

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

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GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY MUST HOLD MINISTERS TO ACCOUNT FOR DEREGULATION

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) is at last examining the record of central government and the role of ministers, some four and a half years since the devastating fire. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) wanted these matters investigated from the start. The coming months should expose the appalling policies of deregulation, imposed for more than four decades by successive governments, which led to the terrible tragedy on 14 June 2017.

DEREGULATION

Since 1979, Westminster governments have pursued disastrous policies of deregulation, privatisation and contracting out, which have devastated public services and the system designed to protect public safety. This has run down and undermined the work of firefighters, building control officers and other public sector professionals.

Westminster government policies licenced the irresponsible behaviour of private sector companies. They created a culture of complacency, which prioritised making profits over keeping people safe in their homes and communities. Ministers over 40 years made catastrophic decisions, which ultimately led to the Grenfell Tower fire.

THATCHER AND MAJOR

Thatcher governments instigated deregulation in the UK. Lord Young's, Lifting the Burden White Paper (1985) defined deregulation as: "First, freeing markets and increasing the opportunities for competition. Second, lifting administrative and legislative burdens which take time, energy and resources from fundamental business activity." It boasted of government deregulatory policy since 1979 and set the agenda for subsequent administrations. Key drivers were Francis Maude's Deregulation Unit (1986) and Michael Heseltine's Deregulation Taskforce (1994).

Building safety was undermined by a succession of policies:

- Heseltine's part-privatisation of building control in 1984 and its expansion from 1996
- The Building Act 1984, Building Regulations and Approved Documents, which drastically reduced the law and allowed voluntary guidance instead

- The Building Research Establishment (BRE), threatened with privatisation (1981), its workforce halved, made to serve private industry, then an executive agency (1990) and John Gummer's decision to privatise it in 1997.

Fire safety was also attacked through cuts and attempted deregulation:

- Review of Fire Policy, 1980
- Fire cover review 1981-84
- Reviews of the Fire Precautions Act, 1985, 1990, 1993 and 1994
- Audit Commission, 1986 and 1995

BLAIR AND BROWN 1997-2010

Deregulation was renamed "better regulation" and extended by the Better Regulation Task Force and Better Regulation Unit, the Regulatory Reform Act 2001 and the Hampton report, Reducing Administrative Burdens (2005). For example the 'one-in, one-out' approach to regulation was proposed in Less is More (2005). likely take the hit. Firefighters see clear evidence for this as they recall that when the prime minister was mayor of London, he shifted money from fire reserves to fund police numbers and cut the fire service.

Building safety also suffered during these years:

- Nick Raynsford extended the role of private approved inspectors in building control
- BRE research and testing was not brought back in-house
- Continuation of weak guidance in Approved Document B – especially the 2006 version.

Fire safety was also undermined by the disastrous Bain review (2002) and John Prescott's White Paper (2003), which promoted the deregulation agenda:

- Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, which scrapped national standards of fire cover and firefighter establishment levels, abolished the inspectorate in England and dissolved the statutory advisory body, the CFBAC – all replaced by fragmented localism and a free-for-all for chief fire officers
- Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, which scrapped certification and allowed weak enforcement.

CAMERON, MAY AND JOHNSON 2010-

The Coalition government supercharged deregulation and austerity from the start, the tone set by David Cameron's attacks on health and safety culture, 'one-in, one-out' rule and demand to "cut red tape". This included:

- Francis Maude's Open Public Services White Paper, 2011
- Vince Cable/Michael Fallon imposed the 'one-in, two-out' rule, 2012
- Oliver Letwin's Deregulation Act, 2015
- Sajid Javid's 'one-in, three-out', 2016

Building safety also suffered continual threats from the Red Tape Challenge, further privatisation and the decline in enforcement.

Critically, Eric Pickles and other ministers failed to respond to the proposals made by the Lakanal House coroner in 2013, including the tightening of Approved Document B guidance, high rise firefighting guidance (GRA 3.2), clarifying policies on the common parts of high rise residential buildings, the stay put policy and sprinklers.

Fire safety was further undermined by:

- Pickles, Bob Neill and Brandon Lewis imposed around 30% central funding cuts, leading to the loss of one-in-five firefighters
- The privatisation of the Fire Service College, 2012
- Attempts to privatise control rooms, including in London
- Section 20 repealed, 2012
- Attempts to introduce mutualisation through regulatory reform, 2013
- Scrapping the Practitioners Forum
- Weak enforcement rules, including Fire Safety Order.

These policies continue. Private inspectors are still allowed by the Building Safety Bill. Boris Johnson's Taskforce on Innovation, Growth and Regulatory Reform (TIGRR) plans to unleash further waves of privatisation and deregulation.

WHAT DEREGULATION MEANT FOR GRENFELL TOWER

The role of deregulation has been partly exposed by the evidence given by private contractors who refurbished Grenfell Tower, undermining its compartmentation through cladding and other flammable materials. Their testimony has shown:

- All three cladding manufacturers accepted that their marketing material was misleading, dishonest and unethical
- Firms accepted that the savings from using unsafe cladding were not going to be passed on to the TMO, but would be pocketed by companies
- "Value engineering" was common
- Staff did not know or understand safety regulations and guidance Firms were appointed without going through any proper tender process
- Staff had little or no experience of refurbishing high rise buildings
- Qualifications and experience were misstated
- Staff had no training dealing with cladding
- Poor workmanship and working practices.

LISTEN TO THE PROFESSIONALS

The FBU has consistently warned about the consequences of deregulation and its effect on public safety. The union opposed the part-privatisation of building control and attacks on fire cover in the early 1980s. The FBU defended the Fire Precautions Act against attempts to water it down. The union strongly opposed the deregulation taskforce's proposals in the mid-1990s on fire safety.

In 1999, the FBU warned the Environment Select Committee about the risks of cladding. The union warned of the impact of scrapping fire certificates and weak enforcement in the Fire Safety Order – the same measures now being reintroduced by the Building Safety Bill.

The FBU was deliberately excluded from the new fire governance regime imposed in 2004. Ministers ignored advice from the union, relying exclusively on chief fire officers. The union was one of the few voices advocating for the fire inspectorate and criticised peer review.

The FBU has also fought the cuts, imposed from Westminster but carried through by local politicians, including the current prime minister when he was mayor of London. During the inquiry, the FBU has been subjected to unwarranted criticism. Yet the union was the only organisation to oppose deregulation and campaign against it throughout the decades before Grenfell.

The FBU wants all the ministers responsible for the Grenfell disaster held to account. If the GTI is to leave no stone unturned, then it must examine the record of governments in making the UK's worst fire for generations.



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