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Lessons from the Grenfell Tower disaster: the historic failures of the state in fire safety

The Grenfell Tower disaster raises serious questions about the role of the state in ensuring public safety. There are many historical fire disasters that demonstrate the necessity of learning lessons quickly in order to reassure local communities that similar tragedies will not occur. However, deregulation of public services and fire codes by successive governments has weakened the state's hold over fire safety. The Grenfell disaster also places fire-fighters at the centre of public debates about safety, at a time that fire brigades' resources are severely stretched following seven years of austerity. There is a need for coordination of policy between government and the fire service associations to respond to the challenges facing the service.

Governments in the UK have historically taken a reactive approach towards fire safety. For the first half of the twentieth century, regulations only applied to industrial workplaces, and were strengthened following major fires, as in the case of eight fatalities at a Keighley mill fire in 1956. The 1960s saw an extension of safety regulation into other workplaces – licensed premises (1961) and shops, offices and railway premises (1963) – following fatal fires at a Liverpool department store in 1960 (11 fatalities) and a Bolton nightclub in 1961 (19).

The Fire Precautions Act (1971) was another reactive measure, following a hotel fire in Saffron Walden in 1969 (11 fatalities). It empowered fire authorities to enforce safety through inspection and certification of premises. It legitimated the fire service's growing expertise in fire prevention, but owing to its strict enforcement, was subject to criticism by business leaders and politicians in the 1980s and 1990s. Beginning with Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, a thirty-year period of deregulation of fire safety followed, justified by successive governments' asserting that the abolition of 'red tape' was good for both business and public sector efficiency.

Deregulation continued under New Labour, with the privatisation of fire safety research and the introduction of risk assessments. The 2005 Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order ended certification by fire authorities, and transferred responsibility for safety onto a combination of employer, employee, occupier, and landlord. The idea was to generate a more safety-conscious public, with individuals taking greater responsibility for their own safety, or for the safety of those they were responsible for. This was part of a government-wide shift away from direct enforcement, towards contracting out compliance to non-governmental bodies in a move reminiscent of fire safety before the formation of municipal fire brigades in the nineteenth century.

There has been little attempt to revise fire safety codes since 2006 despite fatal fires in multi-storey housing. In 2009 a fire at Lakanal House in London killed six people; a year later, a tower block fire in Southampton claimed the lives of two fire-fighters. These fires have raised urgent questions about the effectiveness of the deregulated safety regime, especially in tower blocks refurbished with cheap flammable materials and ineffectively inspected. Lessons were not acted upon quickly enough in the eyes of the public or the All-Party Parliamentary Fire Safety and Rescue Group. The coroner's report into the Lakanal fire was not published until 2013, and its main recommendations were still under review by the Conservative government in 2016. Questions have thus emerged about the state's duty of care to its citizens, and the Conservative government's failure to act promptly to prevent similar incidents from happening.

Calls for a wide-ranging public inquiry into the causes of the Grenfell disaster have been heeded by the Prime Minister. This is particularly important given the delayed response from the government and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to help survivors in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. The inquiry must take evidence from everyone involved in the fire, including residents

and fire-fighters. Public support for the work of the London Fire Brigade has been unwavering as stories of heroism have circulated; fire-fighters' bravery has already been commemorated through public displays of support and calls for formal recognition. It is remarkable that no fire-fighters died in the disaster, especially because the Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade, Dany Cotton, conceded that she was sending fire-fighters into [‘something that was very unknown and very dangerous.’](#) Fire-fighters had to work 12-hour shifts because of a shortage of available staff to relieve them. Since 2010, ten fire stations have been closed, 27 fire engines axed, and more than 600 firefighter posts cut in London.

Fire-fighters will always risk their lives to save others, regardless of the conditions under which they work. Historic cases of fire-fighter deaths at major incidents demonstrate the way that risk-taking has been embedded into the service's working culture. For example, at a warehouse fire in Glasgow in 1960, a huge explosion killed nineteen fire-fighters. In 1972, seven Glasgow fire-fighters were killed at a warehouse fire whilst trying to rescue a trapped colleague. These iconic fires triggered lessons: the service's professional associations, in particular the Fire Brigades Union, embedded safety into fire-fighters' training during the late 1970s, and reviewed them again in the mid-1990s following more fire-fighter deaths. They did so through their membership of the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC), which was formed in 1947 to provide specialist advice on fire service policy to the Home Secretary.

The CFBAC provided a national forum through which professional knowledge could be shared between partners. It also coordinated national policies in training, operational procedures, and standards of emergency response, until it was abolished in 2004 as part of the wider deregulation of public services. Since then, the service has lacked a robust machinery for sharing professional experience and clear channels of communication with central government. The Fire Brigades Union's repeated warnings of dangers to public and fire-fighter safety have until recently fallen on deaf ears. The current government needs to listen to its fire-fighters, and their representative associations, if it is going to address clear deficiencies in its fire safety standards, and implement the lessons learned from avoidable disasters such as Grenfell. History shows that there is a precedent for doing so, and that the Grenfell tragedy will define a new era in fire safety.

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