

Britain's Worst Urban Disaster: The Grenfell Tower Social Housing Inferno

By [21st Century Wire](#)

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

The week saw one of the worst urban disasters in recent history, as runaway fires consumed a low-income high-rise council estate in the London borough of Kensington and Chelsea. So far, police have confirmed 17 dead and have indicated that they expect to find many more fatalities.

As the old adage goes, there are no natural disasters, *only human ones.*

But this horrific scene in west London symbolises much more than simple negligence. The image of a [Wicker Man](#) comes to mind.

Were low-income residents sacrificed at the altar of austerity, greed and corporate privatisation?

As North Kensington's towering inferno continues to smoulder into the early morning, circumstantial evidence is beginning to emerge showing how Conservative MPs sidelined legislation that would have required higher safety standards. According to [reports](#), a group of Tory MPs have consistently voted *against* tenants' rights including [voting down Labour's amendment to the recent Housing and Planning Bill](#) which would have required landlords to make their homes "fit for habitation." Perhaps not surprisingly, the 72 Tory MPs who killed the legislation also just happened to be commercial landlords themselves.



To add insult to injury, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson (left) during his tenure as Mayor of London instituted cuts that have stripped London of [7,000 of its firefighters](#) in the last five years, with numerous Fire Station closures and other cuts to frontline emergency services.

So how did Grenfell Tower turn into a death trap for so many? The organisation responsible for maintenance and safety at the social housing block is the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO). But the organisation's name is deceptive - far from being a tenant-run company, the 'TMO' is actually a private company - an aloof ivory tower that sits far above the actual residents, and who 'manage' 10,000 properties... *with*

handsome salaries and fees for selected executives and contractors. Although Grenfell Tower is owned by the Borough Council of Kensington and Chelsea, the management of the tower block is subcontracted out to the TMO.

Critics of the public-private partnership, or *PPP*, management hand-off [claim that the quasi-privatised TMO arrangement is rife with corruption](#), including sweetheart deals to contractors. It also enables connected board members to fleece poor residents while taking home enormous sums of money for doing little if anything for it. Last year, the KCTMO was paid £11million (\$14 million) in taxpayer money to manage Grenfell Tower. According to the [Mail Online](#), four senior members of TMO took £650,000 between them last year. And that's not all:

“There are also claims that there was no central sprinkler system – or it was also not working properly during the fire. Others have claimed that the new cladding encasing the block added during last year’s £10million refurbishment by [Rydon Construction](#) caught alight ‘like a matchstick’.” This [petroleum-based, flammable plastic] exterior cladding was apparently added to the building to improve the view and cosmetic appearance of the tower when seen from a new development or private luxury flats in the locality.

Apparently, this was all part of a “regeneration project” which was said to be completed last year on only one building: Grenfell Tower.

Watch the full-length live feed of the fire here:

It gets worse. According resident advocacy blog [Bella Caledonia](#):

“It’s emerged that the local Council – the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea – actually threatened a local blogger and action group with legal action for calling to attention the state of the building. We’re told also that [“Theresa May’s chief of staff ‘sat on’ report warning high-rise blocks like Grenfell Tower were vulnerable to fire.”](#)

Legal Services
Kensington Town Hall, Hornton Street, LONDON, W8 7NX
Bi-Borough Director of Law
Tasnim Shawkat



THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF
KENSINGTON
AND CHELSEA



25 July 2013

My reference: VS/30006091

Your reference:
Please ask for: Vimal Sarna

Dear Mr O'Connor,

Re: Grenfell Action Group website and blogs

I am advised by the Director of Housing that you are the author of the Grenfell Action Group blog and maintainer of the website. I am instructed that you previously posted blogs that have in general been critical of everything that takes place at Lancaster West in relation to the Kensington Academy Leisure Centre and investment on the estate.

In your more recent postings you have made direct accusations about unfounded criminal actions. You will no doubt appreciate that if you have evidence of criminal activity this should be reported and pursued through the police.

I would also ask that you remove from the blog unfounded accusations against named individuals which are your personal opinion and are likely to be considered defamatory and also likely to be perceived as harassment by the individuals concerned. I should be grateful if you could contact Vimal Sarna immediately to confirm that you have removed the offending blog and that you will refrain from making unsubstantiated accusation of criminal behaviour and personal comments about an individual's performance or actions whilst working on or for the Estate Management Board.

I look forward to receiving your co-operation and await receipt of your confirmation that you will remove your blog on or before 29 July 2013.

Yours sincerely,

Vimal Sarna
Senior Solicitor

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Fax: 020 7361 3488
Email: vimal.sarna@rbkc.gov.uk
Web: www.rbkc.gov.uk
DX: 84015 Kensington High Street 2

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Resident Darren Cullen said on Twitter:

“Any attempt to depoliticise an event like this is a political act in itself.”

Despite numerous warnings by the residents of Grenfell Tower, local action groups believe that the TMO did not take any significant action to rectify fundamental health and safety flaws.

Those saying that the [#GrenfellTower](#) fire had nothing to do with politics need to see this clip pic.twitter.com/NKWTTIhCu8

— The Pileus (@thepileus) [June 14, 2017](#)

Reporter Holly Baxter of the [London Independent](#) detailed how a series of prophetic warnings posted by the residents' advocacy group were routinely ignored:

"The Grenfell Action Group residents' association had consistently warned about the possibility of such a tragedy; this morning, [they updated their website](#) with a post which reads: "Regular readers of this blog will know that we have posted numerous warnings in recent years about the very poor fire safety standards at Grenfell Tower and elsewhere in RBKC [the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea]. ALL OUR WARNINGS FELL ON DEAF EARS and we predicted that a catastrophe like this was inevitable and just a matter of time."

"Links to their earlier posts prove it: [in 2013 they warned](#) that shutting down the block's car park would mean just one narrow, restricted road for emergency vehicle access, something which eyewitnesses reported slowed down the fire engine response this morning; the same year, they [wrote a long post](#) about continuous electrical surges which had been causing fire hazards in the building ("decisive action was only taken yesterday after highly distressed residents descended en masse on the estate office to demand help and assistance. They had woken to find smoke issuing from various electrical appliances in their homes, including the light fixtures, and descended in panic to the estate office to demand help"); and in November 2016, their frustration about what they called inadequate fire escapes culminated [in a frighteningly prescient post](#) titled Playing With Fire: "The Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring to an end the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders... It is our conviction that a serious fire in a tower block... is the most likely reason those who wield power at the KCTMO will be found out and brought to justice".

But the Tories can't take all the credit. It's been said by some party grandees (not to mention Margret Thatcher [herself](#)) that the Thatcher Era's greatest achievement was New Labour and Tony Blair – both of whom helped to push Thatcher's mass-privatisation agenda over the goal line. Blair's corporatist trojan horse was camouflaged under the heading of a '**New Deal for Communities**,' along with the [Neighbourhood Renewal Unit](#) nested within the [Department for Communities and Local Government](#) and fueled by millions of pounds in "regeneration grants" from the EU – supposedly designed to lift-up some of the England's most deprived neighbourhoods, which instead paved the way for a bold social engineering project which led to the mass-gentrification of low income areas across the UK, where massive profits were booked on the back of privatising council properties, taking advantage of an over-inflated housing market. It was during this period that PPP takeovers like the TMO took hold of large sectors of Britain's social housing.

See more TMO scandals at [Not TMO](#), and this open letter to the Hackney TMO [here](#).

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