



by Nick Ross

Long before the Grenfell tragedy, broadcaster Nick Ross warned politicians and fire chiefs of the risks. In this devastating analysis, he reveals how yesterday's landmark report has **STILL** not uncovered the truth behind...

Horror of the inferno: A fireman after battling the 2017 Grenfell fire



# A DEADLY COMPLACENCY

is true some specialist equipment might have been useful but that is a different issue.

It is equally nonsense that the local council is to blame. At least 430 other residential towers in England had risky cladding, many if not most, in Labour-held boroughs, and several in private ownership.

Ten years ago it was a Labour-run council, Southwark, that pleaded guilty to breaking fire safety regulations in what was then our worst tower block fire which killed six at Lakanal House.

Kensington and Chelsea have acknowledged they handled the Grenfell disaster badly, exposing poor disaster management. The failures also laid bare how distant blue-collar North Kensington was from the preoccupations of a borough run by Tories from South Kensington and Chelsea.

But many local authorities have been in one-party control for decades and are equally aloof. Many can thank their lucky stars that Grenfell didn't happen on their patch. They too would have been like rabbits in the headlights.

Not that the political Right should come out of this with their heads held high. What is essentially a noble idea of simplifying rules long ago became an obsession and then a doctrine.

Insulting phrases were routinely used to smear regulation as 'bureaucracy' and 'red tape', sometimes backed by a largely unfounded dogma, bordering certainty, that regulation damages the economy or is an affront to freedom, and that sweeping it away is a good thing in itself.

In reality, there is always a trade-off between recklessness and being overcautious. That was the calculation the specifiers and contractors made when refurbishing Grenfell Tower, and it turns out they weren't cautious enough.

**B**UT whoever is to blame, we should beware of blame itself. In the next phase of this inquiry attention will shift to the people who designed and carried out the Grenfell renovations.

It might be therapeutic to find heads to put on platters, but, as so often, the focus will be on the little guys, the individual designers and builders who, like most people, could never have imagined such a catastrophe could happen.

We might call it justice, but it never does much good to punish people for making a genuine mistake, even if on reflection, they might or should have known better. In fact, blame can be inimical to safety — ask doctors or pilots.

The police have a separate inquiry but criminal proceedings gag witnesses and reporters, and chasing essentially honest people will guzzle up another £40million.

It is also a huge distortion for the already hard-pressed police. In any case, Grenfell has caused enough misery without ruining more lives.

But above all, blaming individuals will distract us from the big issue: complacency. Complacency which goes to the highest levels of the corridors of power.

The complacency which for decades said we didn't need more rules and regulations, and insisted the cost equation for safety wasn't worth it.

The complacency with which ministers and their mandarins maintained their insouciance even after the Lakanal House disaster in 2009.

The complacency with which they still haven't brought forward plans to make sprinkler systems mandatory for social tenants.

The people who made, or rather didn't make, those critical decisions are hiding in plain sight.

Sir Martin promises he will uncover them as witnesses in phase two of his inquiry. But yet again we have to wait.

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PICTURE: EPA/ANDY RAIN/JEREMY SELWYN

**T**HE Grenfell Tower Inquiry was always more about catharsis than revelation. After two years and £10million we know little more about the Grenfell tragedy than we did after two weeks, and certainly after two months. Those who habitually call for a 'full inquiry' when things go wrong, take note.

Recall what was clear before Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his team had even been appointed to conduct the inquiry. We knew a fridge fault caused a fire in Flat 16. The London Fire Brigade arrived within six minutes but by then, without sprinklers, the kitchen had become ablaze.

Flames got through the window and set fire to external insulation and cladding. The insulation was made of a rigid foam which doesn't burn easily — but when it does, it gives off hydrogen cyanide. The cladding was widely used in the building industry: two sheets of aluminium, sandwiching a core of polyethylene.

Polyethylene has a low melting point, drips and can burn fiercely, emitting highly toxic fumes, again including hydrogen cyanide. Within half an hour flames had spread to the top of the east side of the 24-storey building.

In that time 144 residents escaped. Following guidelines, the 999 control room advised others to stay where they were. Within two hours the whole building was engulfed, and by morning 70 were dead. Two others later died in hospital.

Yet so far the inquiry hasn't even covered half of that. It took a long chain of bad decisions and worn-out policy to allow a fridge fault in a fourth-floor flat to turn into the biggest single loss of life in London since the Blitz.

Not many of those involved will come out unscathed, and firefighters are not alone in thinking it ironic that the first people to be humbled in the report are those who came to the rescue.

**L**ITTLE wonder Matt Wrack, boss of the Fire Brigade Union tweeted angrily: 'Firefighters did not put flammable cladding on Grenfell Tower. Firefighters risked their own lives time and again during the fire.' To which he added: 'Government has done nothing substantive in 28 months.'

All this is true, and not just this government. Successive governments and their fire ministers have been shamefully complacent. I will come back to that disgraceful issue in a moment.

And not only is it true that firefighters risk their lives, as Mr Wrack says, but they work in frighteningly hostile conditions.

To see what they go through, often fumbling on hands and knees in blazing heat and almost zero visibility, is shocking to those unaware of how dangerous, uncomfortable and distressing many rescue operations are.

And spare a thought for the control room staff and the harrowing life-and-death calls they had to manage.

But justified public admiration for firefighters has protected them from the need for a different sort of boldness. If only they had been as plucky with their political masters as

they are in rescue operations. How did they allow the building regulations to become so out of date?

How did they accept without loud and persistent protest a system of building control that tempted designers and host contractors to cut corners?

And a big bugbear for me, why had they not mounted a rumbustious and powerful campaign to demand that sprinklers be fitted to all new and refurbished housing, as is compulsory in Wales? Sprinklers are cheap. People don't die in homes with sprinklers. There's often little damage. Usually the fire is controlled by sprinklers alone.

It must be said that there were many fine fire chiefs — I was recruited by them to the cause of fire safety and I campaigned alongside them — who stuck their necks out to

push for more protection in social housing. But the National Fire Chiefs Council, like London's fire chief Dany Cotton, only came out with full-throated support after so many died in this gut-wrenching disaster.

The appointment of fire chiefs has long been politicised, favouring people who conform rather than independent thinkers; and if anything the introduction of elected commissioners has pushed them to be more compliant. It is important to be process-driven in any complex, high-risk emergency; but it needs audacious leadership to know when to discard the manual.

Unquestionably, the failure to evacuate for an hour before they did was catastrophic.

But the stay-put policy was designed to protect residents in fire-resistant concrete compartments and to stop people

dying in high-rise stairwells. It had largely served its purpose over decades, and, though Dany Cotton has been castigated, would you have done any different?

In the intensity of the moment it always seems riskier to break the rules than follow an ingrained procedure, and stay-put was a nationwide policy. In fact, according to the report, her commanders had 'no training for how to recognise the need for an evacuation or how to organise one'.

What is more surprising is that even with hindsight Dany Cotton has said she'd do the same again. I fear that speaks volumes not just about her but about the sort of people promoted into fire service leadership.

The report is right that the fire service was stuck in its ways. Years before Grenfell it

was obvious that some forms of cladding posed a fire risk.

All around the world there had been instances, some of them dramatic and widely publicised on social media, where flames had shot up the outside of structures, not least in one of the tallest residential buildings in the world, the aptly named Torch Tower in Dubai.

It should have been fire chiefs hammering on the doors of regulators to make sure flammable cladding was categorically banned. At the very least risks should have been identified and procedures thoroughly revised.

Sir Martin thinks there is 'compelling evidence' that building regulations were breached, and will look at those next year. But I can tell you now that the regulations had not been revised for years, were poorly policed, and there was so much wriggle room that it might take months of

argument in court to establish what was legal and what was not.

Yet still, I feel sorry for Dany Cotton and her team. As Sir Martin concedes: 'They showed great courage and dedication.'

**W**HAT he should have added, but so far hasn't, is that we need urgent solutions, not scapegoats. Sadly that does not seem to be what everybody wants to focus on. Blame is in the air. Most of it wide of the mark, and none of it likely to prevent similar tragedies.

Some have been rancorous and frankly tribal.

Even allowing for high emotions, Labour's John McDonnell must surely now be embarrassed at making political capital out of the disaster soon after the fire, with his outburst that the victims were

'murdered' by political decisions made by Tories.

In fact, as I can attest after spending decades pressing for better fire safeguards in social housing, seven of the nine government ministers we met and who turned down our pleas were Labour.

Then there are the activists who have been flyposting Marxist slogans across London: 'Justice for Grenfell, Austerity Kills'. In fact the fire took hold because the cladding was part of an improvement package costing £8.6million — a package which the report concedes, 'was intended to promote safety in the event of fire'.

The refurbishment was agreed, as was the cladding, by a tenant management organisation whose board had a majority of tenants, and was signed off by the council's housing scrutiny committee which included a councillor who is now the constituency's Labour MP.

And in a similar vein, a firefighter

who attended Grenfell blamed cuts to the London Fire Brigade.

Taking a headline from the Moore-Bick inquiry beside a photo of Boris Johnson, he tweeted: 'I am truly disgusted by what this country has become. This picture sums it up perfectly. Man who closed 10 fire stations, cut 30 fire engines and 500 firefighters not to blame. But Fire Brigade cut to ribbons, fully to blame.'

It is nonsense of course. Fire stations were being closed because over the past few decades fire-related deaths had plummeted, down some 40 per cent in the decade leading up to Grenfell.

Firefighters have done much to help the trend, offering safety advice and smoke detectors. But it had meant there was now less call for the service.

Another 10 fire stations, 30 pumps and 500 firefighters would not have made much difference to those trapped in Grenfell Tower. It