At the drinks reception for the Fire Sector Summit in October, Nick Ross gave a speech on the Grenfell Tower fire and his views on the future for fire safety

Rule one for a speech at a pre conference reception is to keep it short, and rule two: keep it light. I propose to break both of those golden rules. And with a vengeance. Because Grenfell has proved how badly the rulebook needs to be challenged.

I know I’m speaking to the converted. You’re here because you care and there’s nothing I’ll say you don’t already know. But I hope to galvanise you, to revive the passions you felt when the news of Grenfell was still fresh.

Because this is a time to be angry, and anger is sometimes the right response. This is also a time for honest self reflection in this industry – because so many people, including those in this sector, did not do what they should. But it’s also a time to celebrate – because out of this appalling tragedy, as with the Great Fire of London, there are lessons to be learned and good sense is at last emerging.

Why should we be angry? You could argue Grenfell was an accident. But it wasn’t. It was a consequence. A consequence of decisions made and not made in officiandom.

For heaven’s sake let’s acknowledge that in a civilised country, after centuries of learning how to prevent fires and stop them in their tracks, Grenfell was a testament to bad government, to bad policy, to an abdication of responsibility.

First, let’s dispose of some myths about the Grenfell Tower fire:

• that we don’t know what happened and must await the official inquiries
• that it was the council’s fault
• that the cladding was only there to gentrify the area
• that the problem is only with high rise buildings

None of those is true. We know enough about what happened to act responsibly. We know the fire started in a Hotpoint fridge freezer on the fourth floor. We know there were no sprinklers, so the fire got out of control.

We know it penetrated a window and set the insulation and external cladding on fire, apparently with a gap between them acting like a chimney. We know the fire would never have caught hold if Grenfell had a sprinkler system.
We already knew this after the Lakanal House fire, but chose to ignore it.

We know the cladding was Reynobond - two sheets of aluminium sandwiching a core of extruded thermoplastic made of polyethylene. We know polyethylene has a low melting point. We know that if it burns, it can burn fiercely, producing highly toxic fumes of oxides of nitrogen and carbon including hydrogen cyanide.

We know similar cladding has caused at least eight major fires in the past. We know the insulation was Celotex RS 5000 made of PIR, a rigid foam which doesn’t burn easily - but when it does, it too gives off high levels of hydrogen cyanide.

We know Siderise fire barriers were fitted, but were overwhelmed. We know the regulations - specifically Approved Document B (ADB) - are difficult to follow and haven’t been updated for well over a decade.

We know successive ministers have been resistant to updating them. We know successive ministers have refused to require sprinklers - or even to encourage their use, let alone campaign in favour of them. I could name them all. Again, let’s recall that their indifference was despite the recommendations of the Lakanal House coroner.

We know the Grenfell scheme must have been officially approved by a building control process. In short, we know a lot. The inquiries may tell us more, but we already know there was a dereliction of responsibility. And we already know enough not to prevaricate any further.

As for the local council getting so much blame, councils all around the country have used similar materials. And why shouldn’t they? They were officially inspected and officially approved.

Then there is this nonsense that the cladding was only there for the benefit of gentrified homes nearby. No it wasn’t. That was just a line in the proposal for PR purposes to make the building work more acceptable to neighbours. The reason for treating the outside of the building was a more noble one: to improve thermal insulation - just as every householder is being urged to do.

The council was blamed for acting like a rabbit caught in headlights. It has still failed to rehouse most of those displaced. But - and I have no flag to wave for Kensington and Chelsea Council - the truth is that hardly any other local authority could have done better. Some can’t even collect the bins each week. Money is tight and they’ve not got contingencies for disasters of this rarity or scale.

No, the real culprits are higher up the food chain. For heaven’s sake, how could successive governments and successive ministers be so complacent?

Sometimes politicians and their advisers get fixated on tabloid terms like ‘red tape’ (I seem to remember Margaret Thatcher cut red tape that restrained the banks. What a good idea that turned out to be). Yes, by all means cut unnecessary regulation. But first check that it really is unnecessary. Good governance can never be reflexive, even if politics so often is.
The people who took the decision not to have routine reviews of building regulations bear responsibility for the Grenfell deaths (and many others too). I wonder if they still think that their slashing of red tape was really worth it? Building regulations, like sprinklers, are not unnecessary burdens. They’re life savers.

It’s a time to reflect in the fire services too. Some fire chiefs have always campaigned for more and more fire safety, not least Peter Holland, who helped set up the national fire sprinkler network. Many leaders have been magnificent, and it’s marvellous that London’s fire chief Dany Cotton is now calling for sprinklers. ‘This can’t be optional,’ she said, ‘it can’t be a nice thing to have. This is something that must happen.’

But the service seems to have got more political in recent years. More and more obsequious. Its messages have been so nuanced, politicians happily interpreted them as ‘it’s all right Jack – there’s no need to act’.

Where were the fire chiefs when building regulations were allowed to slide? Where were the fire chiefs when fire safety inspection went to the lowest bidder? Where was the National Fire Chiefs Council on sprinklers – apart from their weasel phrase that sprinklers may have some use in an overall fire safety strategy?

I hate to criticise the fire service. It’s been magnificent in so many respects. It’s rightly accepted cuts in fire stations and resources. It’s pushed hard for smoke detectors. It’s full of good people. But it needs to boldly go where politicians don’t want to go, and confront what politicians would prefer to shy away from.

Incidentally, so do the water authorities. They’re so wrapped up in their own regulations about dead legs in pipework that they’ve effectively stifled ultra low cost sprinklers which could be served by ordinary domestic plumbing. Shame on them for not trying harder and adopting this issue as their own.

I’m reluctant to criticise politicians too. They get a bad press. Many are very decent; some are very intelligent. Most want to do what’s right. But they’re amateurs. That’s the British way. And they’ve been very badly advised on sprinklers in social housing. I hope the people in this room never let that bad advice go to ministers again.

And now the good news: a time to celebrate. Out of each fire tragedy comes progress. As I say, the Fire of London, but more recently the Saffron Walden Hotel fire, the King’s Cross Fire, the Bradford Stadium disaster... and now Grenfell.

We don’t take much notice when people die in ones and twos. We act when people die in tens and hundreds. Belatedly, but we act. And as you may have seen, a BBC survey found that sprinkler installation companies are now struggling with demand. Hallelujah.

They’re mostly going into high rise blocks – but as we all know, we must go further. Almost all the people who die in domestic fire tragedies live in low rise.

Some of you deal in other fire safety measures – and good for you. I doubt that I’d want to campaign for sprinklers if I sold fire doors, for example. But there’s plenty to go round. PLEASE never, ever, talk down sprinklers.

You all know the patter, and it’s true. Domestic sprinklers cost no more than fitted carpets. It’s almost impossible for them to be triggered accidentally, and when they do go off they only activate the heads which can put out the fire. And in 95% of cases, they put out the fire – before the fire and rescue service gets there. In 100% of cases where the system is enabled, they make the firefighter’s job much easier. And above all, no one dies from fire in a home protected by sprinklers.

Grenfell has roused us from our complacency. England has woken up. Now we must catch up with Wales. And we must turn our anger at Grenfell to positive effect.

And I wish you all high energy, determined ambition, and crystal clear progress in tomorrow’s Summit.

Nick Ross is a former broadcaster and international conference chairman. For more information, view page 5