

City

analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

ISSN: 1360-4813 (Print) 1470-3629 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20>

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To cite this article: Gordon MacLeod (2018) The Grenfell Tower atrocity, *City*, 22:4, 460-489

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2018.1507099>



Published online: 20 Sep 2018.



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The Grenfell Tower atrocity

Exposing urban worlds of inequality, injustice, and an impaired democracy

Gordon MacLeod

The fire that erupted in Grenfell Tower in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in west London on 14 June 2017 is widely acknowledged to be the worst experienced during UK peacetime since the nineteenth century. It is confirmed to have resulted in 72 casualties and 70 physically injured. It has also left a community physically and emotionally scarred. That the catastrophe occurred in the country's wealthiest borough added to the shock while the circumstances surrounding it also begged questions relating to political and corporate responsibility. The UK Prime Minister swiftly established a public inquiry which is ongoing and anticipated to stretch well into 2019. This paper offers a preliminary analysis of what some are interpreting to be a national atrocity. It begins by describing the events at the time of the fire while also identifying the key controversies that began to surface. It then examines the local geography of Grenfell Tower and the surrounding Lancaster West Estate revealing an astonishing landscape of inequality across the borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The paper then uncovers how such inequality was combined with a malevolent geography of injustice whereby for several years residents raised regular warnings about the building's safety only to be disregarded by the very organisations which were there ostensibly to protect and safeguard their livelihoods: the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea municipal authority and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation. The paper then deepens the analysis identifying how these organisations disavowed the local democratic process, in doing so dishonouring so tragically the Grenfell residents. It then finds this democratic disavowal to be multiscalar: for amid an incremental neoliberal political assault on the national welfare state, public housing across the country has become wretchedly devalued, stigmatised, and the subject of scandalous maladministration. A final section offers some preliminary analysis of the early stages of the Grenfell Inquiry, while also revealing the dignified resistance of Grenfell community in the face of London's increasingly plutocratic governance.

Key words: Inequality, injustice, the State, anti-democracy, plutocratic governance, London

‘The Grenfell Tower fire has become a symbol of the inequality that exists in our country. Seventy-one¹ people tragically lost

their lives, as well as the many people who lost their homes, possessions, families and loved ones. The first duty of the State is to

protect the lives of its citizens and lessons must be learnt to avoid this happening again' (Press Release by the *Equality and Human Rights Commission*, 11 December 2017).

The Grenfell Tower Catastrophe

At 0054 (British Summer Time) on Wednesday 14 June, 2017, emergency services received reports of fire in a flat on the fourth floor of Grenfell Tower; a 24-storey residential block within the Lancaster West Estate located in the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea in West London. Crews from the London Fire Brigade arrived within six minutes. But before they could extinguish it, the fire had already spread beyond the kitchen window of the flat to the building's external cladding before rising rapidly up its exterior at a 'terrifying rate' (Bulman 2017a). In response over 250 firefighters and 70 fire engines arrived from stations across London. They were soon joined by the London Metropolitan Police Service, more than 100 London Ambulance Service crew and 20 ambulances, the special Hazardous Area Response Team, and the city's Air Ambulance². At any one time, over a hundred firefighters were inside the building to rescue people, equipped with special breathing apparatus and stretching their professional safety protocols (Doward 2017a). The building's own safety regulations instructed residents to remain inside their flats in the event of a fire – the so-called 'stay put' policy – advice repeated by the emergency services. By 0400, though, flames and thick smoke engulfed all sides of Grenfell Tower, inhibiting visibility above the fourth floor. With charred debris falling from the upper floors, rescued residents and firefighters themselves were now being protected by plastic shields held horizontally by riot police officers who had been drafted in (Castle, Hakim, and Yeginsu 2017). At 0414, and reversing the earlier instructions, a senior officer from the Metropolitan Police addressed a swelling crowd nearby

Grenfell to announce: 'Listen, if you know people inside, tell them to self-evacuate, do not wait for the fire brigade. If you get a phone-call or twitter, tell them, you tell them to get out now' (Whinnett and Miranda 2017). Neighbours and friends reported of people being trapped inside the burning building switching torches, mobile phones, or electric lights on and off, some waving from windows while holding children, some jumping from higher floors (Weaver 2017; Weaver et al. 2017). It was already apparent that a truly catastrophic event was unfolding before their eyes.

As firefighters and emergency services continued tirelessly to extinguish the fire and save lives, residents from the surrounding low-rise housing blocks on the Lancaster West Estate and other local neighbourhoods – some having just been instructed to evacuate their own homes – began to congregate around the police cordon that had been established. All were observing in horror while simultaneously endeavouring to voice some hope and reassurance to those visible in the windows of the burning building. Some Grenfell residents had fled with merely their clothes or nightwear as others searched frantically for family and friends, many of whom had originally been instructed to stay in their flats but were no longer answering their phones (Hinliff 2017; Ross 2017). Local institutional support emerged swiftly. The Maxilla Social Club opened at 0200 and The Harrow Club youth centre at 0300. And by 0330, St Clement's church, St James's church, Notting Hill Methodist church, the Rugby Portobello Trust, Westway Trust, and Latymer Christian Centre had all opened their doors to provide refuge, water, food, tea, coffee and care to those affected by the major incident (Fraser 2017; Hattenstone 2017). Before long volunteers were arriving from boroughs across London and further afield: they brought water, food, clothes, bed-linen, blankets, toiletries, sanitary products, and toys in what was an extraordinary nation-wide groundswell of generosity and compassion (Kennedy

2018a). Notices also began to appear on social media sites and at the community centres offering beds: Westway Trust confirming its gymnasium could provide 300 emergency beds that evening (Sawer 2017).

Such voluntary benevolence and community support contrasted with what seemed to many as the palpable lack of an official municipal presence (d’Ancona 2017; Kennedy 2017a, 2018a). Ahmed Chellat, whose brother-in-law, wife, and three children had not been heard from since 0230, stated how ‘for five hours we’ve been here with my sister-in-law and some tenants. There’s no councillors, no TMO³ to say exactly what’s going on. If it wasn’t for the local people we would be in the street’⁴ (Ross 2017). Indeed it was widely reported that no officials – either from Grenfell Tower’s owner, the Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council, or its landlord, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation – were on hand to gather the names of survivors or those missing⁵, or to advise on whether the clumps of ash that continued to fall onto the streets and sidewalks might be toxic (Nadel 2017; Platt 2017). At 0930, the London Fire Commissioner reported of fatalities. By noon the Metropolitan Police Service confirmed six people dead and more than 70 in hospital. Hundreds of ‘missing’ posters and appeals for information on family and friends who had not been seen since the outbreak of the fire began to appear on the Latymer Centre and around nearby churches, alongside messages of love, sympathy and support (Slawson et al. 2017). As volunteers became overwhelmed with donations, frustration intensified over a vacuum of official municipal guidance. So while lauding the efforts of Reverend Mike Long, who was running the Notting Hill Methodist church, local Labour councillor Judith Bakeman underlined how ‘there’s been so many cuts [to council budgets that], there aren’t enough people to deal with this’ (Weaver et al. 2017). At St Clement’s church, council officials *were* helping. But

their sudden announcement to survivors – that ‘[W]e are going to close the doors at seven o’clock. [And]... We urge you to find friends and family close by and stay with them’ – generated absolute astonishment among the clergy and volunteers, who roundly rebuked their call and continued to provide care and support (Graham-Harrison 2017, 6).

Grenfell Tower and the Lancaster West Estate sit in the north of Kensington and Chelsea. Much of it is social housing and home to predominantly lower and modest income, working class, and many black and minority ethnic people, some of whom are migrants: they are in essence ‘ordinary Londoners’ (Alibhai-Brown 2017; Khan 2017; Madden 2017; Obordo 2017; Watt 2017). It is surrounded by conspicuously more affluent neighbourhoods. And questions began to surface about whether a building which housed wealthy people, or indeed whether one of the more recently constructed luxury towers enclosing the über-rich in central London (Graham 2015), would have caught fire so rapidly and burned for so long. Such sensibilities were further fuelled by local knowledge that on numerous occasions since 2013, Grenfell residents had raised serious concerns about fire safety with the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (GAG 2013a; 2016; Tucker 2017a; and see below). At 1100 on 15 June, the number of confirmed deaths was updated to 17, around which time the local community became aware that the UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, was just conducting a private visit to the Grenfell area. She had spoken with emergency service crews but did not meet survivors of the fire because of ‘security reasons’: a decision which infuriated local residents and promptly reverberated across all forms of media, her taciturn detachment so obviously contrasting with the warmth, generosity, compassion, and courage of emergency service personnel, volunteers, and donors (Cockburn 2017; Pasha-Robinson 2017a). Among what were now thousands of heartfelt messages of

support, appeal, grief and solidarity imprinted on the Latymer Christian Centre tribute wall just off Bramley Road were some unequivocally pointed questions about injustice; one simply asserting ‘Justice for Grenfell. Jail those responsible’ (Said-Moorhouse 2017). It was becoming apparent that amid the outpouring of community distress and sorrow:

‘There was a volatile sense of grievance in a neighbourhood that felt overlooked and neglected, whose worst fears had suddenly attracted the world’s attention, and where in the immediate aftermath of disaster the authorities were nowhere to be seen’ (Ross 2017, 3).

Acutely conscious of the widespread condemnation surrounding her visit the previous day, and perhaps mindful of escalating hostility for a Conservative-led municipal authority which appeared to be failing its less well-off constituents in a high profile wealthy borough, Theresa May returned to the neighbourhood on Friday 16 June. She chose a meeting with a selected group of families at St Clement’s church to announce measures including £5 million to help with immediate costs for families affected by the fire alongside a pledge that all displaced residents would be rehoused locally within three weeks (Stewart and Elgot 2017). But when departing the church, Mrs May required police protection as numerous local people voiced their disapproval of her government’s sluggish reaction to what was increasingly acknowledged to be a humanitarian catastrophe (Addley 2017a; Farha 2017; Madden 2017). With police now reporting 30 fatalities and 58 missing (Bulman 2017b), protesters had gathered outside Kensington and Chelsea Town Hall presenting a list of democratic demands, not least to confirm the precise number of people who had been living in Grenfell Tower and for ‘the chief executive of the council to make public commitments on what the council is going to do for the victims of this borough, and for all the other buildings in the borough that [could] stand the same fate as Grenfell

Tower’ (Al Mansur, 16 June; in Learmonth 2017). Many then returned to Grenfell participating in a series of spontaneous speeches as candles were lit and flowers laid outside the Latymer Centre (Humphry 2017). The evening also saw a protest outside the Department for Communities and Local Government in Whitehall, where an estimated 1,400 people were voicing ‘Justice for Grenfell’ (Grierson and Gayle 2017).

In the days that followed, the sense of loss coupled with outrage and injustice was undiminished as the number of fatalities was estimated to be 80 and questions surfaced about the specific type of external cladding that had been installed on Grenfell Tower as part of a major renovation that had taken place during 2015–16 (Doward 2017b). Families of victims and survivors began posing questions as to whether friends and relatives had perished as a result of cost-cutting measures. The period since has revealed the Grenfell community and representatives to balance legitimate indignation with gracious dignity. And at the time of writing, the Grenfell disaster is confirmed to have led to 72 fatalities and 70 people injured, with 151 homes destroyed in the tower and surrounding area leading many of the households affected by the fire to remain in temporary accommodation or hotels for long after the event⁶ (Gentleman 2017a; Rawlinson 2017). The remainder of this paper aims to present a preliminary analysis of the Grenfell catastrophe. The next section offers detail on the geography of Grenfell Tower and the Lancaster West Estate revealing an astonishing landscape of inequality in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea vis-à-vis housing, wealth and service provision (Dent Coad 2017a; Derbyshire 2017). There then follows a discussion of the circumstances preceding the fire whereby for several years Grenfell residents were scandalously disregarded by the organisations that existed precisely to protect and safeguard their livelihoods and interests: the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea municipal authority and the Kensington and

Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation. The following section deepens the analysis to examine how these organisations disavowed the local democratic process and in doing so dishonoured so tragically the Grenfell residents. However, such democratic disavowal has also ensued via the central state amid a creeping neoliberal political assault on the UK national state that has effectively led to its ‘dismembering’ (Toynbee and Walker 2017), not least in the sphere of public housing. In developing this analysis, the paper takes inspiration from Deborah Orr’s opinion piece, where she points towards the ‘complacent indifference’ of key organisations, not least those of the RBKC council and the KCTMO, and the ‘layers of apathy and casual disregard’ which were conducive in shaping the horror of 14 June: and how, given these lines of causality and again following Orr, it is valid to interpret ‘Grenfell not a disaster or a tragedy, but an atrocity’ (Orr 2017, 34). A final section offers some analysis of the early stages of the Grenfell Inquiry, while also revealing the dignified resistance of Grenfell community in the face of London’s increasingly plutocratic governance.

‘If you go further down this road, it feels like you have gone into a different world’: Parallel Livelihoods in Kensington and Chelsea

‘The disparity between rich and poor in this city is disgusting. This [the Grenfell fire] would not have happened to the £5m flats around the corner’ (Danny Vance, associate pastor, Notting Hill Community Church; 15 June 2017; in Bell 2017).

Grenfell Tower and the Lancaster West Estate are located close to where the north end of St Ann’s Road meets Bramley Road, and near the Latimer Road underground station. The Estate and the lower-rise buildings on nearby side streets are majority social housing with some private rented, and in 2015 the vicinity was among the ‘top 10 percent most deprived areas in

England’ (Barr 2017; Snowdon et al 2017). A seven minute walk south, down St Ann’s Road from the Lancaster West Estate, and one arrives at St Ann’s Villas and on the left St James’s Gardens: in each spot a three bedroom terraced townhouse can fetch between £3 million and £6 million. A few minutes east of the Estate sits Elgin Crescent: an elegant arc whose larger properties sell for between £12 million and £30 million (Chakraborty 2017a), feverishly inflated by virtue of lying within the now lavishly fashionable Notting Hill⁷. This is not unusual in London, where affluent property owners may live cheek by jowl with lower income communities residing in densely packed social housing (Addley 2017b). Indeed St Ann’s Road perhaps offers a microcosm of Kensington and Chelsea (Figure 1): a borough where the average annual salary – at £123,000 – is the highest in the UK, but also where over one-third of workers earn below £20,000 and 4,500 children live in poverty (Bell 2017). Such conspicuous inequalities are further reflected in the services available to the different communities. For while Kensington and Chelsea is abundant with handsome parks and green spaces, tennis courts, and other sporting facilities, many of these are formerly public and community assets which are now increasingly privatised just as austerity-induced cuts to council budgets have decimated funding for primary school sports and ended free swimming for children and pensioners: all trends which heighten concerns about sharpening health inequalities⁸ (Nadel 2017; Obordo 2017). In the words of one North Kensington resident:

‘A lot of the clubs where children used to play, the clubs for the elderly, they have all been shut down. If you go to different areas in Kensington, you can see a lot of money being invested in that area, but whatever we have here, they cut it. And everything they build here is private. If you go further down this [St Ann’s] road, it feels like you have gone into a different world’ (Soran Karami; in Addley 2017b, 7).

The wealth divide in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea

Grenfell Tower was in the 10% of poorest areas in England

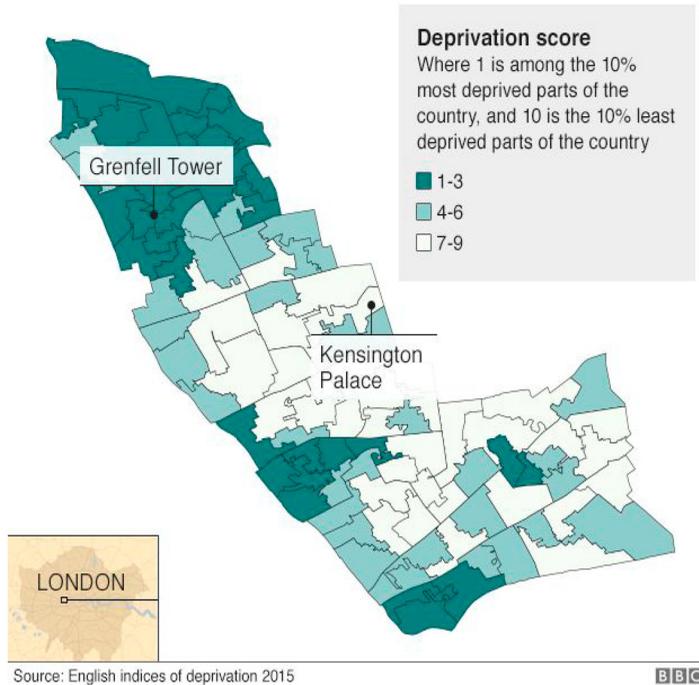


Figure 1. Unequal wealth in Kensington and Chelsea: author's source Adley 2017b.

Amid this juxtaposition of radically diverse livelihoods, it is important to underline how the municipal provision of social housing protects many low and modest income households from the merciless vagaries of London's housing market, not least its soaring private rents (Watt 2009; Atkinson 2017). Demand for social housing is therefore intense across the city. Yet in 2014, just when the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC) was confronting a waiting list of 2677 social housing applicants, the authority had no plans to build any new social housing, agreeing only to contribute £2.9 million to a project initiated by the Peabody Trust⁹ to build 112 homes with an unspecified number of social units (Atkinson, Parker, and Burrows 2017). Indeed the overall stock of social housing in Kensington and Chelsea is declining – only ten new council-funded homes have been built since 1990 (Boughton

2018) – as significant numbers of council and housing association properties are deemed 'non-viable' and placed on the private market or transferred to 'affordable rent'. For instance, between 2014 and 2016 the *Notting Hill* and *Genesis* housing associations¹⁰ sold 711 'low cost' homes and converted 1322 from 'social' to 'affordable rent' (Dent Coad, 2017b): given how the latter is calculated at 80 per cent of the market rate, this represents a cruel absurdity in a borough where the average home costs £1.5 million and whose ruling council executive would deem rent controls a socialist abhorrence¹¹. Moreover, this disposal of municipal assets has been running in tandem with a malevolent geography of displacement. For the RBKC has the second highest 'out of borough placements'¹² in England; a policy designed to relocate homeless people to different boroughs (Booth 2015a; Foster 2017a).

The case of Sutton Dwellings in Chelsea helps reveal the social and economic stakes and the political conflict that can surface in such transformations. Under the stewardship of philanthropist, William Sutton, Sutton Dwellings were built in 1913 to provide ‘houses for use and occupation by the poor’ (Sutton 1894; in Booth 2015b). For decades they offered low rent housing to Londoners. In February 2015, the housing association which owned the estate, Affinity Sutton, announced plans to demolish all 462 social housing flats, rebuilding 237 for social rent and 106 for private sale (Batty 2017). Late in 2016, following a *Save the Sutton Estate*¹³ campaign led by residents and involving celebrities including Eddie Izzard, Affinity Sutton found its proposals rejected even by the RBKC on the grounds that they failed to provide sufficient levels of replacement social housing (Booth 2016). While the campaign recorded a notable political achievement in averting a sizeable sell-off of social housing, it was unable to prevent Affinity Sutton ‘decanting’ numerous residents from the neighbourhood while employing workers to destroy the interior of many flats so as to render them ‘uninhabitable to squatters’ (Blower 2015; LBC 2017). Then, in the summer of 2017, Affinity Sutton – which had confirmed a post-tax surplus¹⁴ of £145 million in 2015–16 before merging with Circle to form Clarion Housing Group (Brown 2016) – lodged an appeal with the UK government planning inspectorate against the RBKC decision while simultaneously outlining its intention to proceed with the lucrative development regardless (Batty 2017). Being submitted the day before the Grenfell fire, it appeared retrospectively as a profoundly insensitive plea. And it provoked Robert Atkinson, Labour leader within the Conservative council, to write to Communities and Local Government (DCLG) minister, Sajid Javid, urging the national government to:

‘... take control of the [Sutton] estate from its rogue owners [and further how ...] Clarion has emptied the Sutton Estate cynically and on purpose, so that they can cash in. ... They

see the estate as being their financial salvation. It’s disgusting. [Although] it’s not just Clarion. As housing associations have got bigger and have kept merging they seem to be turning themselves into property developers and quite openly say for every apartment we sell off in central London we can construct six in other parts of the country or further out of London. It’s not on’ (Robert Atkinson; in Batty 2017).

Atkinson also underlined how, just as Affinity/Clarion’s debased actions left 150 flats in the Sutton Dwellings lying empty, the borough was confronting an acute housing shortage following the Grenfell fire, with 158 families forced into temporary accommodation, many in hotels (Batty 2017, 2018). Indeed public scorn in the aftermath of Grenfell justifiably politicised the scale of empty properties in Kensington and Chelsea. For while England and London have each witnessed a fall in empty homes over a ten year period up to 2016, the royal borough recorded a rise, with 1652 unoccupied and 603 vacant for over two years (Batty 2017). Many are not social housing. Instead they serve to reveal how mere private ownership of property in the UK’s wealthiest borough can reap astonishingly rich reward. Granted, any homes in England which lie empty for two years are levied with an additional 50 per cent council (property) tax: but the net effect is merely to ‘punish’ owners of Kensington and Chelsea’s townhouses with a few hundred pounds on properties that are worth millions or tens of millions. Further research revealed many vacant properties in Kensington and Chelsea to be owned by a cabal of ‘foreign royalty’ and overseas oligarchs including Dmytro Firtash: a Ukrainian preoccupied with fighting extradition to the US while the home he purchased for £53 million back in 2014 – the former Brompton Road tube station – remains empty (ibid). Meanwhile the anti-corruption agency, Transparency International (2015), identified 5,835¹⁵ properties in the borough to be owned by companies registered in offshore secrecy

jurisdictions. All of which fuels a disquieting sense that some of the most coveted real estate in west-central London is being utilised entirely ‘as a safe haven ... to store capital, safely and secretly, where its origins will not be questioned’ (Glucksberg 2016, 244).

It is also vital to appreciate how this unparadigmatic geography of inequality which punctuates the Royal Borough – where elegant uninhabited mansions rub alongside communities enduring diminishing public services, a housing crisis, and rising homelessness – has not materialised innocently via some benign hand of a fêted market economy (Shaxson 2013). And to be sure the Grenfell disaster has done much to stir local consciousness about precisely who has been presiding over the borough’s incongruous social ecology (Barr 2017; Figure 1). One person who has worked vigorously to question the hegemonic political arrangements in the Royal Borough is Emma Dent Coad (Adams 2017). As a Labour councillor in the RBKC for eleven years, Dent Coad railed against some of London’s ‘most extreme gentrification’. Emboldened by a sense that many across the borough were uneasy about growing inequality, Dent Coad stood as Labour Party candidate in the UK general election of June 2017, and by a margin of 20 votes, became the first ever Labour MP in Kensington¹⁶. Five days later, and along with her north Kensington neighbours and constituents, Dent Coad awoke early to the most dreadful news. Since then she has vowed to seek justice for Grenfell victims (Booth 2017; Gentleman 2017b; Adams 2017; Addley 2017a).

**‘They want people like us out of the area’.
Disregard, Intimidation, Social Cleansing:
Toward a Local Political Economy of
Contempt**

‘When people hear about the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea, this [Grenfell Tower and the Lancaster West Estate] isn’t the part they think of. And that unfortunately

includes the council’ (Rochelle Thomas, volunteer at Henry Dickens Centre, 17 June; quoted in Graham-Harrison 2017, 6).

‘In an inner-London borough as rich as Kensington and Chelsea, social housing is at once integral – in that it forms a massive proportion of its housing stock, and houses a large number of its working residents and families – and yet invisible. This means tenants could warn, repeatedly and with escalating fear, that the building they lived in was a death trap; it meant they felt harassed and intimidated by the landlord and subcontractors during the recent renovation; and it meant, ultimately, that they would be the victims of possibly criminal levels of neglect’ (Hanley 2017).

Located in the Notting Dale ward of North Kensington, the Lancaster West Estate was conceived in the late 1960s as part of a wider redevelopment to replace several rows of Victorian terraces which local authorities had designated to have become ‘slum housing’ (RBKC 2012). The 1968 Masterplan, designed by architects Clifford Wearden and Associates, promised ‘a balance of all the essential facilities required to create a comprehensive community’ (Boughton 2017; Gras 2016). The Estate was completed in 1974, with Grenfell Tower its apex and three ‘finger blocks’ of lower rise buildings radiating south. It nonetheless failed to incorporate certain ‘essential facilities’ recommended in the original Masterplan, such as local shops and a swimming pool. And during the 1980s and 1990s, the Lancaster West Estate endured funding scarcities, deteriorating infrastructure, declining amenities, and deficient maintenance (Platt 2017): all characteristic of a depressingly familiar story *vis-à-vis* prolonged governmental malevolence towards public housing (Hanley 2007; McKenzie 2015; Dorling 2015; Boughton 2018). Responding to resident concerns about its steady decline, in 1996 RBKC introduced a new body, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organization (KCTMO), to assume

responsibility for maintenance of the Lancaster West Estate while ownership remained with the Council (ASH 2017). This arrangement has overseen several ‘improvements’ to the Estate, notably the construction of the Kensington Aldridge Academy at the north-facing foot of Grenfell Tower, a rebuilding of the Kensington Leisure Centre (KALC), and the approval in 2012 of plans for a £10 million renovation of Grenfell Tower (Apps 2017). Designed by Studio E Architects (RBKC 2012) and undertaken during 2015–16 by Rydon Construction, the internal refurbishment provided nine additional flats alongside improvements to energy efficiency and community facilities while significant external fittings included replacement windows, new over-cladding, and curtain wall façades offering the tower ‘a fresher, modern look’ (Rydon 2016).

Nonetheless, a growing sense of estrangement from the KCTMO’s decision-making over these developments had led some Grenfell Tower residents to establish the *Grenfell Action Group* (GAG) in 2010, not least in opposition to the Aldridge Academy and KALC on the grounds that they would usurp any remaining publicly accessible green space in the vicinity (ASH 2017). The Group had also campaigned vigorously about safety concerns in the Tower itself (Noor 2017; Platt 2017; Tucker 2017a). In January 2013, the GAG posted a blog outlining how the KALC development had eliminated the Lancaster Road car park thereby obstructing the emergency access zone while warning how this ‘could have lethal consequences in the event of a serious fire or similar emergency in Grenfell Tower’ (GAG 2013a). The following month, it revealed how a risk assessment undertaken by one of the KCTMO’s own safety officers had identified firefighting equipment to have remained unchecked for four years (GAG 2013b). The Group contacted both the KCTMO management and the RBKC Cabinet Member for Housing and Property to raise these concerns, but received no replies. Later that year, in May, residents

began experiencing distressing electrical power surges, with smoke emerging from appliances, some even exploding or catching fire. Regular reports were submitted from residents to the KCTMO over an eighteen day period but were ignored before finally being acknowledged on 29th May by which time surges had ‘escalated out of control’ (GAG 2013c). All of which proceeded to erode trust between the KCTMO and Grenfell residents (Apps 2017). And of course the significance of these electrical surges ought not to be under-estimated given that the catastrophic blaze of June 14 was traced to a faulty refrigerator generating the original fire in the fourth floor flat (Dearden 2017).

Following the 2015–16 renovation, residents began voicing anxieties to the KCTMO about the fact there was only one fire escape route (itself oftentimes blocked by refuse), as well as numerous exposed gas pipes, no obvious evacuation procedure, and the absence of a building-wide fire-alarm and a sprinkler system (Booth, Gentleman, and Khilali 2017; Tucker 2017a). Moreover, in a speech to the RBKC Housing and Planning Scrutiny Committee in January 2016, David Collins, the then Chair of the Grenfell Tower residents’ association, presented evidence that 90 per cent of residents were dissatisfied with the ‘improvement works’ while 68 per cent had experienced intimidation from the TMO, prompting him to recommend an inquiry into the KCTMO. His call was summarily dismissed by the committee (Foster 2017b). Perhaps, though, it is a blog posted in November 2016 that reveals the most tragically prescient warning:

‘It is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders. We believe that the KCTMO are an evil, unprincipled, mini-mafia who have no business to be charged with the responsibility

of looking after the everyday management of large scale social housing estates and that their sordid collusion with the RBKC Council is a recipe for a future major disaster. ... It is our conviction that a serious fire in a tower block or similar high density residential property is the most likely reason that those who wield power at the KCTMO will be found out and brought to justice!' (GAG 20th November 2016).

This grievous disregard for the safety of Grenfell residents exhibited by the KCTMO and the RBKC has a wider political and economic context demanding brief analysis. Firstly, papers released by the RBKC Housing and Property Scrutiny Committee from 2013 reveal how the contractor originally scheduled to undertake the Grenfell Tower renovation, Leadbitter, was rejected because its quotation of £11.28 million exceeded the proposed £10 million budget of the KCTMO-RBKC. It was only after the contract went out to further competitive tender that Rydon gained approval for the project with a quote of £8.7 million (Hills 2017). It surely begs questions about how a building revamp originally quoted at £11.3 million could conceivably be delivered for £2.6 million less without some drop in quality and standards. Second, documents obtained by *The Guardian* disclose how Leadbitter's plans included recommendations from Studio A architects and engineers to deploy a zinc composite external cladding with a fire-retardant core; notably a decision approved by residents (RBKC 2012). However, as part of a 'value engineering process' initiated by the RBKC, £293,369 was saved from the cladding expenses by opting for cheaper aluminium panels¹⁷: crucially they contained a core that has since proved more combustible in tests and been a foremost source of concern among firefighters, safety experts and architects while also being banned on buildings higher than twelve metres in Germany and the USA¹⁸ (Booth and Evans 2017; Walker 2017a; Booth 2018b). Third, shortly after the fire the leader of the RBKC, Nicholas Paget-

Brown, informed BBC *Newsnight* of how the council had received assurances that any fire in a high-rise ought to be contained within the flat of origin – a process known as 'compartmentalization' (Dearden 2018) – and that there was no 'collective view' among residents to retrofit sprinklers given the scope for further disruption and delay to the renovation. However, Paget Brown's claims are disputed in reports which indicate that residents actively requested sprinklers alongside additional fire escapes (Cockburn 2017; Kentish 2017a).

These *Guardian* documents further reveal the overall cost of the 'external façade' – comprising the aluminium cladding, windows, and curtain walling – to have been £3,476,855. Again it is worth placing this in context. For in 2016 the RBKC accumulated £4.5 million from the sale of just two three-bedroomed council houses in Chelsea – so £1 million more than it was prepared to spend on protecting 120 council homes – one of which incidentally was bought by a multimillionaire property investor (Booth and Evans 2017; Atkinson 2017). More than this, though, in 2014 – just as the RBKC-KCTMO governing bloc was enforcing its 'value engineering' on the renovation of Grenfell – the RBKC council recorded usable reserves of £274 million, rising to £300 million in 2015–16. Indeed its finances were so buoyant it could award a £100 rebate on those wealthier residents in the highest council tax bracket while also providing £1.5m towards establishing a charity to run opera events in the affluent district of Holland Park (Walker 2017b). The bellicose geography of inequality uncovered in the previous section appears to be further 'entrenched by council decisions' (Foster 2017c): decisions exposing an unashamed advancement of bourgeois privilege while simultaneously disavowing even the basic principles of local democracy. And for whom was the renovation of Grenfell Tower primarily intended? The planning approval document signals that the *reason* for the 'materials to be used on the external

faces of the building(s)...[are about]... ensuring that the character and appearance of the area are preserved and *living conditions of those living near the development suitably protected*' (RBKC 2014, 2; emphasis added; Bowie 2017; ASH 2017). Or in the words of one world-weary local resident:

'I used to work for the council. Where there's a tower block they want to shut it down and remove them. And you know why? Because the rich people want to come in. So they put the cladding up to make it look nice and pretty for those who are coming in, to make the property values go up' (June 2017; cited in Humphry 2017).

In view of such a lamentably divisive local political economy, it is little wonder how so many residents from the Lancaster West and Grenfell community were moved to voice comments such as 'we feel like we don't matter as people' (in Graham-Harrison 2017, 6), and how 'it was not just that they ignored us, but that they viewed us with contempt' (Yvette Williams, organiser of the *Justice 4 Grenfell* campaign group; in Gapper 2017; see also Humphry 2017; Laville 2017; Moore 2017a; Orr 2017; cf. O'Hagan 2018). David Collins further lamented how some people would have been 'trapped in their rooms, and... will have died thinking: "They didn't care. They didn't listen"' (cited in Foster 2017b). And a local pastor publicly voiced how:

'The people on the lowest incomes of this parish simply do not feel listened to, either this week or in previous years, by those in power. Worse than that, what the whole issue of the cladding and the lack of sprinklers may well highlight is that some people in our society have simply become excess and debris on our neoliberal, unregulated, individualistic, capitalist and consumerist society' (Father Robert Thompson, curate of St Clement's and a local Labour councillor, delivering his sermon on 18th June, 2017; cited in Fraser 2017).

Finally, the catastrophe of Grenfell has intensified debate about the lived experience of

social cleansing and state-induced gentrification across London (Elmer and Denning 2016; Paton and Cooper 2016; Watt and Minton 2016; Foster 2017d; Tucker 2017a; Vulliamy 2017). A library assistant from one of the low-rise blocks near Grenfell put it forthrightly: 'They want people like us out of the area' (in Gentleman 2017c, 9). Beinazir Lasharie, a Labour Councillor and resident of the Testerton Walk finger block in the Lancaster West Estate who was evacuated at the time of the fire, offered a more detailed perspective: 'We are a nuisance to the council. Their attitude is: how dare so many ethnic minority foreigners who are not well-off live in these ugly flats... They don't care about us, they don't listen to us. It's as if they want us to move out. They are socially cleansing us across the borough' (in *ibid.*). Trust in the institutions of the state, already low amid a persistent failure to listen to the concerns of residents, were to plummet in the aftermath of the fire (Chakraborty 2017b): the RBKC council and the KCTMO in particular now forced to encounter a truly devastated community they each had tragically dishonoured, and in the philosophical language of Jacques Rancière (1999), profoundly *wronged*.

Grenfell Tower as a National Atrocity: Disavowing Democracy, Dismembering the State, Dishonoring Public Housing

'Residents at Grenfell Tower describe how, as the local council outsourced contracts to private companies to work on their estate, essential elements of local democracy became unavailable to them. Their voices weren't heard, information they requested wasn't granted, outcomes they were promised did not transpire, complaints they made were not answered. The outcome at Grenfell was unique in its scale but the background is a common enough story. Wherever regeneration of social housing has been outsourced to private developers, responsiveness, transparency, oversight and scrutiny – key elements of healthy

democracy – are lessened for those most directly affected’ (Tucker 2017b).

‘The Grenfell Tower fire was a national atrocity’ (Michael Mansfield QC, lawyer for Grenfell relatives, speaking at the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry in Holborn Bars, central London, on 11 December; cited in Bowcott and Gentleman 2017a).

Disavowing local democracy

In the days immediately after the fire, residents of the Lancaster West Estate and the friends and relatives of those missing became increasingly exasperated at the ineptitude of the RBKC council in confronting the disaster. Particular grievances related to a lack of visible street level staff to offer advice; a failure to communicate information to families about fatalities and of those still missing; delays in finding temporary accommodation; and the chaotic orchestration of the voluntary effort, including an alarming incapacity to distribute money being donated (cf. Blagrove 2017; Livingston 2017; O’Hagan 2018). Residents of the finger block flats were further distressed by conflicting advice from police and local state officials on whether they could return to their homes. For instance, Nina Masroh, who works at the Kensington Aldridge Academy, informed journalists that while their family home was closer to the tower than the school and the Latimer Road tube station, both of which had been closed due to the risk of falling debris, complained how ‘we’ve had no one here to tell us if it is safe [to return] . . . We feel so angry’ (Gentleman 2017d, 4). Amid calls from an aggrieved and traumatised community for the RBKC leadership to resign over its calamitous response to the disaster (Grierson and Gayle 2017; Nadel 2017), on Sunday June 18, the Conservative central government transferred key responsibilities of the relief effort to a Grenfell Fire Response Team. This was to be led by the City of London Corporation chief executive, John Barradell, with support from the DCLG as well as other London

local authorities, the Metropolitan Police, the British Red Cross, and the London Fire Brigade, all designed to provide 24-hour support for housing, health, food, and social care (Pasha-Robinson 2017b).

This decision cast shame on such a wealthy borough council, and it was no surprise when chief executive, Nicholas Holgate, resigned on 21 June. Eight days later, the RBKC did little to help recover its legitimacy. It was the first full meeting addressing the Grenfell disaster and – voicing concerns about possible ‘disruption’ – Council leader Paget-Brown issued instructions that it be held in private without the presence of the media or local residents. A legal challenge was lodged by *The Guardian* leading to confusion and an eventual adjournment, again following orders from Paget-Brown (Foster 2017e; Walker and Weaver 2017). It is convention for council meetings to be open to the public. So the RBKC’s decision only served to further intensify distrust within a community desperate for information. It also signified a belligerent contempt for the democratic process. And amid criticism from the Prime Minister, the following day saw Paget-Brown and his deputy Feilding-Mellen resign, although calls from some local community voices for the whole cabinet to resign were resisted (Nadel 2017). Instead two Conservative councillors, Elizabeth Campbell and Kim Taylor-Smith, were duly nominated as leader and deputy leader respectively (Simpson 2017). Campbell’s first statement was fulsomely apologetic: ‘The first thing I want to do is . . . apologise. This is our community and we have failed it when people needed us the most’ (Pasha-Robinson 2017c). Such failings were underlined in the Independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce report identifying the RBKC to be a ‘distant council that did not know its residents’, with many citizens in the north of the borough feeling they ‘suffered from ‘political neglect’ and that their local area was a ‘political blind spot’ for RBKC’ (IGRT 2017, 4, 10).

Of course it is important to reiterate that responsibility for the *everyday* governance of Grenfell Tower and the Lancaster West

Estate lay not with the RBKC but the KCTMO. The latter's own mission statement proudly proclaims the delivery of 'excellent housing services through resident led management'¹⁹. However, as revealed earlier, it had demonstrated utter disregard for the Grenfell residents who had persistently articulated their anxiety about fire safety (Morrison 2017). And on the two month anniversary of the Grenfell fire, such concerns were reflected in an open letter to the RBKC signed by the heads of 25 local resident associations:

'We agreed that the position of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation Ltd (KCTMO) is no longer tenable and that there is an urgent need to adopt a different, resident-focused model of managing Council housing in our borough. . . . We agree that there has been a fundamental breach of the duty of care by the KCTMO that cannot be remedied. The police have reasonable grounds to suspect that KCTMO committed an offence. This should be sufficient for RBK&C to take immediate action to end its contract with KCTMO. It is clear to us that KCTMO is not fit for purpose. We have no confidence in their ability to manage Council housing on behalf of RBK&C or in their ability to make the correct decisions about our safety' (in Snowdon 2017).

Eight days later, in a private meeting with some survivors and relatives of the Grenfell fire victims, the Prime Minister offered assurances that the KCTMO would be relinquishing responsibility for the Lancaster West Estate (Mason and Sherwood 2017). And on 27 September, the RBKC voted unanimously to terminate its contract, new deputy leader Taylor-Smith indicating how 'The TMO no longer has the trust of residents. [And that] . . . We are listening to residents and consulting on how they want their homes and neighbourhoods to be managed in the future' (Sherwood 2017b). Listening is presumably one of numerous lessons being learnt by this thoroughly discredited local state. Indeed when questioned on the BBC *Today*

programme on 20 July, Taylor-Smith conceded that while serving on the RBKC Housing Scrutiny Committee, he never became aware of the concerns about safety raised by Grenfell residents or of the long-running blogging campaign waged by the Grenfell Action Group, before conceding quite astonishingly that 'Personally I didn't get involved in the scrutiny, there's obviously something that has to be looked at' (York 2017). Perhaps in identifying this 'something to be looked at', it is worth analyzing more forensically the role and the formal representation of the KCTMO alongside its relationship with the RBKC. At the time of the Grenfell fire, the KCTMO was managing 10,000 houses on behalf of the RBKC – its entire council housing stock²⁰ – while also assuming the position of an *arms-length management organization*: a not-for-profit company providing housing services on behalf of a local authority, and an alternative arrangement to fully independent housing associations²¹. The KCTMO Board comprised fifteen members; four council-appointed, three independent, and eight residents. Even allowing for the large scale of its housing management, questions must be posed about how such a purportedly 'resident-led' approach was to disavow Grenfell residents so catastrophically.

Some clues are provided in a report by *Inside Housing* (Apps 2017). It reveals how just prior to completion of the Grenfell refurbishment, Councilor Judith Blakeman had presented a petition to the RBKC (and signed by 51 residents) complaining of 'intolerable' living conditions and a lack of consultation. The matter was delegated to the RBKC Housing Scrutiny Committee. And at the Committee's next meeting, Edward Daffarn, the Grenfell resident and *Grenfell Action Group* mobiliser, called for an independent investigation into the management of the 2015–16 Grenfell refurbishment work. While the RBKC acceded to this demand, Council papers reveal a one-day investigation conducted by six members of the KCTMO board and a written report

‘commending the contractor Rydon on [its] performance and ability to deliver a complex construction project... [and also] the TMO team involved in high quality management of the project over 22 months’ (Apps 2017). ‘Baffled’ by this cloistered self-scrutiny, Blakeman – a non-executive member of the KCTMO – disputed these claims, indicating how she had raised *nineteen* complaints on behalf of individual Grenfell residents about fire safety while also lodging her frustration about the limited horizons for resident voices to be heard. Remarkably, the Chief Executive of KCTMO, Robert Black, then proceeded to criticise Blakeman for speaking out in such terms, recommending that ‘a member of the [KCTMO] board had a duty to the board and to support the views and conclusions they had put forward in relation to Grenfell Tower’ (ibid). In Blakeman’s own words ‘I was treated like I was a nuisance’ (in Booth and Wahlquist 2017). Daffarn too revealed how, since the period just prior to commencement of the refurbishment, in his position as Housing Scrutiny Committee chair, Rock Feilding-Mellen, had encouraged a gradual erosion of a Tenant Consultative Committee²². Subsequent disclosures also uncover how some of the Grenfell residents who dared to voice grievances (two of whom tragically were casualties in the fire) had been threatened with legal action for defamation by both the KCTMO and the RBKC (Osborne 2017).

All of which is indicative of a grievous vacuum of accountability alongside a scandalously anti-democratic approach to governing public housing (Foster 2017b; Bowie 2017; Tucker 2017a; Boughton 2018). Sián Berry, the Green Party chair of the London Assembly Housing Committee, encapsulates much of the problem:

‘... when [residents] raise fire safety, when they raise life-threatening issues, they need to be listened to, and there just currently isn’t the structure for that to happen... There are many, many groups, like the Grenfell Action Group, who are getting involved in trying to

make their homes better and they are treated with suspicion by the authorities – they are regarded as troublemakers as this group was – and I think we need to change that at a much bigger level’ (in Weaver et al. 2017).

In the case of Grenfell, however, the disavowal of democracy extends to the KCTMO’s contract with Rydon and the latter’s own deployment of at least eight sub-contractor firms in the Grenfell refurbishment²³. The fragmentary effect of this sub-contracting has led architectural experts to question the levels of expertise and the degree of oversight in the Grenfell renovation, particularly in view of how the increasing privatisation of the building inspection regime encourages a cost-cutting ‘race to the bottom’: one enabling private companies to reap immense profits in providing publicly necessary goods and services while also evading the scrutiny of local democratic control (Chakraborty 2017a; Foster 2017f; Tucker 2017a). For political theorist, Wendy Brown, trends like these expose any aspiration to deliver reliable public goods to the vicissitudes of financial markets and the murky world of speculative derivatives, thereby furthering a ‘marketization and outsourcing of the state’ while simultaneously *undoing the demos* (Brown 2015, 71).

Outsourcing, anti-Regulation, austerity: dismembering the state

‘For years successive governments have built what they call a bonfire of regulations. ... But what they call red tape often consists of essential public protections that defend our lives’ (Monbiot 2017).

This local anti-democracy is also, nonetheless, traceable to the actions of *central* government. Not least in that the original impulse to outsource erstwhile publicly managed services – at local and national levels – came from successive Thatcher-led governments in the 1980s: part of a wider endeavour to ‘roll back’ an ostensibly unwieldy and overly-bureaucratic state

(Cochrane 1993; Peck 2010), and all guided by a neoliberal doctrine promising that private providers would enhance efficiency while improving choice for ‘consumers’ of public goods. It has tended to leave citizens paying more for degraded services (Chakraborty 2017a). But such centrally-imposed outsourcing and privatisation have also seen an erosion of in-house expertise in local government and remaining officers frustrated in their capacity to scrutinise outsourced projects, leading, in turn, to a collapse of governmental accountability (Hetherington 2017; Raco 2013)²⁴. Over three decades on and the scale of such contracts is truly breathtaking. Between 2011 and 2016, £120 billion of government work – at least 30 per cent of which is conducted via local government – was awarded to private corporations whose primary duty to maximise returns for shareholders ultimately overrides any commitment towards a public realm (Tucker 2017b), to the extent that:

‘The deployment of contractual processes as a mechanism for capturing and re-defining what is meant by a ‘public interest’ represents a significant challenge to our fundamental understandings of the modern democratic state, where power lies, and with whom’ (Raco 2013, 49).

Alongside this, and as part of the deeper embedding of a neoliberal canon within the UK central state, successive governments – including those of New Labour (Hall 2011; Travis 2017) – have endeavoured to strip away layers of ‘red tape’ purported to hinder the free operation of business, not least in construction. Peter Hetherington (2017) cites the ‘relaxation’ of building regulations in 1986, which subsequently permitted high-rise blocks to be refurbished with exteriors less resistant to fire: a decision which was to impact fatally on Grenfell Tower thirty-one years later (Knapton and Dixon 2017). In the intervening years, government ministers channelled considerable ire in the direction of bureaucracy and enterprise-inhibiting ‘statism’ (Du Gay 2000;

Freedland 2017): a convention that assumed new heights in 2014 when Housing Minister, Brandon Lewis, heralded a new governmental rule which insisted upon two existing regulations being removed for every new one introduced (Monbiot 2017). He did so in response to opposition party calls to certify that all construction companies fit sprinklers in new homes, before deploying the archetypal neoliberal rationale that ‘it is the responsibility of the fire industry to market sprinkler systems effectively [and that] the cost of fitting sprinklers may affect housebuilding, something we want to encourage’ (Moore 2017). The Grenfell atrocity was to reveal the absurdity of Lewis’s hubristic reasoning. It also transpires he is one of four successive Conservative Housing Ministers who failed to act on the intelligence of a 2013 report into a fire in Lakanal House, Southwark, back in 2009 where six people died (Foster 2017d; Walker 2013). Had the recommendations to *introduce fire safety regulations* been implemented – and, moreover, had DCLG Secretary, Eric Pickles, not repealed Section 20 of the London Building Act one year earlier – then Grenfell Tower would have been more rigorously assessed (Watts 2017). This wilful neglect by Conservative Ministers has also left thousands of people in the UK continuing to reside in towers clad with combustible materials²⁵. That those responsible have not been called to account therefore casts shame on the democratic process in Westminster as well as Kensington and Chelsea (Lammy 2017).

It is also impossible to view Grenfell in isolation from austerity. For as part of its political response to the financial crisis of 2008–09 (Blyth 2013), the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government savaged the DCLG Communities Budget, with 50 per cent cuts to social housing and 40 per cent cuts to local government impacting disproportionately on vulnerable communities (O’Hara 2015; Toynbee 2017). If economist Paul Krugman (2012) was justified in interpreting the UK government’s original

political austerity drive as ‘an excuse to dismantle social programmes’, then the zealously unrelenting deployment of *austerity as ideology* has left local authorities believing it their job to spend as little as possible (Hanley 2017; Foster 2017g). In which context it is worth considering the firefighters at Grenfell risking their lives in a borough where fire cover had been cut by 50 per cent (Gentleman et al. 2017); nurses treating the injured on lower real rates of pay than in 2009; mental health experts facing an outbreak of post-trauma among residents and emergency services staff and numerous suicide attempts following the fire amid reductions in mental health services (Crew 2017; Pasha-Robinson 2017d); and further how the post-2010 political strategy to confront a financial crisis effectively positioned the low and modest income residents of neighbourhoods like the Lancaster West Estate to pay for the reckless venality of rich bankers, many of whom reside in luxurious mansions only streets away (Chakraborty 2017a).

In the immediate aftermath, Polly Toynbee (2017) interpreted the burnt shell of Grenfell Tower to be symbolic of ‘austerity in ruins’. It is also of course a catastrophic outcome of what she and David Walker term the ‘dismembered state’: one increasingly stripped of social and physical protections for citizens, and which – in the wake of outsourcing, deregulation, privatisation, and a fostering of miscellaneous public-private and arms-length agencies – has been so ‘confusingly branded’ as to instil bewilderment over who or which organisation might actually be responsible for what and where (Toynbee and Walker 2017; Hinsliff 2017). And as cogently argued in a passionate editorial the weekend after the Grenfell fire:

‘... this is more than a story of a benign state being hacked at by funding cuts and deregulation. [For] Grenfell has peeled away the layers, to reveal an unaccountable, distant state, sheltering behind arms-length bodies to which it has subcontracted its most

fundamental responsibilities for keeping people safe ... In this fragmented state, where the buck gets passed on by those who are democratically elected, what recourse do local people have when they are failed so dismally by their local services?’ (Observer, 18 June 2017, 34).

German political theorist Claus Offe offers an analogous critique of how societies are increasingly exhibiting a ‘democratic inequality’; many citizens living through and experiencing a somewhat disempowered state, or more precisely ‘one that is overpowered by the *poderes facticos* [the powers that be] of corporate market forces’ (Offe 2013, 181).

De-Municipalized, dishonoured, devalued: public housing in England

‘We’re seeing the biggest challenge to this 40-year drive to marginalize or discredit the state and its role in the economy and society.

Grenfell Tower had such impact because it symbolizes for many in Britain the retreat of the state, visible in badly maintained social housing and the failure to build more social housing’ (Simon Tilford, deputy director Centre for European Reform; in Erlanger 2017, 9)

‘... the [Grenfell] fire was fed by the broken housing system; the privatisation of local government services; the drive for deregulation no matter the human cost; the racism that perpetuates inferior infrastructure and safety standards for people of colour; and the erasure of the voices and interests of working class and poor people from the concerns of the state’ (Madden 2017, 2).

The tragic lack of recourse that faced Grenfell residents is undoubtedly related to the way in which social housing has been a primary target of state dismemberment. What was once termed *council housing* reached a peak of 32 per cent in 1978 (Ginsburg 2005). However, as part of its endeavour to foster a ‘property-owning democracy’, the 1979 Thatcher government introduced legislation obliging municipal authorities to sell council houses to sitting tenants at significant

discounts while denying them permission to reinvest in new housing or improving existing stock, just as their funding from central government was being eroded²⁶ (Meek 2015). Council housing was further de-municipalized from the late 1980s via the transfer of ownership and oversight to housing associations²⁷ or arms-length tenant management organisations such as the KCTMO (Watt 2009; Bowie 2017; Tucker 2017a). The cumulative impact of which is that many former council properties have been sold on to private landlords often charging double or triple the social rent to households unable to gain a council house due to the acute shortage²⁸ (Meek 2015). This situation is especially pervasive in London. Here, many councils have been facilitating housing projects by selling premium sites to private developers on condition that ‘planning gain’²⁹ enables inclusion of a certain proportion of ‘affordable’ units (Graham 2015). Consequently many councils – including Labour-controlled Camden, Hackney, Haringey, Lambeth, Newham, and Southwark – have overseen a forcible eviction of thousands of people across London, many making way for luxury redevelopments way beyond the means of local communities (Lees 2014; Elmer and Dening 2016; Flynn 2016). Such trends are prompting concern that as municipal government becomes distanced from direct housing provision and private developers assume greater sway, lines of accountability are blurred and housing becomes ever more defined in terms of *market exchange* rather than *human use value*, rendering social housing tenants to be deemed ‘a ‘necessary evil’, tolerated by the private sector only because they allow lucrative private market housing to be built’ (Tucker 2017a; Watt and Minton 2016; Foster 2017a).

Nonetheless, analysis of these trends demands a historical geographical appreciation of the internal politics of the state (Duncan and Goodwin 1988; Jessop 2016). For since the era of Thatcherism – characterised by a central government as determined to ‘bury’ municipal socialism and radical left

local initiatives as it was to privatise housing and public services (Gyford 1985) – England has generally experienced a centralising mode of authority. Allied to serial budget cuts, this has curtailed the scope for local governments to nurture relatively autonomous paths for development, housing and service provision: New Labour’s constitutional and devolution reforms belying its controlling approach towards local government and local democracy (Davies 2008). The upshot of which is that any locally choreographed gentrification of formerly social housing in Southwark, Southampton, Newham or Newcastle bears a discernible imprint of the central state. This imprint is even more pronounced since 2010 as Conservative-led governments have been channeling ever more public subsidy towards ‘right to buy’ while simultaneously framing social housing as ‘lavish public expenditure’ (Atkinson 2017; Edwards 2016; Paton and Cooper 2016). Such political economic sensibilities are writ large in the 2016 Housing and Planning Act: for it effectively compels local authorities to sell-off high-value land and property without the messy trouble of engaging consultation with residents. As a cynical post-political endeavour to ‘destroy any form of democratic control of planning and land use’ (Minton 2017, 47), the Act is also viewed to signal ‘the end of council housing’ in the UK (Harris 2016). Indeed it prompted the former head of the UK Civil Service, Sir Bob Kerslake (2016), to conclude that ‘I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that for the leading figures in this government, publicly provided, social rented housing is now seen as toxic. This is something I deeply regret’.

Nonetheless, and even for a government as merciless as the current one, it is surely a source of painful discomfort that the Grenfell atrocity occurred amid what has been a generation-spanning stigmatising offensive waged by hegemonic bourgeois forces against the people, the places, and indeed the very values of municipally provided housing (Forbes 2017; Hanley 2007;

McKenzie 2015; Slater 2016; Tucker 2017; Watt 2017; Boughton 2018). It is in this regard that, as outlined by London's *Radical Housing Network* on the day of the Grenfell atrocity:

'The fire at Grenfell is a horrific, preventable tragedy for which authorities and politicians must be held to account. Grenfell's council tenants are not second-class citizens – yet they are facing a disaster unimaginable in Kensington's richer neighbourhoods. This government, and many before it, have neglected council housing and disregarded its tenants as if they were second class. Nationally and locally, politicians have subjected public housing to decades of systematic disinvestment – leaving properties in a state of disrepair, and open to privatisation. Regeneration, when it has come, has been for the benefit of developers and buy-to-let landlords, who profit from the new luxury flats built in place of affordable homes. Across London, regeneration has meant evictions, poor quality building work, and has given tenants little meaningful influence over the future of their estates. The chronic under-investment in council housing and contempt for tenants must stop. It is an outrage that in 21st-century Britain, authorities cannot be trusted to provide safe housing, and that people in council properties cannot put children safely to bed at night' (Radical Housing Network, June 14 2017).

Justice for Grenfell: renouncing plutocratic urban governance

'Today, we ask why warnings were not heeded; why a community was left feeling neglected, uncared for, not listened to. Today we hold out hope that the public inquiry will get to the truth of all that led up to the fire at Grenfell Tower ... and we trust that the truth will bring justice' (Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington, Memorial Service for Grenfell six months on, St Paul's Cathedral, 14 December 2017).

'Financial interests have increasingly set the agenda of public bodies in the UK. The worst fire in the UK in recent history is a lethal

catastrophe [...] and it has taken place in one of the wealthiest boroughs in one of the wealthiest cities in the world. The borough is home to many globalised commercial interests, with huge influence and enormous wealth. Around the world lethal and reprehensible conditions are permitted by wealthy elites operating from protected positions of financial privilege or bureaucracy' (Ishmahil Blagrove, former coordinator for *Justice4Grenfell* 2017). 'The rich [...] are able to control much of economic life and the media and dominate politics, so their special interests and view of the world comes to restrict what democracies can do' (Sayer 2015, 2).

The dominant narrative of London is that of a *world class city*: one that for several years has topped PricewaterhouseCoopers' global rankings for business opportunities, education, and quality of life³⁰ (PwC 2016). Less prominently featured in the consultancy firm's reports is the fact that no city in the global north internalises such a gulf between rich and poor: conditions which render housing to be extraordinarily expensive in relative terms for virtually everyone (Dorling 2015). In *Big Capital: Who is London For?*, published just prior to the Grenfell atrocity, Anna Minton offers prescient analysis of London's unequal social ecology: in particular how escalating financialization is facilitating a mushrooming of glitzy often vertical corporate-residential citadels across London's inner core alongside the afore-mentioned municipally-guided gentrification of social housing throughout the inner suburbs (Beswick and Penny 2018): processes which leave many Londoners struggling to gain or retain a home. One example that encapsulates Minton's concerns is the Vauxhall Nine Elms Development on London's South Bank. Incorporating the iconic Battersea Power Station and a new US Embassy, it features numerous seemingly open public squares which are *de facto* privately owned: such a routine trend nowadays that 'every new

‘piece of the city’ is privately owned and removed from a democratically accountable, genuinely public realm’ (Minton 2017, 23; also Sassen 2015). At least approval for the development was on condition that in accordance with Section 106 (see note 29), a proportion of housing units would be rendered ‘affordable’. Yet the Malaysian-backed Battersea Power Station Development Company has since reneged on this commitment, following an agreement with the Wandsworth council planning committee permitting the number of affordable flats to be reduced from 636 to 386. Mayor Sadiq Khan was reported to have been ‘furious’ at the decision. For Minton these events and the way in which housing has moved ‘from democratically accountable control into the hands of opaque companies has a big part to play in the Grenfell atrocity’ (in Bignell 2017).

The power ostensibly exercised by the Malaysian-backed company in influencing the planning committee of Wandsworth council coupled with Mayor Khan’s fury raises another nontrivial question pertaining to Grenfell: who now governs London? Taking inspiration from Freeland’s (2012) glimpse into contemporary ‘plutocrats’ and the new global super-rich, Atkinson, Parker, and Burrows (2017) define London as the archetypal *plutocratic city*: one where the sheer money-power of super-rich individuals and corporate dynasties is not only transforming London’s built environment and social and cultural landscapes, but also exerting influence over political decision-making in distinctly pronounced ways. Indeed fuelled by feverishly high-pitched corporate-speak and ever under the influence of *The City*, democratically representative institutions from national government to the Mayor and inner city borough authorities now seem to perform akin to a ‘chamber orchestra’, harmonising conditions which are conducive for attracting plutocratic capital and the conservation of late capitalism (Atkinson, Parker, and Burrows 2017). The result is that London’s *political* regime

appears to veer between neurosis and awe-inspired seduction in legitimising a seemingly unrestricted access of plutocratic wealth as the ‘objectives of city success have come to be identified and aligned with the presence of wealth elites while wider goals, of access to essential resources for citizens, have withered’ (ibid, 179)³¹. Joe Delaney, a resident from the Barandon Walk finger block adjacent to Grenfell Tower, seemed acutely conscious of such priorities when describing how, just as the streets nearby began to witness investment, socioeconomic conditions in the Lancaster West Estate worsened revealing ‘a direct relationship between gentrification and the level of services the council provides to social housing tenants’ (Delaney; in Platt 2017).

Nevertheless, surely there are limits to how far plutocratic modes of ‘representative government’ can insulate elected politicians from scrutiny and public ire. Grenfell may well be one significant moment in revealing these restrictions. Recall a back-footed Prime Minister after her first visit; her fulsome apology in Parliament a week later for ‘a failure of the state, local and national, when people needed it the most’ in the hours immediately after the fire (Kentish 2017b); and the eventual resignations of the RBKC leadership. The gravity of the fire and obvious shortcomings in the institutional response prompted Mrs May on 22 June to announce in Parliament a judge-led public inquiry into the fire. A week later she revealed that this Grenfell Tower Inquiry would be Chaired by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, a retired commercial court judge. While surely respected within the legal profession, many within the Grenfell local community became alarmed by his early admission that the inquiry would be limited to the technical causes of the fire and not consider wider contextual questions such as social housing maintenance (Sherwood 2017a). Prior to commencement of the inquiry, 330 submissions were sent by a variety of individuals, community groups, campaigners, professional bodies, politicians

and faith leaders. Notable among these was *Justice4Grenfell* registering apprehension about the panel's 'unrepresentative and non-diverse make-up' and that 'the causes of the disaster need to be tracked to those at the highest level of central government, and not restricted to those at local authority level, the KCTMO, the contractors and the sub-contractors' (Pasha-Robinson 2017b). *Justice4Grenfell* was also anxious about how Sir Martin had earlier presided over a social housing case whose decision, in the words of the victim's solicitor, set 'a terrible precedent for local authorities to engage in social cleansing on a mass scale': a decision later overturned by the Supreme Court (Blaugrove 2017).

In view of which the Prime Minister may be forced to acknowledge that 'state failure' has not been strictly limited to the hours immediately after the fire. For Grenfell is proving to become a deeply politicising moment (Moore 2017b). The inquiry itself opened on 14 September 2017 in the Grand Connaught Rooms, central London. Many Grenfell residents and representatives gathered outside while Chair Moore-Bick was accused of displaying disrespect to the survivors by refusing to answer a question from their legal representative, Michael Mansfield, QC (Adjoa Parker 2017). At the Inquiry's initial procedural hearing in December, justice campaign group, *Inquest*, urged that a panel representative of the community join Moore-Bick 'without which the inquiry will be flawed and will fail those seeking the truth and justice they deserve' (Bowcott and Gentleman 2017b). Replying two weeks later, Mrs May insisted that the 'probe' already had 'the necessary expertise to undertake its work'; a decision described by *Inquest* director, Deborah Coles, as 'disgraceful and wrong-headed [and] which sends a message out to the bereaved and survivors that their voices have still not been listened to' (Roberts 2017). And early in 2018 it was revealed that KPMG – that standard bearer for plutocratic 'accountancy governance' (Merrifield 2014) – had been contracted to

audit the Grenfell Tower Inquiry: this while simultaneously auditing the RBKC council, the Rydon Group which undertook the Grenfell Tower renovation, and Celotex which provided the defective cladding. Given these very particular circumstances, it is truly staggering that those holding the highest office saw it befitting that the Inquiry be audited by this global corporate giant, which itself at least had the politesse to step down from its role before a petition which was on its way to Theresa May would force her hand on a decision (Taylor 2018).

In May 2018, just prior to the Commemorative Hearings³² and the evidential hearings of Phase One of the Inquiry – which began in June 2018 and is scheduled to examine the night of the fire and the emergency response – the Prime Minister finally acquiesced to concerted community pressure. Following several meetings with bereaved relatives and a petition signed by over 156,000 people and backed by grime artist Stormzy, Mrs May agreed for two additional panel members with the requisite local cultural and community expertise to join Sir Moore-Bick for Phase Two of the Inquiry, which is scheduled for December 2018 and will examine the period leading up to the fire and decisions relating to the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower (Booth 2018c). To have secured local representation is a significant democratic achievement by the Grenfell community. That it required to be fought for so doggedly only serves to cast further shame on the plutocratic state. Moreover, as outlined by Deborah Coles of *Inquest*, 'it is disappointing that it is not for both phases of the inquiry ... [for] a diverse panel can help to provide some legitimacy that the inquiry has lacked' (cited in Kennedy 2018b). The early stages of the Inquiry revealed several crucial issues which demand clarification and perhaps a corporate or institutional response, including: a charge that the smoke ventilation system at Grenfell Tower was reported to have failed eight days before the fatal blaze and that a proposal to

repair it for £1,800 was ignored (Booth 2018d); that while the RBKC and the KCTMO undertook a refurbishment to install highly inflammable cladding ‘with public funds paid to an array of contractors and sub-contractors’, none of these bodies has ‘yet to take any responsibility for what happened’ (Danny Friedman, QC, representing survivors and the bereaved; cited in Bowcott 2018); and controversies relating to the decision by fire-fighters to retain the ‘stay put’ policy well after control over the blaze appeared to have been lost: firefighters rescued all remaining residents up to the 10th floor, but none got higher than the 20th floor while only two people escaped from the highest two floors³³ (Mendick, Maidment, and Ingle 2018; Dearden 2018; Doward 2018; O’Hagan 2018³⁴).

Grenfell is an atrocity for which the institutions of government in Parliament and in Kensington and Chelsea alongside certain private contractors must be held to account. It is imperative that the Grenfell Tower Inquiry be unrestricted and forensic. To be sure it will be a long and arduous process for many people who are forced to recall unimaginably painful experiences. But it is also to be hoped that the Inquiry is one where the conventionally ascetic disposition of an English legal establishment can reveal the due diligence *alongside* the emotional intelligence to deliver justice: it cannot resort to protecting itself or the national-London plutocratic elite (Adjoa Parker 2017). The Grenfell and Lancaster West community have shown remarkable grace in articulating their righteous indignation while campaigning for justice amid a succession of crass decisions that have been delivered at them by the plutocracy: here we can cite the initial demonstrations which concluded with impromptu speeches and conversations; the silent marches on the 14th of every month; and their dignified presence at the six month commemoration in St Paul’s Cathedral; and further dignity in being the target of deeply shameful vilification that has been placed on social media and which

is surely fuelled by the hate-speech of ‘nativist politicians’ and England’s thoroughly degraded right-wing press (Madden 2017). It is time the people of Grenfell and the Lancaster West Estate and their friends are treated with the honour that befits them and the memory of their lost loved ones. Recalling the quotation from Andrew Sayer at the beginning of this final section, is also high time to renounce the current restrictions placed upon democracy and the provision of decent housing by a plutocratic mode of local and national level government.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Harriet Bulkeley, Geoff DeVerteuil, Tim Edensor, Martin Jones, Rhoda MacDonald, DK MacLeod, Jon May, Colin McFarlane, Emma Ormerod, Rachel Pain, Dave Roberts, Paul Watt, Helen Wilson, Felicity Wray, an anonymous referee, and the *City* editors, Mark Davidson and Dan Swanton, for reading and commenting on the paper. Responsibility for errors of fact and interpretation remain with the author.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

- 1 This was subsequently confirmed to be 72.
- 2 “Statement Re Grenfell Tower”, London’s Air Ambulance on 15 June 2017. <https://londonsairambulance.co.uk/our-service/news/2017/06/statement-re-grenfell-tower>
- 3 TMO here refers to the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO).
- 4 Tragically, subsequent reports confirmed that Mr Chellat’s family died in the fire (Kennedy 2017b).
- 5 The claims about the lack of a council ‘presence’ are disputed in a lengthy essay by Andrew O’Hagan (2018) in the *London Review of Books*, which also reports that at 1100, the Kensington and Chelsea Council sent ten housing officers to begin the search for accommodation.
- 6 At the time of writing, a spokesman for RBKC claimed it had spent £235m on securing 307 properties to help rehouse people affected by the fire; and that, of the 203 households requiring

- rehousing, 134 have a new permanent home, while 52 are in temporary and 15 in emergency accommodation (Batty 2018).
- 7 The ex-footballer, David Beckham, and a host of hedge fund billionaires live in the stucco mansions of Notting Hill, while Roman Abramovich, the current Chairman of Chelsea FC who pocketed billions of dollars following the privatization of Russia's state assets, owns a £125m house in Kensington Palace Gardens.
 - 8 While life expectancy in Kensington and Chelsea is the highest in the UK it is extremely uneven. In the Hans Town ward, near the world-renowned Harrods store, a man can expect to live up to 94; in Golborne ward (just north of Grenfell) the average life-span for a man is 72, a reduction of six years since 2010 (Dent Coad, 2017b).
 - 9 As one of the first benevolent housing associations, The Peabody Trust was established in the 1860s by philanthropist George Peabody, and currently rents about 20,000 homes across London (Meek 2015).
 - 10 The two have since merged.
 - 11 In Kensington and Chelsea the average rent is 96 per cent of the average income (Gapper 2017) thereby coming in at £9,840 per month.
 - 12 The highest rate is in Labour-controlled Newham with 1,706 in September 2017, Kensington and Chelsea having 1,619 (Watt 2018). And thanks to Paul Watt for highlighting this to me.
 - 13 <http://www.savethesuttonestate.co.uk/>
 - 14 Housing associations never call it 'profit'.
 - 15 The second highest in London after Westminster with 11,457 or 9.3 per cent, and all part of over £122 billion worth of property in England and Wales held via companies registered in secrecy jurisdictions (Transparency International 2015).
 - 16 The national political map sees the Royal Borough divided: with Kensington forming one full constituency, while Chelsea is included in the Chelsea and Fulham constituency, where the Conservative, Greg Hands, was re-elected.
 - 17 These savings are believed to have emerged following an 'urgent nudge email' sent by the KCTMO project manager to Artelia, its French-based consultancy firm, which outlined how, with respect to cladding, 'We need good costs for Councillor Feilding-Mellen and the planner tomorrow at 8.45am!': Rock Feilding-Mellen being the ex-chair of the RBKC housing committee and former Deputy Leader (Booth and Grierson 2017).
 - 18 It is worth noting that, during its refurbishment, building inspectors visited Grenfell Tower sixteen times, signing it off as 'compliant with government fire safety guidance despite it being fitted with combustible plastic core cladding panels' (Booth 2018a).
 - 19 <http://www.kctmo.org.uk/sub/about-us/38/our-mission>
 - 20 Thereby rendering it the largest TMO in the UK.
 - 21 The KCTMO is the only TMO that is also an arm's length management organization (ALMO). And although it was created in 1994 under the then Conservative Government's *Housing (Right to Manage) Regulations*, it was done so under corporate law and, as an ALMO is thereby exempt from Freedom of Information requests (ASH 2017).
 - 22 Daffarn revealed this in a film by Anthony Wilks, entitled *Grenfell: The End of an Experiment?*, which accompanied the online publication of O'Hagan's paper in London Review of Books: see: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n11/andrew-ohagan/the-tower#group-view-film-dBLTvrFj7z>
 - 23 It is notable how Grenfell Tower was deleted from the websites of several companies involved, many of which list the other projects they have worked on as case studies intended to demonstrate excellence (Davies 2017).
 - 24 Furthermore, The Audit Commission, which had responsibility for scrutinizing local authority contracts, was abolished in 2015, its functions transferred to the voluntary and private sectors (Tucker 2017b).
 - 25 In the ten weeks after Grenfell, it was identified that 262 tall residential towers across England had similar combustible cladding panels, including 161 social housing blocks and 26 student halls of residence (Booth et al 2017).
 - 26 Of all the spending cuts introduced by the Thatcher government in its first term, three-quarters came from the housing budget (Meek 2015).
 - 27 A process dependent upon a majority of council tenants voting in favour but one which also saw considerable deception in terms of misinformation alongside outright threat and coercion waged upon tenants who favoured continued council ownership (Meek 2015).
 - 28 By 2011, for the first time since 1971, more London households were living in the private rented sector (25 per cent), and *Shelter* has estimated that private renting will swell to 41 per cent by 2025 (London Assembly Housing and Regeneration Committee 2013, 13; in Watt and Minton 2016).
 - 29 Relating to arrangements between planning authorities and private developers under 'Section 106' to secure agreed proportions of units in new developments as social or 'affordable' housing (Edwards 2016).
 - 30 This PwC rating on London's quality of life is bafflingly at odds with other studies identifying quality of life to be high in cities quite different from London, such as Vancouver and Sydney as well as European cities like Amsterdam and Stockholm: ones which are less dependent on finance, more equal and frankly more 'public'.
 - 31 While it might be expected for Boris Johnson, Conservative Mayor from 2008 to 2016, to be an

unabashed cheerleader for the 'heroic contribution' made to London by the super-rich (Atkinson et al. 2017, 187), his predecessor, the left-leaning Ken Livingstone, is also reported to have been 'in thrall to the titans of London's property world' (Jenkins 2016; Massey 2007).

- 32 This was a highly emotive week of hearings where friends and relatives paid tribute to the 72 people who died in the fire.
- 33 Amid claims that senior firefighters were under-prepared for the events of June 14 2017, it is worth noting that while all fire authorities were officially advised to train key staff to determine when they should abandon the 'stay-put' policy for residents in burning tower blocks three years before the Grenfell tragedy, the training of the London fire brigade has been outsourced since 2012 to a private contractor, Babcock International: a process that itself is under scrutiny vis-a-vis the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (Doward 2018).
- 34 Andrew O'Hagan's essay has itself generated considerable controversy, not least for its purported misrepresentation of details provided to him by Grenfell survivors and families, his sympathetic account of the RBKC leadership, including Paget-Brown and Feilding-Mellen (Rustin 2018), and also his claim that 'the firefighting operation at Grenfell was a huge and dramatic failure, though nobody wanted to say so' (O'Hagan 2018, 16).

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