

'An almost psychopathic disregard for human life'

Show Me The Bodies: How We Let Grenfell Happen

Peter Apps

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John Booth

In the coming months the final report of the Grenfell Tower public inquiry will tell us how 72 women, men and children came to die in what the hearing's lead counsel described as the 'failure to pay due respect to the idea of home as a physical aspect of human privacy, agency, safety and dignity'.¹

In his excoriating closing statement last November, Richard Millett KC depicted the 'spider's web of blame' he had uncovered in revealing the incompetence, malpractice and dishonesty in 'the merry-go round of buck passing' that passed for the testimony of many of the companies, politicians, civil servants, public bodies and others who appeared as core inquiry participants.

'Expressions of regret for the victims of the fire have been as common, to the point of trite, as admissions of responsibility have been rare', he told the inquiry. 'A tragedy of these dimensions ought to have provoked a strong sense of public responsibility. Instead many – not all – core participants appear simply to have used the inquiry as an opportunity to position themselves for any legal proceedings which might or might not follow in order to minimise their own exposure to legal liability.'

His conclusion that 'each and every one of the deaths that occurred in Grenfell Tower on the 14 June 2017 was avoidable' was one that journalist Peter Apps had not only reached years before but had tried to prevent.

His position at trade journal *Inside Housing* gave him a base from which to focus closely on one area of public life. This book, like much of his reporting and social media output over many years, confirms how he also brings to that position a vocational concern for the wellbeing of those of us in public housing.

¹ <<https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/>>

Show Me The Bodies combines a minute-by-minute account of that night's horrific events with a knowledgeable detailing of the context in which it happened. The latter recounts the controversial circumstances in which the recent refurbishment of the 24-storey West London apartment block occurred and includes the broader political 'bonfire of regulation' framework in which this took place.

Under the Conservative premiership of David Cameron, writes Apps:

the government was bound to an ideology that said it should not regulate the private sector, but should instead reduce any restrictions to allow it to generate economic growth. In the years before Grenfell, this became an all-out assault on regulation, codified in a "red tape challenge", and a "one in, three out" rule which effectively banned the introduction of any stringent new rules on business. In the crucial but niche area of fire safety in high-rise buildings, this utterly undermined its ability to ensure the safety of its citizens.

Throughout, the government relied on the fact that deaths in fires were failing to justify its failure to tighten fire safety rules. This is said to have been expressed by officials with the following phrase: "Show me the bodies". There were simply not enough deaths to justify new restriction on businesses. On 14 June 2017, our government got what it had asked for. (p. 5)

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RKBC), home to some of London's richest and poorest and a self-proclaimed 'value for money' council, was not alone in coping with ageing public housing stock. Apps writes: 'We built housing in vast numbers after World War II and then neglected to spend sufficient money maintaining it.' (p. 215)

Grenfell Tower was completed in 1974 and built to the mandatory Parker-Morris standards for space, heating and amenity which Margaret Thatcher effectively ended in 1980. The wealthy part of reportedly the most unequal borough in the country – home at one time to Cameron's 'Notting Hill set'² – routinely returned a Conservative majority. The RKBC became a flagship local authority for outsourcing services. This included housing, with Grenfell Tower among almost 10,000 properties run at arm's length by the largest tenant management organisation (TMO) in the UK.

Apps writes:

Thatcher and her allies subscribed to an economic vision which said

² <<https://tinyurl.com/3ewj425a>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-4524320/PETER-OBORNE-Welcome-death-Notting-Hill-set.html>>

governments should avoid imposing rules on businesses and instead unleash markets to determine their own rules. She began a major campaign of deregulation.

This caught the construction sector in her second term. Michael Heseltine, then secretary of state with responsibility for housing, promised to deliver “maximum self-regulation, minimum government interference” for the building industry.

One arm of this was to part-privatise the enforcement of the rules. From now on, builders would be able to pay a private consultant, known as an Approved Inspector, to confirm their projects had complied with building regulations, instead of being required to seek sign off from the local council. (p. 32)

He adds:

In 1984, a new bill was introduced which aimed to sweep an estimated 350 pages of previously existing building regulations into the bin, and replace them with 24 headline standards. All local and regional codes would be replaced – including the tough restrictions relating to external fire spread long enforced by the London Model Byelaws.

The new regime shifted from being “prescriptive” to “performance-based”. This meant rather than being given a book of rules to follow, builders would simply be told to achieve certain outcomes and left to decide how to do it themselves . . . Alongside these “performance-based” regulations, the government introduced new, non-mandatory “approved documents” containing official guidance about how to meet the standards. The rules about fire were contained in Approved Document B.

There were those who issued warnings. As the act neared Royal Assent, Labour peer Lord Sydney Irving tried to sound the alarm:

“I hope that when the government come to consider the building regulations and the guidance in the approved documents they will not permit any relaxation in such matters as non-combustibility and remember that when building standards have been relaxed it has often led to disaster.” (p. 33)

Twenty-five years later six people died in the fire at refurbished Lakanal House in south London. Apps had researched its causes and was warning of a bigger tragedy to come. He and his *Social Housing* colleagues were writing this up when Grenfell happened.

He says of Lakanal House:

The tower block had been poorly maintained and serious fire safety defects had been allowed to fester. Residents had raised their concerns without any success. A legally required risk assessment had not been carried out. Worse, a recent refurbishment had seen highly combustible panels fitted to an external wall. (p. 1)

A television fault set off a fire,

the flames licking through an open window, igniting one of the panels. It began to spread up the building, threatening other flats.

Three adults, two children and one twenty-day-old baby lost their lives in a public and avoidable tragedy.³

Apps writes:

The fire that killed them demonstrated all the fundamental flaws that would lead to the horrors seen at Grenfell Tower eight years later: combustible external panels allowed the blaze to spread out of the flat of origin and climb up the building's exterior; internal breaches to fire protection allowed smoke and flame to spread through the building; and the fire brigade's blind faith in its advice to stay put resulted in the victims losing their chance to escape. (p. 3)

Show Me The Bodies details the tragic consequences, concluding that Grenfell was a result of political choices.

Over a period of at least thirty years, our representatives chose time and again not to act on mounting evidence that something needed to be done to prevent a disaster in a high-rise building. They deliberately ran down, neglected and privatised the arms of the state that might have otherwise avoided the need for this book. And they allied themselves with a corporate world that evinced an almost psychopathic disregard for human life. (p. 3)

The author describes the opportunistic way many in the housing sector – from materials manufacturers to contractors – jumped into this free-for-all arena cleared for them by elected politicians and their civil servants. Residents' safety was left way behind.

He cites the following as just one example of what the Thatcher ideology meant in practical terms: 'The British Board of Agrément (BBA) was initially established by the government in the 1960s to certify construction products as suitable for use. It became a private organisation in 1983 – reliant on

³ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-39116172>>

<<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/mar/28/lakanal-house-fire-deaths-prevented>>

commercial income to fund its work.’ (p. 108)

Inevitably the market dynamic of paying a fee to obtain certification – ‘for product manufacturers, a BBA certificate was a passport to winning sales’ – resulted in the promotion in the UK of unsafe products.

Political and economic choices saw us adopt lower standards than Germany and others around the EU. We wanted to remove barriers to doing business, and in so doing became a market where dangerously combustible cladding could be sold. (p. 118)

What was true for cladding also applied to insulation, another part of the refurbishment to Grenfell Tower completed a year before the fire.⁴

Apps writes:

As Sky News reported a few months after Grenfell, the UK lobbying arm of the plastic insulation industry boasted of its ability “to influence UK and local government, specifying authorities, relevant approval and certification bodies” and having “high level involvement in the drafting and regular revision of British and European standards [and] the Building Regulations”. (p. 125)

Of the many elected politicians who chose not to engage seriously with these life and death issues, one of the most prominent is Eric (now Lord) Pickles. He was Cameron’s Communities and Local Government Secretary from 2010 to 2015 and the recipient of the Lakanal coroner’s strong recommendations for change. This included the retro-fitting of fire sprinklers.⁵

Readers can judge for themselves the adequacy of his 2013 response ⁶ to her, as they will from his 2022 appearance at the Grenfell Tower inquiry⁷ when he had to apologise both for his arrogant demeanour and his characterisation of the 72 identified fire victims as ‘the 96 nameless’.⁸

⁴ <<https://stillwerise.uk/2020/11/29/grenfell-tower-refurbishment-a-timeline/>>
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6N6eeNjbVws>>

⁵ <<https://tinyurl.com/52n89u9s>> or <https://assets.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/RBK00001553_Lakanal%20House%20Coroner%27s%20Inquest%20recommendations.pdf>

⁶ <<https://tinyurl.com/2p9drw7c>> or <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/205567/Annex_B_-_SoS_DCLG_Rule_43_response.pdf>

⁷ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-61016603>>

⁸ <<https://tinyurl.com/52hvnzbz8>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10696825/Ex-Cabinet-minister-Lord-Pickles-stuns-Grenfell-inquiry-tells-hes-extremely-busy.html>>

One of his subordinates at the time was Gavin (now Lord) Barwell.⁹ He now sits on the board of the UK's largest and much-criticised housing association, Clarion.¹⁰ Another was Brandon Lewis¹¹ who, like Pickles before him, was to become chairman of the Conservative Party. Their inquiry performance can be seen and transcript of their evidence read at the Grenfell Tower Inquiry website.¹²

Another former party chairman, Grant Shapps, was Cameron's first housing minister in 2010. He quickly took steps to abolish the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) set up by the previous Labour government to afford some regulation of council and housing association landlords.

Apps writes that Shapps boasted 'the TSA is toast' to a reporter before announcing its axing. 'Instead, the government set up a regulator which would only really consider the financial performance and governance arrangements of social landlords. This was due to the need to attract private finance into the social housing sector to compensate for the cuts being made to government grant.'

Boris Johnson makes his appearance in this story as Mayor of London. He implemented 'savings' and 'efficiencies' in the capital's fire service.

In the eight years he was mayor of London, the brigade experienced cuts totalling £100m. It cut 552 firefighters, 27 fire engines and closed 10 fire stations. Crucially, the cut in jobs particularly affected support staff – with 329 posts removed, 29 per cent of the total.

Senior officers' roles were also cut – giving the London Fire Brigade a much thinner ration of support staff and senior officers to frontline

⁹ <<https://tinyurl.com/ytap4twb>> or <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/grenfell-tower-fire-gavin-barwell_uk_59410ecbe4b09ad4fbe45929>

¹⁰ <<https://tinyurl.com/3pk845ec>> or <https://assets.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/CLG00000803_Letter%20from%20Sir%20David%20Amess%20MP%20to%20Gavin%20Barwell%20MP%20re%20concerns%20on%20review%20of%20Part%20B%2C%20previous%20fires%20and%20lack%20of%20response.pdf>

<<https://tinyurl.com/9h537zmb>> or <<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/housing-minister-was-warned-of-poor-fire-regulations-two-months-ago>>

<<https://tinyurl.com/ye56aruj>> or <<https://www.clarionhg.com/news-and-media/2022/04/11/two-new-non-executive-directors-join-the-clarion-housing-group-board>>

<<https://tinyurl.com/msxfsvtp>> or <<https://www.itv.com/news/2022-05-23/clarion-put-on-notice-by-deeply-disappointed-michael-gove>>

¹¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/2p86f5r2>> or <<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/government-grenfell-tower-department-for-communities-and-local-government-london-grenfell-tower-inquiry-b991510.html>>

¹² <<https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/>>

fighters compared to other forces. It is hard to believe that this did not contribute to the failures to plan and prepare before Grenfell.'

The author records: 'In a debate about the mayor's plans in September 2013, a Labour politician accused him of lying about the impact. Johnson told him to "get stuffed"'. (p. 269)

One Conservative who did regularly raise concerns about fire safety and building integrity was MP Sir David Amess, who chaired the All-Party Parliamentary Fire Safety and Rescue Group.¹³ After Grenfell he was joined on the fire safety group by Emma Dent Coad who had been elected Labour MP for Kensington days before the disaster.¹⁴ As a local councillor she had long campaigned with Grenfell residents for change.

Apps summarises some of these long-standing issues as follows:

The tower had non-compliant lifts, a malfunctioning smoke control system and gas pipes which punched holes in the compartmentation at every floor. Its fire doors were drastically below the minimum standards. It had no plans for how to evacuate the many residents with disabilities who called it home. (p. 200)

The compartmentation he refers to is the basis of the 'stay put' policy adopted by many of those with responsibility for the safety of high-rise dwellers. Apps writes:

With effective compartmentation, a building will contain the spread of fire within a single unit long enough to allow the firefighters to extinguish it while all other residents go about their business unaware that anything untoward is happening.

But he goes on to say:

The idea of perfect compartmentation was always a fiction. Fire research from 1960 – before the idea to stay put was born – demonstrated that fire could spread up the outside of a building by breaking out of a window and licking up to the window above without even the assistance of combustible materials and even if windows were spaced quite a long way apart.

¹³ <<https://tinyurl.com/3warh4xd>> or <<https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/sir-david-amess-mp-britains-buildings-are-vulnerable-to-fire-we-must-mobilise-industry-expertise-to-improve-standards>>

<<https://tinyurl.com/2p9xwrp3>> or <<https://www.towerblocksuk.com/single-post/2019/07/17/Sir-David-Amess-MP-blogs-on-Fire-Safety>>

¹⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/yck6mz5f>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jun/17/grenfell-emma-dent-coad-death-threats-ptsd-kensington-labour-mp>>

Moreover, the very act of fighting a fire will breach the compartment. Once firefighters have knocked down the door to the burning flat and propped open the door to the staircase to run their hoses through, smoke will start to spread through a building. (p. 245)

But as the Lakanal House coroner had pointed out, this depends crucially on fire-resistant construction. As fearful Grenfell Tower residents, Dent Coad and others including the author had repeatedly said, this was one of many unresolved issues which would lead to the June 2017 tragedy.

The appeals of Amess and others to fit sprinklers and communal fire alarms – standard features on most high-rise blocks elsewhere in the world – and take other safety precautions fell on deaf ears.¹⁵ This meant a rigid adherence to the ‘stay put’ policy and the lack of any plan B in the event of it not working.

On the night of 14 June ‘stay put’ was only removed as the official advice to fearful Tower residents one hour and 20 minutes after the inquiry’s experts say it should have been abandoned. Only 36 people managed to escape after that point.

The heroic efforts of members of the London Fire Brigade (LFB) that night could not compensate for their lack of training and planning, writes Apps.

While the scale of the fire at Grenfell Tower shocked everyone, the brigade should have had a plan for a major, out-of-control fire in a high-rise block. That it did not was a result of hubris and a failure to act on the need for change . . . LFB’s frontline staff, from the control room to the incident ground, were set up to fail by a lack of training on what to do if stay put failed.

Apps writes:

The experts never planned for the evacuation of a tall building, seeming to hold some sort of British exceptionalist belief that it simply wouldn’t happen here.¹⁶ (p. 264)

When she appeared at the inquiry after the fire, then commissioner at the LFB Dany Cotton angered survivors by comparing the brigade’s failure to plan for a fire like Grenfell to a failure to plan for ‘a space shuttle landing on the Shard [London’s tallest building]’. But this was spectacularly disingenuous. The LFB knew a cladding fire would come. It failed to prepare. (p. 265)

Apps concludes his footnoted but unindexed book with two pictures of the

¹⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/19_6_17_sprinklers.pdf>

¹⁶ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnTZLzXq8fU>>

tragic events he describes.

The world that gave us the Grenfell Tower fire looks irredeemably dishonest. It is a story of corporate structures that allowed human beings to abandon their own conscience and sense of agency and to think only about sales and profit margins. Government institutions placed ideology above human lives at every turn. Listening to the evidence of the people within these structures over the years, one leaves with a profound sense that they felt trapped. They simply served as drones, turning the wheels of a machine far beyond their control.

But there is another vision of humanity available from the Grenfell Tower tragedy. It is of those who stopped as they fled the burning building to help their neighbours flee. Or of the firefighters that went back into the fire, up the smoke-filled, dangerously hot staircases, with no water, faulty radios and no guarantees that the building was not about to collapse around them.

It is the mosques, churches and voluntary organisations that provided some semblance of a humanitarian response as the state disgracefully failed to respond. It is those who stood up on behalf of their neighbours and demanded better treatment from their landlord before the fire and continue to fight for others after it. (pp. 310/11)

In describing the horrors of 14 June 2017 Apps has not written a book for the faint-hearted or squeamish. He offers a withering critique of the policies and beliefs that have pervaded UK politics and government for decades. His work requires those in public life to do more than mutter trite expressions of regret. How many times have we heard the vapid 'thoughts and prayers', 'our hearts and thoughts go out' and 'lessons will be learned' sandwiched between the revelation of one scandalous public tragedy and the emergence of the next?

Of course, accidents will happen in the best-ordered circumstances, human frailty being what it is. But Grenfell was far from that: it was a predicted and preventable disaster. As 15 disabled residents died in the smoke-filled upper floors of a burning tower with only one staircase as a means of escape, those who loved them experienced the cruel reality of Thatcher's phrase 'there is no such thing as society'.¹⁷

How were the dead, bereaved and traumatised meant to ensure that those responsible for their safety – from the 'value for money' local council to budget-and-regulation-cutting Westminster – had their wellbeing at heart?

Along with her 'elf and safety' followers and backers, Thatcher had

¹⁷ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38553797>>

discarded in the name of 'reform' the protections of civilisation which Grenfell counsel Millett so well described. It was exemplified at the inquiry by the behaviour before him of Thatcher's disciple Lord Pickles: he was an 'extremely busy' man with a full diary, one without even the time to count, even less give names to, the 72 dead.

Neither of the two MPs who consistently raised fire safety issues in Parliament will do so again. When Sir David Amess was murdered in 2021, his work for housing safety was movingly acknowledged by those who risk their lives fighting our fires.¹⁸ Emma Dent Coad has been much abused for her stand and was not re-elected in 2019. She has been denied the chance to again represent her former parliamentary constituents in Kensington by Sir Keir Starmer.¹⁹

In their absence, lobbyists and political donors continue to promote the corporate capture of government. It was largely unseen in the 'bonfire of regulation' period Apps describes so well. Their continuing influence is still largely invisible to the taxpaying electorate.²⁰

The 'extremely busy' Lord Pickles now has some formal responsibility for countering that. He chairs the watchdog Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACOBA).²¹ But he also does some lobbying himself as chairman of the Conservative Friends of Israel group in the House of Lords.²²

Perhaps it was to Pickles and his ilk that Millett directed part of his closing statement: 'True regret is not the repeated and mournful use of the word "sorry", but the achievement of a practical outcome reflecting permanent self-corrective action.'

Whether the hapless Thatcher tribute acts now responsible in government for our safety and wellbeing six years after Grenfell are minded to make such a commitment I very much doubt. Until such time as electors find those who will, we have Peter Apps to thank for his public service in tirelessly throwing light on

¹⁸ <<https://www.fire-magazine.com/fire-service-tributes-to-sir-david-amess>>

¹⁹ <<https://tinyurl.com/yeywe8ed>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/oct/17/labour-blocks-former-kensington-mp-emma-dent-coad-from-running-next-election>>

²⁰ <<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/why-do-private-donors-fund-labour/>>
<<https://tinyurl.com/bdhfkt7b>> or <https://www.transparency.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf/publications/TI-UK_Lifting_the_Lid_on_Lobbying.pdf>

²¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/mc52jebn>> or <<https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/lord-pickles-government-lobbying-watchdog-head-role-group-959388>>
<<https://tinyurl.com/2aju466k>> or <<https://theconversation.com/uk-lobbying-rules-explained-why-no-one-seems-to-be-in-legal-trouble-159741>>

²² <<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/eric-pickles-enobled-jewish-community-israel-1.466136>>

their lethal lethargy.

*John Booth is a freelance writer.
He blogs at Forthzando.com and tweets at [@JohnBooth2017](https://twitter.com/JohnBooth2017)*