400 fire deaths a year and most victims live in low-rise properties.

We need sprinklers in all social housing, care homes, and multi-occupation premises including schools — and let's not forget our hospitals.

Whatever Sir Ken Knight said in the past, where necessary, we need to retrofit them. And we need the National Fire Chiefs Council, meeting in a few days, to show leadership.

There is a terrible anger after Grenfell. Instead of trading political insults we must put it to good use.

■ NICK ROSS chairs the annual Fire Conference and is president of The Kensington Society.

Ephraim Hardcastle



PRINCE Charles and Camilla will be in Canada today, celebrating its 150th anniversary, thus

sparing them an awkward moment. Diana's grave is to be rededicated tomorrow, nearly 20 years after her death. William, Kate and Harry, along with the Cambridge children George and Charlotte, will be present at the private service on what would also have been her 56th birthday. On the tenth anniversary, Charles wanted Camilla to accompany him to the memorial service. The Queen intervened, telling Camilla to spare everyone's blushes and stay away.

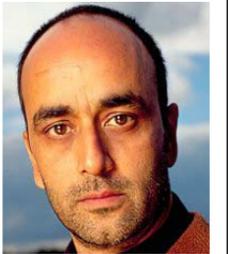
NAUGHTY sex and drugs star Lindsay Lohan, 30, pictured, offers fans a £2.30-a-month peek into her new website, promising: 'I'll tell you all my secrets,' including her 'personal diaries, exclusive personal photos... and much more.' A bargain!



PENNY Junor's book mentions a spat between the Queen and Prince Charles after HM refused him the use of a royal jet to collect Diana's body from Paris. What is less well known is that the Queen was also opposed to Diana's body resting in the Chapel Royal at St James's Palace. She felt it should remain either in a funeral home or at Kensington Palace. It was only on the insistence of Charles — and the intervention of the Queen Mother — that the monarch backed down.

APROPOS the victim of paedophile bishop Peter Ball not getting a response to 17 letters he wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury — mentioned here on Tuesday — I notice the Most Revd Justin Welby's website explains: 'He hopes correspondents will understand that because so many letters and emails are sent to him, he is unable to read or reply personally to many of them.' The Queen usually manages, comments a C of E source, adding: 'There is one sure way of getting a response from Welby. Request a signed photo.'

THE brilliant Pakistani-born star Art Malik, 64, pictured, isn't concerned about not appearing in the Queen's birthday honours, despite great performances in *The Jewel in the Crown*, *A Passage to India* and other prestige productions, saying he wouldn't accept an MBE, OBE or CBE because 'I grew up aware of 250 years of imperial rule'. I'll drag this up if he ends up accepting one.



FORMER Tory bigwig Lord (Chris) Patten, 73, a Roman Catholic, attacks Theresa May for seeking support from Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, claiming: 'The DUP is a toxic brand. There is a danger of us (the Tories) looking like a nasty party again. Their values are not ours.' Irish historian Ruth Dudley Edwards (a Catholic) notes: 'It's open season on the DUP for the sins of being white, Christian and a bit old-fashioned.' Incidentally, Patten personally toxified the Tories by enforcing the hated 1989 poll tax, later abandoned.

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LITTLEJOHN IS BACK ON TUESDAY