

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

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MINISTERS EXPOSED AT THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY, BUT DEREGULATION PROBE MUST GO FURTHER

Almost five years after the Grenfell Tower fire, the ministers responsible for building safety and the fire and rescue service were at last called to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) this month. Their testimony underlined the pernicious consequences of deregulation for public safety. It also revealed a callous indifference to their responsibilities, a lack of understanding of their brief, the constant blaming of their underlings and plain ignorance about important facts.

PICKLES

Eric Pickles was secretary of state for communities and local government between 2010 and 2015. He was responsible for both fire and building safety. He gave testimony on 6-7 April.

Pickles was asked about a press release entitled “Pickles introduces new red tape test for department”, announcing his intention to “ensure that regulation and red tape is kept to a minimum”.

Pickles claimed the release had “no official status”, dismissing it as the work of “a middle-ranking press officer”. He objected to the line of questioning, suddenly exclaiming:

“By all means, sir, feel free to ask me as many questions as you like, but could I respectfully remind you that you did promise that we would be away this morning, and I have changed my schedules to fit this in. I do have an extremely busy day meeting people.”

This was met with gasps from the bereaved, survivors and residents present. Later Pickles added:

“This is not about deregulation, one in, one out, number of regulations, fancy letters from the Prime Minister, this, that and the other... ultimately it comes down to the nameless I think it was 96 people who were killed in the Grenfell fire. It's them we should think about when we're arguing the toss.”

He thereby managed to insult the survivors of both the Hillsborough disaster and the Grenfell Tower fire.

Pickles was desperate to show that life safety issues were exempt from the government's drive to deregulate. While the Fire Safety Order and Sub-Surface Regulations were exempted (albeit not indefinitely), there was no exemption for Part B of the Building Regulations or Approved Document B. The Lakanal House coroner wrote to Pickles about these matters, but they were not fixed.

Instead the Building Regulations Advisory Committee (BRAC), the body advising ministers on building safety, spent much of its time discussing red tape, the ‘one in, one out’, or ‘two out’, then ‘three out’ approach and how to promote deregulation.

Pickles was sufficiently chastened to issue an apology for his bad behaviour in the witness box. However he failed to take responsibility for the failures on his watch, which contributed to the Grenfell Tower fire.

He was created Baron Pickles of Brentwood and Ongar in 2018.

LEWIS

Brandon Lewis was fire minister in DCLG between 2012 and 2014, and then again at the Home Office between 2016 and 2017. He was responsible for the fire and rescue service, not building regulation. He gave evidence on 30 March.

Lewis was unable to remember much of what he did as fire minister. Instead he referred to handwritten notes, which he thought had been “kept somewhere”. He admitted to putting his name to materials put in front of him by senior civil servants, without much careful attention:

“As a minister, you will look at a sub, and it’s a very straightforward, uncontroversial response to a letter... doesn’t need a great deal of thought, and you will literally just tick it.”

Asked about a fire safety review into the Lakanal House fire, Lewis said: “When I became parliamentary undersecretary, I may well have been given it to read, but I don’t consciously remember that.”

Asked by the QC, “Is the reality that it took a multi-fatality event such as Grenfell to focus proper attention on the issues that had been discussed in the decade before?” Lewis replied, “In a practical sense, that’s clearly happened.”

Lewis admitted he recognised a political predisposition against further regulation in the field of fire safety. He said:

“In government we still do – [consider] do you require statute to achieve what you’re looking to achieve? Can you do it – is there statutory powers in place that already allow you to do this through guidance or regulations, rather than having to do primary legislation?”

OTHER MINISTERS

Gavin Barwell was the minister responsible for the building regulations and guidance between 2016 and 2017. He was tasked with overseeing the long-delayed review of building regulations requested by the coroner after the Lakanal House fire inquiry. He told the GTI that as this was pledged at any time “during this parliament”, that “doesn’t suggest a time pressure to do it immediately... I suspect it made me think this isn’t a sort of life safety critical issue.”

Barwell also revealed that he was “comforted” by decreasing numbers of fire related fatalities over the years. He admitted “with the clear benefit of hindsight, I gained a completely false situational awareness”.

Barwell lost his seat in the 2017 general election. He was appointed chief of staff for Theresa May and claimed some credit for establishing the inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire. He has since been elevated to the House of Lords.

James Wharton was the minister responsible for the building regulations and guidance between 2015 and 2016. He too failed to implement the Lakanal House coroner’s proposals. He too has been elevated to the House of Lords.

Stephen Williams was a Liberal-Democrat minister in the coalition government. He was the minister responsible for the building regulations and guidance between 2013 and 2015. He too failed to implement the necessary changes after the Lakanal House investigation. Williams did however provide a colourful description of the philosophy at the heart of the administration. He told the GTI:

“Well, I suppose one of the biggest issues was – obviously this was what would now be called the age of austerity...”

“It certainly was the case that Eric [Pickles] was sceptical about regulation. As I say, how much of that he genuinely felt, how much of it was trying to please the Treasury – which is, you know, something that all ministers have to dance to, the Treasury tune, unfortunately, or the Number 10 tune... Eric thought most of the officials were Guardian-reading pinkos.”

WHY ONLY TWO WEEKS?

The FBU believes this testimony is damning and demonstrates ministers’ culpability for the fire.

However the inquiry devoted only two weeks to hearing from ministers, when it spent two months quizzing firefighters in 2018. Bob Neill, Penny Mourdant, Mark Francois and Mike Penning were all fire ministers, but were not called. Andrew Stunnell and Don Foster held the building regulations brief, but were not asked to appear. The ministers responsible for deregulation, such as Francis Maude, Oliver Letwin, Vince Cable, Michael Fallon and Sajid Javid, were absent.

Prime minister Boris Johnson was in charge of the London Fire Brigade for eight years before the Grenfell Tower fire, finishing his term only a year before the fire. The inquiry has called no ministers from the Labour administrations, which also imposed “better regulation”. The GTI has not probed the destruction wrought by deregulation between 1979 and 1997, when building safety was fatally undermined and fire safety under serious assault.

If the inquiry is to fully understand the causes of the fire, it needs to investigate the deep roots of deregulation. That means asking difficult questions of Westminster politicians, who made mistakes over many decades.