

GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

‘WAR’ ON THE CULTURE OF HEALTH AND SAFETY

The UK’s Fire Brigades Union lawyer Martin Seaward told the Grenfell Tower Inquiry that any assessment of the fire and rescue service must take place “in the wider political and economic context” and noted that the disaster was caused by individual private companies and government, with “total” building failure and “widespread” systematic failings.

On giving evidence to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, Fire Brigades Union (FBU) lawyer Martin Seaward pointed out that it “was particularly wrong to blame the individual firefighters and control staff who attended the disaster in its early stages”.

He said that the London Fire Brigade’s work was impeded by austerity cuts and privatisation for decades before Grenfell.

The Grenfell Tower disaster was caused, he said, by “individual private companies which were allowed to put profit before people”.

He said that it “represented 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”.

Elsewhere in his evidence, Seaward also emphasised that lessons must be learned by London Fire Brigade.

SYSTEMIC CAUSES

He said that “the building failure was

Martin Seaward, FBU’s lawyer, gave oral evidence to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry on 24 January 2022.



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”.

He added that “the performance of the fire and rescue service” at Grenfell must be assessed “in the wider political and economic context, apportioning blame where it is due, particularly, in relation to those who created and enabled this truly horrifying disaster”.

He added that it was wrong to blame the individual firefighters and control staff who attended the disaster in its early stages, in part as “any deficiencies in the performance of the London Fire Brigade were institutional or due to inadequate senior management”.

He said that “the manufacturing companies manipulated the flawed testing and certification regime, while the private companies involved in the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower created a wholly unsafe building surrounded by highly flammable material, from which the Tenant Management Organisation’s under-resourced and ineffective fire risk management system failed to safeguard the residents”.

He then stated, “The lack of care

shown by the private companies, 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”.

Naming specific policies here, he said “Deregulation and the ‘war on the culture of health and safety’ facilitated the use of the inflammable cladding that destroyed Grenfell Tower... privatisation weakened public services and introduced conflicts of interest between safety and profit as we have seen in the testing and certification regimes.”

CLADDING RISKS

The FBU’s latest written submission to the inquiry has also raised important questions about what the government knew about combustible cladding as far back as 1991 and why this information was not conveyed to London Fire Brigade.

After the fire at Knowsley Heights, Merseyside in 1991, a government note from the Department of the Environment, to the Building Research Establishment, asked them to “play down” the issue of the cladding fire at Knowsley. Cladding’s contribution to the fire was then “suppressed”, according to the union.

In its evidence the FBU says that the

note shows that “the government and the Building Research Establishment were significantly invested in the success of cladding schemes”.

The union’s lawyer added that, in relation to the note, “the risk of rapid fire spread associated with combustible cladding systems was deliberately downplayed by government and this significantly contributed to the widespread misunderstanding of this risk”.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

“We accept there are important lessons to be learned by the London Fire Brigade and the fire and rescue service more generally from Grenfell Tower.” He said that, amongst other things “operational crews in London had not been informed that building failure was not rare, that compartmentation could not be relied upon and some cladding materials were combustible, nor of the heightened risk of total building failure these combined risks presented in cladded High Rise Residential Buildings, nor of the resulting need to consider revoking stay put and evacuating such a building, and had not been trained when or how to do so”.

He also said that equipment issues caused problems, including communications equipment and aerial appliance. However, he added that responsibility here went wider than simply the fire brigade itself: “Central Government, the Chief Fire Officers’ Association, National Fire Chiefs Council, Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor and the London Fire Brigade failed to equip and prepare the operational crews, incident commanders and control room staff for a major disaster such as Grenfell Tower”.

Additionally, he pointed out that any changes or improvements to the fire and rescue services needed to be properly resourced. “Central government cannot deregulate, privatise and cut away whilst at the same time increasing the duties of the fire and rescue service.”

OPERATION GUIDANCE

Seaward added that “weaknesses in the preparation and performance of London Fire Brigade”, including in relation to stay-put in buildings where cladding and compartmentation failure were issues, “can be traced back to the decision of Central Government to remove any form of national body for discussing and developing strategy, equipment and operation guidance across the fire



Smoke billows from the fire that engulfed the 27-storey Grenfell Tower in West London on 14 June 2017.

and rescue service”. The Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council, which held this role, was abolished in 2004.

“We submit that a properly resourced national body, crucially including the involvement of firefighter representatives, is essential to ensure that knowledge of risk is translated into policies and guidance which are properly discussed and then disseminated and implemented across the fire and rescue service,” he pointed out.

Expecting individual fire and rescue services to do this themselves was unrealistic, he noted. “It is unrealistic, even where the subject matter is drawn to their attention, to expect fragmented, under-resourced fire and rescue services across the country to be on top

of what might be happening at another fire and rescue service without national co-ordination”.

INADEQUATE SENIOR MANAGEMENT

“Any deficiencies in the performance of the LFB were institutional or due to inadequate senior management. They were not the failings of the individual fire fighters or control staff who attended the disaster. They did their best in accordance with their training and experience to save lives in face of an unprecedented catastrophe.

“The individual firefighters who attended the disaster, including the first two Incident Commanders and the supervisors of the Control Room staff, should be relieved of any individual blame. Grenfell Tower was not their fault.”