

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FOR MPS FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | JANUARY 2022



GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY MUST STOP SCAPEGOATING FIREFIGHTERS FOR GOVERNMENT AND CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY FAILURES

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) has completed its Module 5 on firefighting and begun on Module 6 on government, part of its Phase 2 investigation of the background to the fire. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) is a core participant in the GTI and has made numerous written statements, submissions, questions and evidence available to the inquiry.

The FBU wants the inquiry to hold politicians and business to account for cuts and deregulation, which ultimately set the context for the fire. It is wrong to blame firefighters who attended or the London Fire Brigade (LFB) alone for nationwide failures that led to the ongoing building safety crisis.

CONTEXT

On 24 January 2022, the FBU's counsel Martin Seaward made the union's closing statement on Module 5: Firefighting, putting the issues in context. The FBU said from the outset that the inquiry could better assess firefighting procedure and training after looking first at all the regulatory and guidance context within which the fire and rescue services developed their policies and procedures.

Mr Seaward said:

"Although the lessons can and must be learned from a disaster, including by the LFB and the wider fire and rescue service, the building failure was so total and the systemic failings so widespread across the country that it would be wrong to scapegoat the fire and rescue service for the failures of central government and a corporate culture that made people's homes unsafe. The disaster was not caused by the LFB, but by individual private companies which were allowed to put profit before people.

"Grenfell was the culmination of a generation of central government policies, including deregulation and the war on the culture of health and safety, privatisation, fragmentation, austerity and the degradation of social housing...

"Grenfell was a perfect storm. After the manufacturing companies manipulated the flawed testing and certification regime, the private companies involved in the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower created a wholly unsafe

building, surrounded by highly flammable material, from which the TMO's under-resourced and ineffective fire risk management system failed to safeguard the residents, and then, when it became an inferno, the emergency response was unable to rescue 72 of them.

"The lack of care shown by the private companies involved in the disastrous refurbishment of Grenfell Tower and by the TMO as the primary responsible person was facilitated and enabled by policies made since 1979 by central government in the service of a social and economic system driven by the pursuit of profit above all else, including people. This agenda has been the dominant political ideology of most politicians in central government for decades. We submit the relationship between government policy-making and the interests and demands of business in this sector has been politically corrupt."

EXPERTS

Inquiry lawyers have suggested that Grenfell Tower could have been fully evacuated on the night between 01.30 and 01.50. However evidence given during this module – including by its own experts – does not support this conclusion.

The GTI made former chief fire officer Steve McGuirk its firefighting expert. However Mr McGuirk's evidence ran counter to the assumption that evacuation was obvious.

Mr Seaward argued:

"Mr McGuirk has agreed... there was no practical guidance to fire and rescue services on how [evacuation] could be done, neither national or international..."

"Mr McGuirk has neither volunteered nor been asked, despite the FBU's suggested lines of questioning submitted to the Inquiry, as to how a full evacuation could have been achieved that night.

"We submit it is unfortunate Mr McGuirk, who serves as expert to this Inquiry, having been a leading figure in the CFA for 15 years before Grenfell, was not questioned further on why he and other senior fire and rescue leaders failed to provide any form of operational guidance on training or training on when and how to revoke stay put and evacuate a high-rise, which might have made a significant difference at Grenfell."

The Coalition government supercharged deregulation and Inquiry lawyers also seem to believe that the Rescue, Intervention, Containment and Evacuation (RICE) aide memoire developed by Dr Paul Grimwood as part of Kent's standard operating procedure (SOP) offered an alternative high rise firefighting policy.

Mr Seaward explained why this was not the case:

"RICE and the Kent SOP did not deal with or provide guidance to firefighters in relation to a full evacuation of a high-rise residential building in the event of a major fire spreading beyond the compartment of origin. At most, it raised the possibility of evacuation as one of the possible strategies to consider right from the start of a high-rise incident.

"The FBU has concerns about Kent's policies. The stairwell protection strategy could expose firefighters to significant and avoidable danger by placing them above the bridgehead without breathing apparatus, or with BA sets that have not been started up."

LFB

Some inquiry lawyers have tried to paint LFB as a failing public service. The FBU rejects this conclusion.

Mr Seaward argued:

"Weaknesses in the preparation and performance of the LFB can be traced back to the decision of central government to remove any form of national body for discussing and developing national standards, strategy, equipment and operational guidance across the fire and rescue service.

"The LFB's work was impeded by austerity cuts and privatisation for decades before Grenfell. The government cannot fragment and cut away at public services and yet expect them to shoulder ever greater responsibilities. Any deficiencies in the performance of the LFB were institutional or due to inadequate senior management; they were not the failings of the individual firefighters or control staff who attended the disaster. They did their best in accordance with their training and experience to save lives in the face of an unprecedented catastrophe."

The FBU also firmly rejected the suggestion by former commissioner Ron Dobson that industrial action by our members was in any way responsible for any of the failures of the LFB.

"They were clutching at straws, trying to deflect blame for the significant and long-term failures of the principal officers leading the Brigade.

"Mr Dobson [sought] to worsen the terms and conditions of the LFB workforce and to reduce their number. For example, firefighters were shocked and angered by his threat in 2010 to fire and rehire the entire workforce on reduced terms and conditions."

Other FBU industrial action arose from Westminster government attacks on firefighters' pensions.

FIREFIGHTERS

Mr Seaward also made a robust defence of the firefighters who attended the Grenfell Tower fire. He said:

"We contend it's unfair to criticise the first two incident commanders for not revoking stay put in the first hour of the disaster. The individual firefighters who attended the disaster, including the first two incident commanders, and the supervisors of the control room staff, should be relieved, we submit, of any individual blame. Grenfell Tower was not their fault."

The inquiry now moves onto matters of Westminster government policy. It will call civil servants and ministers in the coming months. The FBU expects the lawyers to put ministers and their advisors – including chief fire officers – under the same rigorous spotlight that they have applied to earlier witnesses.

The GTI should be challenging ministers about their policies of privatisation and deregulation, which impacted on building safety and fire safety. It should ask why they scrapped national standards, national statutory advisory bodies and even the fire service inspectorate in England. They should question the austerity agenda, imposed by Westminster and carried out by mayors and fire authorities, which removed one-in-five firefighters since 2010.

Only then will it become clear how the role of central government – in cahoots with private business – paved the way for the Grenfell Tower fire.



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