

**Neoliberalism, Abandonment, and Stigmatisation in Residents’  
Understandings of the Grenfell Tower Fire**

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## List of Abbreviations

**ACM:** Aluminium composite material

**BSRs:** Bereaved, survivors and local residents

**BRE:** British Research Establishment

**KCTMO:** Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation

**LFB:** London Fire Brigade

**MPS:** Metropolitan Police Service

**RBKC:** Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council

**RTB:** Right to Buy

## Abstract

The fire that engulfed Grenfell Tower, on 14 June 2017, killed 72 people. This thesis is a study of the causes, experiences, and effects of that fire, from the perspectives of those who experienced it. The research used semi-structured interviews with twenty-four participants, conducted between October 2020 and October 2021, in combination with the analysis of a range of policy documents, Public Inquiry findings, and media reports. Four of the participants were survivors of the fire and members of the bereaved and survivors group, Grenfell United. Two live on the Lancaster West Estate, where Grenfell Tower is located, and ten participants were residents living nearby to Grenfell Tower at the time of the fire. The sample also includes: a firefighter who attended the fire; the Bishop of Kensington; an ITV journalist; Emma Dent-Coad, the MP for Kensington at the time of the fire; and four volunteers or people working closely with the community.

The first key argument made within this thesis is that the fire was the result of decades of governance that rendered groups of people irrelevant to its calculations in the pursuit of financial accumulation through the housing industry and regeneration. This process, which has been described as “organised state abandonment”, is found to have penetrated the decisions that led to the fire, from broad neoliberal agendas to the decisions made locally about gentrification, the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, and the marginalisation of its residents.

The second key claim concerns the immediate aftermath of the fire, in a chapter that considers how residents were abandoned, stigmatised, and subject to securitisation. I show how the state was absent in its caring function but present as a force of securitisation and policing. It is in this context that the bereaved and survivors group Grenfell United was formed, and movements like the silent walk were arranged.

The third argument of the thesis examines whether the truth about the fire has been uncovered and whether justice and change have followed the fire. Here, the thesis argues that while there has been some piecemeal change, the necessary systemic change that challenges the deregulation agenda and the decline of social housing that led to the fire has been entirely missing. This case is made alongside an analysis of the features of the campaign for justice and in relation to the features and limitations of the Public Inquiry.

## **Declaration**

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.



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## Chapter One

### Introduction: North Kensington as a Site of Struggle

In the early hours of 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017, a fire broke out in Grenfell Tower, a 24-storey high-rise block that formed part of the Lancaster West Estate, a social housing estate in North Kensington, West London. The fire rapidly engulfed the entire tower, resulting in the deaths of seventy-two people and physically injuring hundreds of others. The engulfed tower immediately received live media coverage worldwide as people questioned how a fire of this nature could happen in the twenty-first century in one of the richest cities in the world. It quickly became apparent that the cause of the rapid fire-spread was the cladding panels that had been attached to Grenfell Tower with the refurbishment that was completed only a year before. As the fire was still burning, thousands of volunteers from across the country poured into North Kensington to help those affected by the fire. Local community centres were quickly overwhelmed with donated items for the survivors and just a day after the fire, many asked the public not to bring any more (Sherwood, 2017). At the same time, reports were coming from the community that the tower's landlord, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), and the local authority, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council (RBKC), were nowhere to be seen during the relief effort (Cornish and Jack, 2017; Gentleman, 2017; Grierson, 2017; Graham-Harrison, 2017).

The fire was immediately linked to issues of class, race, ethnicity, immigration, and housing tenure. David Lammy, MP, described the fire as a “tale of two cities” (Long, 2017), as it took place in a social housing block in one of the richest boroughs in Europe. Rapper, writer, and social commentator Akala famously argued outside of the charred remains of the tower that the cladding was used to prevent “the rich people opposite” from having to “look at a horrendous block” and that the victims “died because they were poor” (Channel 4 News, 2017). Others pointed to how Grenfell residents foresaw the fire but were ignored by the RBKC and KCTMO (Oakley, 2017; Baxter, 2017), a process that Jeremy Corbyn argued is “consistent” for “working-class voices” (Corbyn, 2017). Six months after the fire, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) wrote: “The Grenfell Tower fire has become a symbol of the inequality that exists in our country” (EHRC, 2017).

On the other hand, working-class and racialised folk devils were simultaneously mobilised to demonize the Grenfell Tower victims. The residents were labelled as illegal immigrants (Littlejohn, 2017); criminals (Pogrund, 2018); illegal subletters (Dejevsky, 2018); workshy or unworthy of the “luxury” flats that the state was offering them for “free” (LBC, 2017). The *Mail Online* incited blame on the occupant of Flat 16, where the fire started, by including his identity and photographs in an early article. On 16<sup>th</sup> June 2017, the article became the fifth most complained about article to The Independent Press Standards Organisation, receiving over 1,300 complaints (Sweney, 2017). As a result of the media reports, it was deemed necessary to offer the occupant of Flat 16 witness protection and a new identity. He told the Public Inquiry into the fire that in the aftermath of the article, he feared for his life, as the press portrayed him as a criminal, and he still feels scared today (Kebede, 2018).

Using primary empirical data collected from twenty-four participants who were directly affected by the fire or involved in its aftermath, this thesis examines how the participants understand the socio-political causes and consequences of the Grenfell Tower fire. The thesis has four empirical chapters, each of which develops arguments about, in turn, the fire’s causes, its immediate and longer-term aftermath, and the campaign for truth, justice, and change, all from the perspective of those involved. As this study draws upon the philosophical assumptions of critical realism, which emphasises the stratified nature of reality and the idea that knowledge of reality is not only empirical (de Souza, 2014), the arguments made in this thesis are based upon both primary empirical data and secondary data obtained from the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry, the media, and government reports.

The purpose of this introductory chapter is twofold. Firstly, I situate the Grenfell Tower fire, and thus the research study, in North Kensington, an area I describe as a site of historical and ongoing struggle. For many, it was the fire that revealed the vast inequality that exists in Kensington. However, the social polarisation of extreme wealth beside significant levels of social deprivation has persisted in North Kensington since the early 1840s. For over 150 years, the residents of North Kensington have faced and struggled against different forms of marginalisation. Yet, the historical struggle for space and place is often excluded from analyses of the fire. I argue that it is within this context of marginalisation that the fire must be studied. Specifically, because it introduces the complex social relations that pre-existed the fire and complicates the idea that the Grenfell Tower fire was an accident or a tragedy. This highlights why the thesis is important,

particularly in examining the causes of the fire alongside the Public Inquiry, which has a narrow remit. Secondly, this chapter will introduce the research study and the research aims. It is the objective of this thesis to extend and develop the analyses of the fire through empirical research into the community's understanding of the fire.

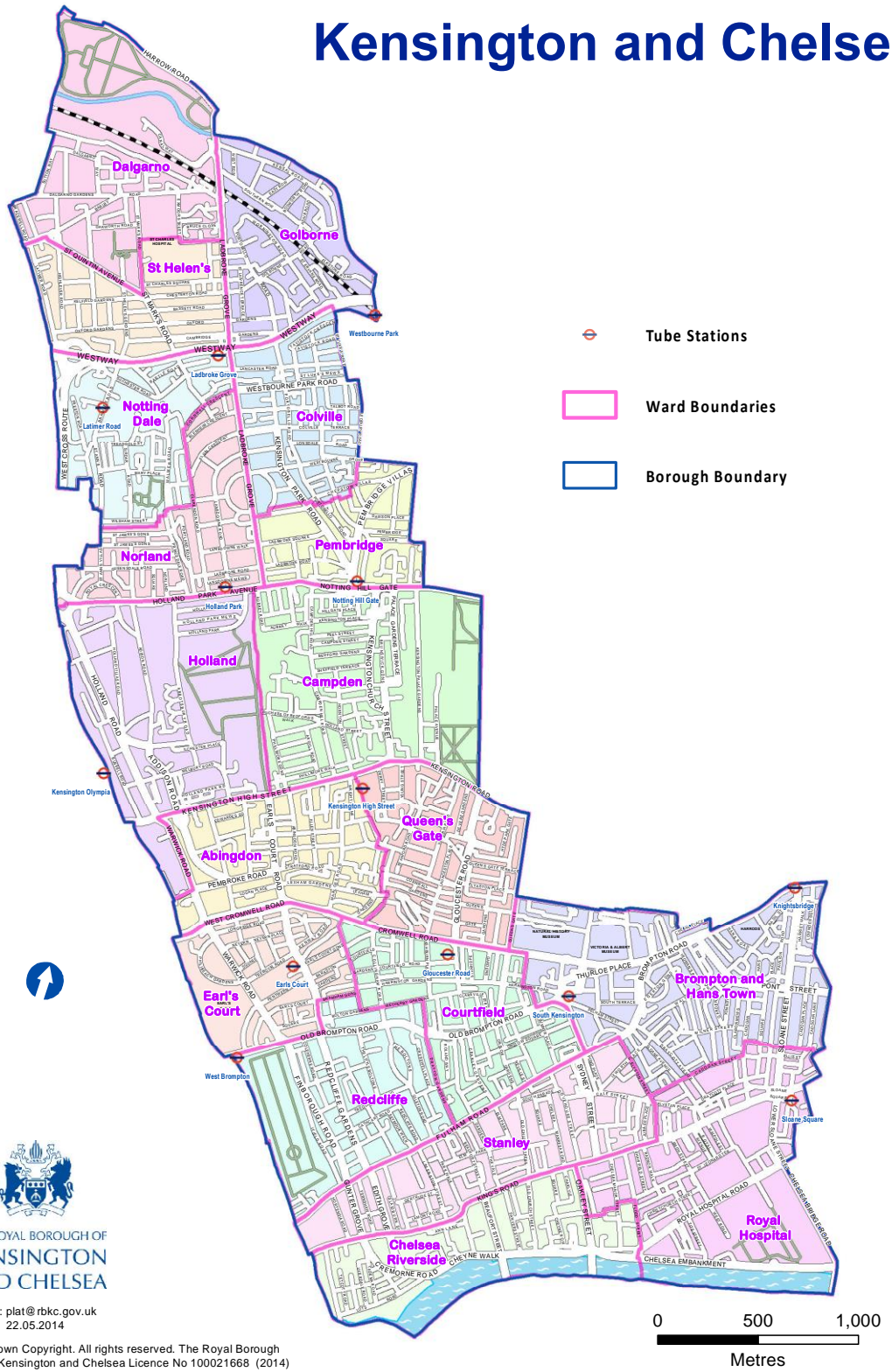
In Section 1.1, I begin by locating Grenfell Tower and North Kensington in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and establishing the present-day social polarisation and disparity that characterises the area. Following on from this, I trace how North Kensington has transformed from a partially slum-like area into one of the most sought-after areas in the country. I show how social polarisation and marginalisation have persisted in the area throughout the ongoing transformation and reimagining of North Kensington. In Section 1.2, I describe how Notting Dale, the ward where Grenfell Tower is located, was once known as a slum called the “Potteries and Piggeries”, whose notoriety even drew attention from Charles Dickens in 1850. Even back then, I show, the Potteries and the Piggeries sat beside grand townhouses with private communal gardens (Sullivan, 2020). In Section 1.3, I examine the long-established relationship between class, race, and housing discrimination in North Kensington. In Section 1.4, I describe how North Kensington has been transformed amid multiple waves of gentrification, which has left the working-class and racially minoritised residents resisting multiple forms of displacement. This section brings us to the contemporary struggles that preceded the fire, including the resistance against the regeneration of the nearby Silchester Estate. Following on from this, Section 1.5 outlines the research aims of the thesis and introduces the four research questions I formulated to understand the fire, its aftermath, and the struggle for truth, justice, and change.

### **1.1. Situating Grenfell Tower**

Grenfell Tower is a part of the Lancaster West Estate, a social housing estate in North Kensington. Locally, the area that surrounds Grenfell Tower is informally known as “Latimer”, “Ladbroke Grove” or “Grove”, and, to some extent, “Notting Hill”, though the latter is more commonly used to refer to the wealthier parts of the area. North Kensington is part of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which is the smallest London borough geographically, but one of the most densely populated. The borough is made up of eighteen wards, five of which are in North Kensington, including Notting Dale, the ward where Grenfell Tower is located.

Figure 1: RBKC Ward Boundaries (RBKC, 2014).

# The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea



  
 THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF  
**KENSINGTON  
 AND CHELSEA**

Author: plat@rbkc.gov.uk  
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RBKC is one of the richest boroughs in Europe, though the experiences of those living in North Kensington are often far removed from those in other parts of the borough. On the one hand, the RBKC's *State of the Borough Report* (2021) boasts that the average household income in the borough is £156,000, which is double that of inner London and over three times the UK average of £50,000. The borough's median income is £40,400, or 140% higher than the London median, while one in two households in the borough has an income over £73,000, and RBKC has the highest median house price across all London boroughs, with half of houses priced over £1.3 million in 2017 (ibid.). On the other hand, RBKC is one of the most economically and racially divided boroughs nationally (Burgum, 2018; WPI Economics, 2021) and the most segregated local authority in the country because of the geographical clustering of the most and least income-deprived neighbourhoods (ONS, 2021).

The five North Kensington wards (Notting Dale, St Helens, Colville, Golborne, and Dalgarno) are significantly more deprived and ethnically diverse compared to the wealthy South of the borough. The Notting Dale ward, where Grenfell Tower is located, is among the 20% most income-deprived neighbourhoods at a national level (WPI Economics, 2021). Here, 68% of households are deprived in at least one dimension<sup>1</sup>, compared to 40.7% in the neighbouring Norland ward and 51.7% of the borough overall (ONS Census, 2021). While 66.9% of households in Notting Dale are socially rented, this amounts to only 26.2% in the Norland ward and 27.6% in RBKC overall (ibid.). Likewise, 56.4% of Notting Dale residents reported being from an Asian, black, mixed, or "other" ethnic group, compared to 26.9% in the Norland ward and 36.3% in RBKC overall (ibid.). It is important to emphasise here that the Norland ward is not even the richest ward in the borough. I made this comparison due to its proximity to Notting Dale.

North Kensington comes under the parliamentary constituency of Kensington, and this covers both South Kensington and North Kensington. It has not always been this way, however. Kensington, as a constituency, was first created in 1974 and lasted until 1997, and it was later recreated in 2010. Prior to 1974, Kensington was divided into two parliamentary constituencies: Kensington North and Kensington South. Between 1945 and 1974, Kensington North was a mostly safe Labour seat, while Kensington South was the safest Conservative seat in the country. Likewise, between 1997 and 2010, the boundaries

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<sup>1</sup> The dimensions of household deprivation are based on four selected household characteristics: education, employment, health, and housing.

were redrawn as Regent’s Park and Kensington North, and Kensington and Chelsea. While the former was represented by Labour MP Karen Buck throughout the entire time it existed, the latter was also firmly held by various Conservative MPs. This is evidence of the stark contrast between the two constituencies, which have now been merged as one. Today, the democratic boundaries mean that the residents of North Kensington are often not represented by the MP they vote for. During the entire time that the combined Kensington constituency has existed, there has only ever been one Labour MP, Emma Dent Coad, who was elected before the fire in 2017 and won by only twenty votes. This election followed Dent Coad’s eleven years of campaigning against gentrification in the area while she was a Labour councillor within the Tory-run council (Booth, 2017).

## **1.2. The Piggeries and the Potteries**

Historically, North Kensington has been marked by social polarisation and marginalisation that can be traced from the Victorian era to the present. As Olden (2011: 15, *emphasis added*) captures, “From its affluent south to its deprived north, *there have always been two Notting Hills*, if we call the rough triangle of London W10 and W11 by that name, rather than its official North Kensington”. Renwick and Shilliam (2022: 19) similarly write, “Notting Dale has always stirred revolt and tension due to the way in which the area places the country’s most wealthy in close proximity to some of the country’s most destitute”.

Such tension can be traced back to the 1840s. During this time, property developers began building large, expensive houses for affluent families in Notting Hill, right beside an area that was “developing into a slum whose notoriety was probably unsurpassed throughout London” (Sheppard, 1973: 340; RBKC, 2015: 39). This slum-like corner of the borough was Notting Dale, which was infamously known as the “Piggeries and Potteries” after the pig-keepers and brick-makers who lived there. It was an area where pigs outnumbered humans three to one, and the average life expectancy was just 11 years, compared to 37 years across the rest of London (RBKC, 2015). The notoriety of the area came after the cholera epidemic of 1848–1849, which revealed “the conditions of filth, disease, and insanitation in which its inhabitants were found to be living and dying” (Sheppard, 1973).

Notting Dale received its first feature in the headlines as the result of Charles Dickens’ magazine *Household Words*, in 1850, where he describes the area as being simultaneously “studded thickly with elegant villas and mansions” whilst also being “a *plague spot*



*scarcely equalled for its insalubrity by any other in London*” (Dickens, 1850 in Olden, 2011: 15, *emphasis added*). In 1864, a wall was built to act as a physical barrier between the southern edge of St. James Gardens (home then to the lawyers, bankers, and sea captains) and the “notorious slum” on the other side (Before Grenfell: A Hidden History, 2018). In 1893, campaigning journalist George R. Sims once again drew a spotlight on Notting Dale by labelling it “West End Avernus”, or hell on earth (White, 2023: 418). Charles Booth’s (1902) map of London presented Kensington as predominantly wealthy but with areas, such as Notting Dale, “of as deep and dark a type as anywhere in London” (British History Online, n.d.).

The boundary between the working-class Notting Dale and the wealthy Notting Hill became blurred following the 1930s Great Depression. Working-class families from around the country moved to London to find work, and consequently, the population of North Kensington began to grow. At the same time, some of Notting Hill’s rich population were also struggling to maintain their homes and moved to the suburbs, and their properties began to be subdivided into cheap flats to rent (Before Grenfell: A Hidden History, 2018). The incoming working-class families would move into these often overcrowded and insanitary sub-divided flats, which were formerly housed by the rich Notting Hill residents.

### **1.3. Race and Housing**

There is a long-established relationship between race and housing in North Kensington. After WWII, Notting Hill became one of the first multicultural communities in Britain (*Before Grenfell: A Hidden History*, 2018), and this itself was the consequence of discrimination and marginalisation. While there was an increasing sense of aspiration in terms of housing following the First and Second World Wars, accessibility to council housing was not neutral across all social and ethnic groups. Often, this meant that ethnic groups, or specifically, immigrants, were excluded from public housing and thus had to look for accommodation in the private housing sector, where discrimination was also widespread. For the new migrants from the Caribbean, a report published in 1955 placed housing as the first of the difficulties they faced because of racism in the housing sector, both private and public (Senior and Manley, 1955; Moore, 2013). While application forms for the Housing Department did not reference race or country of origin, all immigrants had a five-year waiting period before they could begin to qualify for council housing, and this meant that most immigrants were excluded on the grounds of residence alone (Rex and Moore 1969). Even if they did qualify, they would likely be allocated the inferior council

houses. At the same time, they were also discriminated against in the private sector. A 1956 survey of London property owners, for example, found that 90% admitted they would not take black lodgers (Pilkington, 1988). Immigrants and racial minorities were therefore often required to look for alternative housing options.

During the war, rents had been capped, but the Rent Act of 1957 removed rent controls. Many unscrupulous landlords took advantage of this, including the infamous Peter Rachman, who would exploit the housing discrimination that the newly arrived families from the Caribbean were suffering from. The migrant newcomers quickly became established in Notting Hill, often side-by-side with white families, as landlords like Rachman operated in North Kensington and recognised the financial benefits of letting rooms to black people in return for extravagant rents (Moore, 2013; Hodkinson, 2019; Simmonds, 2002). Becoming arguably one of the most notorious names to come out of Notting Hill during the early 1960s, his exploitation of tenants led to the word “Rachmanism” entering the Oxford English Dictionary as a synonym for any greedy, unscrupulous landlord, particularly those who demand excessive rent using intimidation and other illegal or anti-social actions to remove them (Moore, 2013; Davis, 2001).

Black immigration began to create discontent within North Kensington, particularly as the “race question” – as the white encounter with racially minoritised recent immigrants was framed by the press and social policy – became intertwined with the housing crisis. At this time, North Kensington had a vast amount of slum housing, and this contributed to tension with the incoming settlers from the Caribbean. Notting Hill, amid competition for housing and rising racial tension, became the subject of national headlines in 1958 as the result of four nights of rioting between white and black inhabitants. The “Notting Hill Race Riots”, as it is now known, were provoked by far-right groups like the British Union of Fascists and Oswald Mosley’s Unionist Party, under the slogan “Keep Britain White”, who mobilised the white youth of the area against the black population (Moore, 2011). Significantly, the Chair of the Institute of Race Relations, Colin Prescod, argues that the police force only began to intervene in the disturbances when the black population made it clear that they were prepared to organise themselves and fight back (Prescod, 2020).

Tony Moore (2013: 36), a Divisional Commander at Notting Hill, recognises that from 1945 onwards, West Indians faced “racialism, particularly in employment and housing” in abundance, as both the public and police lacked empathy with Caribbean cultures and

lifestyles. Moore (2013) argues that this was a failure that successive governments did little to correct. In 1959, the Chairman of the North Kensington Conservative Association, Moore-Brabazon, wrote to the party Chairman, Lord Hailsham, to express his concern that decent British people were leaving the area and that it would soon resemble a Harlem slum, claiming that “this is a view which is, I regret to say, held by a large number of ordinary, decent people living in North Kensington” (Conservative Party Archives, 1959 *in* Davis, 2001: 84). At the time of the riots, it was estimated that the “coloured population in North Kensington” was around 7,000 (Wickenden, 1958: 36). Leech (1967) argues that the housing problems in North Kensington were not caused by recent immigration, but instead reflected the long history of deterioration, or the “multi-occupation of deplorable property”, where multiple people were living in crowded slum-like accommodation. Leech (1967) shows how, despite being the victims of the housing crisis, racially-minoritised groups were framed as the cause of it in a way that worked to direct attention away from the social roots of inequality.

Even though the Notting Hill riots began with attacks by white people on the black population, it was used as a basis for arguments about “too many ‘coloured immigrants’ in relation to housing, employment and crime” and the impact that black immigration would have upon the “racial character of the British people” (Solomos, 1993: 58). To such an extent that the Notting Hill Race Riots led to more restricted immigration legislation; namely, the 1961 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which regulated the number of immigrants by requiring that they have work permit issues with the government to immigrate (Schuster and Solomos, 2004; Moore, 2011). It is important to acknowledge that there was a delay in the implementation of this policy, and this was in part due to the legal and moral difficulties related to restricting Commonwealth citizens to the “Mother Country” (Schuster and Solomos, 2004: 268).

A year after the riots, the founder of the Unionist Party, Oswald Mosley, stood for Kensington North in the 1959 General Election, developing what was largely an anti-immigration campaign. Oswald Mosley therefore operated in North Kensington, and he worked to convince people that it was the presence of black settlers that made their lives miserable (Prescod, 2020). Within this context, Antiguan-born Kelso Cochrane was stabbed to death in 1959 following a racially motivated attack in North Kensington. Notting Hill became a synonym for racist violence (Leech, 1967) and associated with the racialised phenotypes of the people who lived there: “Increasingly, the presence of

'blacks' and 'the pakis' came to be seen as a form of squalor in-and-of-itself" (Shilliam and Renwick, 2022: 57). The murder of Kelso Cochrane made a huge impact on race relations and led to the Notting Hill Carnival being founded. Many of today's existing North Kensington population and their ancestors would have lived through or fought against the race riots and racist attacks and struggled against various forms of discrimination and marginalisation.

Following the murder of Kelso Cochrane, racial tensions in the area began to settle; however, the slum-housing persisted. The 1960s saw the rise of tower blocks, and it was during this time that there was a slum-clearance initiative in North Kensington, which saw the demolition of 19<sup>th</sup>-century streets in North Kensington. The Lancaster West Estate building was completed in 1975, and those who had been living in slum housing were at the top of the waiting list. The new flats on Lancaster West Estate were therefore a vast improvement in living conditions for those moving in; the flats were "luxury" (*Before Grenfell: A Hidden History*, 2018).

#### **1.4. Resisting Gentrification and Displacement**

I turn to an ongoing struggle that the working-class residents of North Kensington are still engaged in today: the struggle against gentrification. As local resident Ishmael Francis-Murray argues, "The history of Grove is one of never-ending struggle, up until today, where we are fighting the biggest threat we have ever faced: gentrification" (*Failed by The State: The Shadow of Grenfell* (2017)). The term "gentrification" was coined by urban analyst Ruth Glass in the 1960s, who described a pattern where "working-class quarters" are "invaded by the middle classes – upper and lower" to such an extent that "all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed" (Glass, 1964: xviii). The concept of gentrification was coined with negative connotations, as Finch (2015: 281) points out: "Glass's view of gentrification as an aggressive, predatory act is marked by her use of metaphors drawn from commerce ('takeover') and warfare ('invasion')". As this suggests, gentrification is a fraught and conflictual process with detrimental effects on the housing of the working class and racially minoritised groups. It involves the physical and symbolic reimagining of formerly less affluent areas and communities, which subsequently displaces, removes, and marginalises the existing working class and racially minoritised residents. Gentrification-induced displacement can take multiple forms, either through "direct" means, such as housing demolitions, "economic" means via rent increases (Marcuse, 1986), or through

psychological (Rozena, 2022) and symbolic means (Martin, 2005), as places are transformed to no longer serve the original inhabitants or feel like “home”.

North Kensington has undergone multiple waves of gentrification since the 1960s, when Glass (1964: 138-139) recorded the “invasion” or gentrification of North Kensington and “even [...] the ‘shady’ parts of Notting Hill”. Then, gentrification in North Kensington comprised of poor immigrants, predominantly of Irish and West Indian origin, being “wedged in between newcomers who were more prosperous”, resulting in “increasing competition for space” (Glass and Westergaard, 1965: 9). The last of North Kensington’s slum housing was demolished by the 1970s, and thus, it was in the 1980s when the gentrification of North Kensington took charge, as wealthy incomers were attracted to the favourable location and the popularity of its affordable, spacious houses (Walawalker, 2020). By the 1990s, Atkinson found that “processes of gentrification created a continued upward movement in the status of those being displaced and those acting as gentrifiers” (2000: 317), which saw some of the middle classes also being displaced from Kensington. By the 2000s, many of the properties in North Kensington that were not long ago called slums had become some of the most desirable properties in the country, and at this stage, if you owned a house in Notting Hill, you would earn more from it in a year than most of the Notting Dale residents could earn by working for 20 years (*Before Grenfell: A Hidden History*, 2018). Just a short walk from Grenfell Tower is Portland Road, which Moore (2012) dubs the “UK’s most gentrified street.” On Portland Road, for example, there is a house that was built beside the notorious Piggeries and Potteries in the 1850s that was bought by a couple in 1968 in a dilapidated state for £11,750 and is now worth over £2 million (ibid.). While North Kensington’s influx of wealthy residents has caused house prices to rise drastically, there has also been a reduction in social housing provision, as RBKC only built 10 council homes between 1990 and 2018 (Boughton, 2018). Meanwhile, the RBKC has the ‘second highest out-of-borough placements’ for homeless applicants in England (MacLeod, 2018). Residents are therefore often forced out of the area, as they are unable to access either the private housing market or the social housing market.

Today, North Kensington is a “super prime residential district” (Savills, 2016: 2) facing what Lees describes as “super gentrification”: the “transformation of already gentrified, prosperous and solidly upper-middle-class neighbourhoods into much more exclusive and expensive enclaves” (2003: 2487). Super-gentrified areas experience the “class

replacement” of affluent professional middle classes, such as doctors and lecturers, with “a qualitatively different group of very high salaried ‘masters of the universe’” (Butler and Lees, 2006: 469) consisting of a “new generation of super-rich ‘financiers’ fed by fortunes from the global finance and corporate service industries” (Lees, 2003: 2487). Glucksberg (2016) situates the super-gentrification of prime London areas, such as Notting Hill and South Kensington, in the context of London’s position as a global city and its role in global financial networks. She identifies how London’s prime real estate is being used as an investment by the global super-rich, either by buying to let or “buying to leave”. In the latter cases, it is usually understood that properties are bought and left empty to store capital, thus using London’s prime real estate as a literal bank (Glucksberg, 2016). Shockingly, Transparency International (2015) found that 7.3% of properties in Kensington and Chelsea are owned by companies registered in an offshore secrecy jurisdiction.

As the Grenfell Tower fire shows, gentrification, or super gentrification, in North Kensington remains an incomplete process (Martin, 2005). To some extent, the remaining social housing has acted as a “buffer” against gentrification (Glucksberg, 2016: 240). As a result, North Kensington today is predominantly made up of the super-rich and the social housing residents living side-by-side, with not much in between. Here, my account reaches the contemporary experience of residents in North Kensington. As I have mentioned, with gentrification comes struggle, which is a crucial aspect of the context and experience of North Kensington in the lead-up to the fire. By the time the fire happened, there were a range of ongoing local struggles led by groups in North Kensington that were striving to resist the state-led gentrification coordinated by the RBKC. This includes the Save Our Silchester campaign, which was aimed at preventing the demolition of the nearby Silchester Estate, and the Save Wornington College Campaign, which fought against the council’s selling-off of a local adult learning college. Meanwhile:

While these groups [anti-gentrification and housing campaigners] struggle on the ground, fighting to save their homes and communities from demolition and ‘redevelopment’, the political response at both local and national levels has been to push for ever more foreign investment to build more homes, seemingly regardless of who they are for, how they are marketed and at what prices they are sold at (Glucksberg, 2016: 238).

The focus of this chapter is to situate the Grenfell Tower fire in North Kensington, an area I describe as a site of struggle. I, therefore, examine the relationship between the state, the global city, and the financialisation of housing more closely in Chapter Two.

### **1.5. Thesis Overview and Research Questions**

Thus far, this chapter has situated the Grenfell Tower fire in North Kensington, a place that is characterised by historical and ongoing class and racial struggle. I argue in this thesis that the fire is a product of these social relations that have persisted in North Kensington for at least 150 years, in combination with the specific policy actions of successive governments that have worked to make certain lives more precarious. It is on this basis that I attempt to extend and develop the analyses of the fire through empirical research into the community's understanding of the fire.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews undertaken between October 2020 and October 2021, I addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the long-term causes of the fire?
2. How do the participants recall the immediate aftermath of the fire and the recovery response by the institutions present?
3. How have the bereaved, survivors and local residents organised themselves politically since the fire?
4. Focusing on truth, justice, and change, what are the long-term consequences of the fire?

Although there has been a large amount of academic interest in the Grenfell Tower fire, only a minority of these publications include primary qualitative data obtained from the bereaved, survivors, and community members (Ohana, 2021; Rozena, 2022; Waine and Chapman, 2022; Tekin and Drury, 2021; Tekin and Drury, 2023; Cornish, 2021). In most of the existing research publications that do include qualitative data from local community members, the sample size is significantly smaller than that used in this thesis. Rozena (2022), for example, acquires rich data on displacement on the Lancaster West Estate using ethnographic biographical interviews with participants who she has existing personal relationships with, but her study is limited to a sample of three. One of the important exceptions is Ohana (2021), who, using data obtained from workshops with fourteen participants who were next of kin to the deceased and four North Kensington residents,

carried out significant research on how the community's knowledge on the causes of the fire is being excluded from the Public Inquiry. The findings from Ohana's study are important to this thesis as they emphasise how the people most directly affected by the fire are being excluded from knowledge production, not only in sociological research, as I suggest, but also institutionally through the Inquiry (Ohana, 2021).

There are several other examples of social research addressing the fire using qualitative research methods, but they are from a social-psychological perspective and predominantly focus on activism and campaigning. Tekin and Drury (2021), for example, use interviews and ethnographic methods with fifteen participants who were involved in the campaign and researched how campaigners used street mobilisation to seek justice in the aftermath of the fire, finding that it both built solidarity with supporters and challenged negative stereotypes. Waine and Chapman (2021) similarly use in-depth interviews with six participants to research community mobilisation in the aftermath of the fire, looking particularly at how public spaces and buildings were claimed and shared by the community. Cornish (2021) also undertakes an extensive investigation into Grenfell activism using three years of knowledge exchange and ethnographic engagement with the community response. It is a study that stands out for its thoroughness, as Cornish (2021) undertook forty-nine interviews with a wide range of community actors and regularly attended formal and informal meetings and activities, producing a database of over seventy-four active community groups and over four-hundred community-led actions and activities.

This thesis aims to add to the existing research and respond to the limitations I have described here by developing an account of how the causes, aftermath, and consequences of the fire are understood by those closely involved in it. Four of the participants in this study were survivors of the fire and members of the bereaved and survivors' group, Grenfell United. Two of the participants are residents of the Lancaster West Estate, where Grenfell Tower is located, and ten other participants are residents or former residents living nearby. The sample also includes a firefighter who attended the fire; the Bishop of Kensington; an ITV journalist; Councillor and former MP Emma Dent-Coad; and volunteers or people working closely with the community. The sample therefore involves a range of experiences and perspectives, but it is predominantly made up of local community members and volunteers. The extensive engagement with, and analytical foregrounding of,



residents' and survivors' understandings of the fire is the first original of the three original contributions of my thesis.

Through an analysis of the Grenfell Tower fire, I contribute to the knowledge about the wide-ranging and intersecting oppressive structures of class, race, and Islamophobia that subject certain lives to increased precarity and premature death (Bhandar, 2022). I draw upon both primary and secondary data to provide a thorough and rich chronological analysis of the fire and its aftermath. In doing so, I also carefully map out the tension between generalisability or exceptionalism of the fire, treading carefully to outline what aspects of the fire could have happened elsewhere, and what is significant to Grenfell Tower itself. As shown by the historical content that I have described so far in this chapter, there are some long-term causes of the fire that are specific to Grenfell Tower, yet, I argue, are evidence of real structures and processes that play out every day across the country and the world.

## **1.6. Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter 2 will build upon this introductory chapter, which has explored the local socio-political history of North Kensington, to unpack the national, global, and colonial implications of the fire. Here, I situate the research project within broader debates in academia, the media, and popular discourse. Due to the complexity of the research topic, I have divided the literature review into five key stages. The first stage begins by critically assessing some of the key popular and non-academic responses to the fire. The second stage critically assesses “stigma” as a sociological concept. Here I move away from “passive” understandings of stigma and instead conceptualise it as a political means of enforcing symbolic violence. The third stage focuses on the rise of neoliberalism and its consequences for the state’s provision of welfare and housing. The fourth stage examines the global, racial, and colonial logic of the Grenfell Tower fire, while the final stage of the chapter draws together the various arguments made throughout the literature review to argue that the fire is best understood as a form of state-corporate violence.

Following this, Chapter Three unpacks the research design and methodological framework that I have applied in this research project. I begin the chapter by outlining some of the key features of critical realism that were influential on the philosophy of the thesis. I then outline the qualitative research design that I applied to the project, including how I

approached the sample recruitment, the semi-structured interviews, and the final analysis. I also reflect on the research ethics and my positionality as a “blended status” (Chavez, 2008: 482) researcher.

In the first of the four empirical chapters, Chapter Four addresses the first research question by examining the long-term causes of the fire. Here, I examine how and why combustible materials were allowed to enter the market of tall residential buildings, why the Grenfell Tower fire was refurbished with dangerous materials, and why the voices of those who interrogated the work of the KCTMO, RBKC, and Rydon were silenced and ignored. The chapter is divided into three overarching analytical stages: neoliberalism, organised state abandonment, and marginalisation. I argue that the fire was a consequence of decades of governance that rendered groups of people irrelevant to its calculations in the pursuit of financial accumulation through the housing industry and regeneration. This process, which has been described as organised state abandonment (Bhandar, 2018, 2022), is found to have penetrated the decisions that led to the fire, from broad neoliberal agendas to the decisions made locally about gentrification, the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, and the marginalisation of its residents.

Chapter Five examines the immediate aftermath of the fire and critically assesses the response by the state. I argue that the local authority’s response to the fire was governed by the principles of organised state abandonment and its emphasis on outsourcing, calculated indifference, and the abandonment of responsibility, and this meant that the Grenfell survivors and the families of those missing were deserted at the scene of the fire. I also show how the national government’s response was driven by self-interest (Preston, 2019). The second original contribution of this thesis is the argument that the state was absent in its caring function but present as a force of securitisation and policing. I show how the state framed the survivors and local residents as a suspect community to implement disproportionate security and surveillance measures. It is in the context of abandonment, stigmatisation, and securitisation that the bereaved and survivors group Grenfell United was formed.

Chapter Six gives an insight into how the North Kensington community organised itself in the aftermath of the fire. It is the shortest of the empirical chapters, as this thesis was not designed to be a social-movement study; however, I maintain it is important to shed light on how the community has responded to the fire, particularly given the abandonment and

stigmatisation by the state both before and after the fire, and to understand this response as a key practical feature of the community's understandings of the fire. This chapter is predominantly centred around the organisation of Grenfell United, the group that represents the majority of the bereaved and survivors, however, it also engages with the tactics of two other prominent campaign groups: Justice 4 Grenfell and the Grenfell Community Campaigners. I consider some of the disagreements and divisions over strategies and tactics, while also critically analysing the 'silent' aspect of the high-profile tactic of the silent walk. A third original contribution of this thesis is the argument that these divisions have been to a large degree been created and accentuated by the council and national government, who have implemented a "divide and conquer" approach to the North Kensington community.

The final empirical chapter of the thesis, Chapter Seven, critically assesses the long-term consequences of the Grenfell Tower fire. The chapter is structured around the three aims of Grenfell United: truth, justice, and change. First, I begin the chapter by assessing the Public Inquiry as a means of uncovering the truth about the fire. Here, I unpack some of the key findings from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Inquiry, while also critically assessing the Inquiry as a medium for revealing the truth about the fire. Second, I consider what justice means for my participants. For most participants, justice means prison sentences for liable individuals. At the very least, it means disciplinary or economic consequences for those implicated in the causes of the fire. According to this definition, there has not yet been any justice for the fire. Third, I examine the change that has followed the fire, with a focus on the Public Inquiry recommendations, building safety, social housing policy, and systemic change. I argue that there have been some cases of piecemeal change since the fire; however, the necessary systemic change that challenges the deregulation agenda and the decline of social housing is entirely missing.

Chapter Eight concludes the thesis by drawing together the key arguments made in each of the empirical chapters. I argue that organised state abandonment, introduced with the rise of neoliberal governance, caused the Grenfell Tower fire, and the subsequent neglect that the victims suffered from in the immediate aftermath of the fire. I show how organised state abandonment relies upon the "profound devaluation of human lives" (Bhandar, 2018: n.p.) and how the Grenfell Tower residents were accordingly subjected to stigmatisation before and after the fire. At a local level, organised state abandonment meant that the concerns of the Grenfell Tower residents were ignored and silenced before the fire, while

the victims were abandoned and neglected in its aftermath. In response to the fire, I argue that the priority of the state in the face of a major emergency has been to protect itself and to maintain social order, and that is evidence by the lack of justice or change that has followed the fire. Highlighting the three original contributions of the thesis, this chapter details the key contributions and insights that this study has provided into the causes, experiences, and consequences of the Grenfell Tower fire. Following this, I close the chapter by discussing the limitations of the research study.

## Chapter Two

### **The National, Global, and Colonial Context of the Fire.**

This chapter situates my research in relation to the relevant debates within academia, the media, and popular discourse. Here, I examine some of the key concepts, arguments, and national policies that inform the academic literature about the Grenfell Tower fire. In doing so, I build on Chapter One, which discussed the socio-political history of North Kensington, by contextualising the fire in relation to the broader national, global, and colonial context. The literature review is structured around five key stages.

The first stage of this chapter explores some of the most widely accessible coverage of the fire. In Section 2.1, I discuss some of the key documentaries, books, articles, and artistic portrayals of Grenfell Tower. I also consider some of the work that has come directly from North Kensington, including that of several of my participants. An important development of this section is the competing representations of the Grenfell Tower community, which gives insight into why stigmatisation is a key concept of the thesis.

The second stage of this chapter (Section 2.2) considers how stigma power is mobilised as a resource in UK politics (Link and Phelan, 2014; Tyler, 2022). I begin by critically assessing Goffman's conceptualisation of stigma before turning to a less "passive" understanding of the concept. Building on the arguments made by Tyler (2022), I argue that stigma is drawn upon politically to impose symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1987; 1990). Linking this back to Grenfell Tower, I consider how class, housing tenure, ethnicity, and religion inform the stigma produced and reproduced within the media and UK politics.

The third stage of this chapter captures how neoliberalism has produced the political and social context that led to the fire. In Section 2.3, I unpack neoliberalism as a political ideology before briefly introducing deregulation, privatisation, and austerity as key neoliberal policy areas in the UK. In Section 2.4, I argue that the neoliberal agenda has produced a context that embraces "organised state abandonment" (Bhandar, 2022). Here, I will critically assess the concept of organised state abandonment in contrast to "organised negligence", a proposed alternative by Renwick and Shilliam (2022). Finally, in Section 2.5, I outline how the neoliberal turn led to the rapid decline of council housing and its increased residualisation. I argue that residualisation has contributed to the increased mis-

recognition (Tombs, 2019) and marginalisation of social housing tenants by housing authorities who are responsible for managing social housing.

Section 2.6 is the beginning of the fourth stage of this chapter, where I move away from the national implications of the fire to discuss its global, racial, and colonial logic. Leading on from the previous discussion about the decline of council housing in the UK, I begin by examining how the global financialisation of housing has transformed the role of housing and how local authorities and housing associations now manage social housing, particularly council estates. In Section 2.7, I consider how the causes of the fire go beyond national borders. Here, I explore the role of immigration, race, and ethnicity in the global city. Although the global city relies upon the labour of racialised populations, it simultaneously marginalises them as “surplus” in the everyday operations of the global city (Danewid, 2020: 297). I build on this argument to show how preparedness for disasters in the global city is devised around capital. Finally, I outline the colonial lineages of North Kensington to show how the fire is evidence of the “presence of the colonial elsewhere over here” (Bulley and Brasset, 2021: 554).

The final section draws upon the various strands of the arguments made so far in the chapter, where I show how both global capital and the government are implicated in the causes of the fire. In Section 2.9, I therefore introduce the concept of state-corporate violence (Tombs, 2020), and how the state’s liability in the fire has led many to argue that it was an act of “social murder” (Chakraborty, 2017; Hodkinson, 2019; *Grenfell and Social Murder*, 2018; Medvedyuk, Govender, and Raphael, 2021; Renwick and Shilliam, 2022; Tombs, 2020).

## **2.1. Popular and Cultural Responses to the Fire**

There has not been a shortage of interest in the fire. Many articles, books, and television programmes have engaged with Grenfell Tower, while numerous documentaries have focused on the fire and the local community of North Kensington<sup>2</sup>. It has also been a topic

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<sup>2</sup> These include *Before Grenfell: A Hidden History* (2018); *Grenfell: The First 24 Hours* (2018); Reggie Yates: *Searching for Grenfell’s Lost Lives* (2018); *Grenfell: Did the Fire Brigade Fail?* (2019); and *Grenfell: The Untold Story* (2021).

for arts and culture in poetry<sup>3</sup>, music<sup>4</sup>, and theatre<sup>5</sup>. Significantly, Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, attended the play *Value Engineering: Scenes from the Grenfell Inquiry* (2021) at the Tabernacle in North Kensington, where he was heckled by the audience, who chanted “shame on you”. Although there has been a vast amount of popular material covering the fire, some of which I have already acknowledged, the analysis of all this material is generally outside the scope of this study. However, in this section, I discuss some of the critical material, as it introduces some of the key topics and arguments that are significant throughout the thesis, and some of the cultural responses by members of the Grenfell community.

While the North Kensington community embraced some of the popular and cultural representations of the fire, others were much criticised for their portrayal of the community. *Reggie Yates: Searching for Grenfell’s Lost Lives* (2018) was one of the first nationally broadcast documentaries covering Grenfell Tower. In the BBC documentary, Reggie Yates, the writer, actor, and presenter, meets with some of the families and friends in the local community to learn about some of those who died in the fire. The documentary was criticised, both in my fieldwork and online, by local residents, who condemned its biased and provocative representation of the community. In a YouTube video, local resident Reis Morris explains that some of the community “weren’t happy” with the documentary, who felt that the BBC didn’t need to mention “jail” or “Syria” (MalContents, 2018). Reis argues that the community can “see what [the BBC] are trying to do”, which is make the community “look as bad as they can: criminals, terrorists, everything apart from the victims innit” (ibid.). By drawing attention to these topics, many felt that the documentary reproduced harmful and negative stereotypes that had already been attached to the Grenfell Tower residents in the aftermath of the fire (as I continue to discuss in Chapter Six).

As the *Reggie Yates: Searching for Grenfell’s Lost Lives* (2018) documentary shows, not all responses to the fire have been productive. This is not least exemplified by the notorious extended article in the *London Review of Books* by Andrew O’Hagan (2018), who smeared,

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<sup>3</sup> *Grenfell Tower 2017* – a poem by Ben Okri

<sup>4</sup> *Ghosts of Grenfell* (2017) by Lowkey; *Ghosts of Grenfell 2* (2018) by Lowkey; *Bridge Over Troubled Water* (2017) by Artists for Grenfell; Grenfell Tower Tribute – Big Zuu (2017)

<sup>5</sup> There have been three critically acclaimed theatre productions covering the causes of the fire: *Value Engineering: Scenes from the Grenfell Inquiry* (2021); *Grenfell: System Failure* (2023); and *Grenfell: In the Words of Survivor* (2023).

misrepresented, and dismissed the residents and campaigners to absolve the council from criticism. O'Hagan (2018) engaged with many North Kensington residents and campaigners in research for this article, which is not only deeply problematic, but it has also made residents wary of researchers, including myself. In his boldest attempt to delegitimise the residents and campaigners, he targeted the Grenfell Action Group. The Grenfell Action Group was formed in 2010 by Lancaster West Estate residents Eddie Daffarn and Francis O'Connor as they felt increasingly alienated from the KCTMO's decision-making. They would regularly write blog posts prior to the fire, raising concerns about several issues concerning the refurbishment, including those around fire safety. Writing about the Grenfell Action Group, O'Hagan describes the authors of the blog as "committed local agitators" who "hate the Tory Council" (2018: section 2); while dismissing one of the groups most infamous blog posts<sup>6</sup> as "merely the latest in a barrage of complaints going back to 2013" (2018, section 2). In doing so, he is not least failing to recognise the longstanding complaints by the group indicative of "the refusal of the council and TMO to address their complaints" (ASH, 2018:1).

O'Hagan made further efforts to demonize the Grenfell survivors and the local community. He portrays the survivors as opportunists by writing that they were requesting multi-million-pound houses and turning down offers to get bigger houses. O'Hagan also mentions fraudsters in his article, while refusing to acknowledge that all the charged fraudsters were not residents of Grenfell Tower but were actually defrauding the victims. He also ignores the inaccurate accusations of fraud by the media, particularly when the media falsely accused Lancaster West resident Joe Delaney of claiming a hotel room and food money while living in his apartment beside Grenfell Tower (Pogrund, 2018; Cashmore, 2018; Clark, 2018).

The group Architects for Social Housing (ASH) (2018) criticised the legitimacy of O'Hagan's research, arguing that it takes the form of a novella and reflects no facts or real investigation. They provide a rich and detailed response to O'Hagan's article, using extensive evidence to argue that O'Hagan presents "almost no facts or evidence" but includes "only emotive, unsubstantiated, occasionally slanderous and overwhelmingly

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<sup>6</sup> The blog post foreshadowed the fire, as it warned that "only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO", and that "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!" (Grenfell Action Group, 2016a: n.p.).



class-based attributions of truth or falsehood based on who is laying claim to either” (ASH, 2018: 1). Daniel Renwick, a writer, and participant in the study who works closely with Grenfell United, also responded to O’Hagan’s “insidious piece of writing”, which “mounts [...] defence of the council” (2018:1). Here, Renwick (2018: 1) highlights how O’Hagan’s article was based on “evidence” gathered from members from the community who “were told that their accounts would be unedited”, yet “they were anything but”. Renwick describes reading O’Hagan’s article as “like looking through a kaleidoscope, I see everything I know refracted into something unrecognisable” (ibid.). As Chapter Three discusses further, the deceit used by O’Hagan and other journalists has caused a greater distrust of outsiders approaching the community, thus causing difficulty for other researchers to gain access to the Grenfell community.

The bereaved, survivors, and local community members have responded to controversial mainstream discourse around the fire by taking control of the narrative themselves. For example, in 2022, Feruza Afewerki, a bereaved family member, created a photo series in tribute to the Grenfell victims, survivors, bereaved, and local community members. This project, named *Gold & Ashes*, set out to “humanise the Grenfell community” and “bring dignity and honour to the true stories of the Grenfell community” (Afewerki, 2022: n.p). In the introduction, Afewerki (2022: n.p.) frames *Gold & Ashes* as a counter-narrative to the “mainstream rhetoric [...] filled with insensitive headlines and political talking points” and the attempts to “portray the community in a false light”.

In 2017, Redfish released *Failed by the State: The Struggle in the Shadow of Grenfell*, a three-part YouTube documentary that is co-written and presented by Ishmael *Francis-Murray* (Ish), a resident who was born in Grenfell Tower and lived there for 25 years. Throughout the documentary, Ish speaks to survivors, local residents, and prominent figures in the council to examine how “Grenfell burned for local and global reasons” (Redfish, 2018). Similarly, while *After Grenfell* (Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany, 2019) is an academic text, it brings together a range of voices from activists, artists, and academics to outline and describe how the Grenfell Tower fire was a consequence of a long history of violence that has taken many shifting forms. It features important local voices, including Lowkey’s *Ghosts of Grenfell*, and a chapter by Daniel Renwick called *Organised on Mute*, as it traces the historical, global, national, and local implications of the fire to argue that “the fire was not a regrettable accident but a foreseeable result of various forms of negligence, violence and structural inequalities” (Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany, 2019: xxiii).

The *Ghosts of Grenfell* (2017), which features in *After Grenfell*, is a song and tribute written by local resident, rapper, and activist Lowkey. It was released just two months after the fire with a chilling and emotive music video that is set around the base of the tower and features survivors and local residents mouthing the lyrics to the song. The song concludes by listing the names of those missing or confirmed dead, asking, “Where are all these people?” (Lowkey, 2017). In 2018, Lowkey then released *Ghosts of Grenfell 2*, a more politically charged version of the previous release. Here, Lowkey directly criticises neoliberalism, the government, the council, and the private companies that are implicated, including Celotex. It includes lines such as “neoliberalism kills people”, “we’re calling for the companies and council held accountable”, and “no more to big business, fiddling regulations” (Lowkey, 2018).

One councillor that featured in the *Failed by the State: The Struggle in the Shadow of Grenfell* (2018) documentary was Emma Dent Coad. The Labour MP for Kensington at the time of the fire, Emma Dent Coad, has written several reports addressing the inequality in Kensington and Chelsea, both prior to and in the fire’s aftermath (Dent Coad, 2014; Dent Coad, 2017; Dent Coad, 2020). In 2014, using data from the Office of National Statistics, Dent Coad released a report on the inequality in Kensington entitled *The Most Unequal Borough in Britain*, and in 2020, she revisited these statistics and produced an updated and more detailed report. In the updated report, Dent Coad (2020: 11) argued that the inequalities have grown, reporting that Kensington and Chelsea is the only London borough with three wards in the top ten most income-deprived and three wards in the top ten least income-deprived. In her book *One Kensington*, Emma Dent Coad compiles and builds upon many of the arguments and statistics she presents in the reports to argue that “in the context of [the Council’s] huge wealth, the Council’s actions are indefensible” (Dent Coad, 2022: 10).

Considering the competing representations of Grenfell Tower, its residents, and the causes of the fire that I have described so far; the next section will introduce the concept of stigma to show how political figures and parties manufacture and weaponize stigma as a form of symbolic violence. I argue that the Grenfell Tower residents have been subjected to various forms of stigma, drawing on racism, Islamophobia, class, and territorial stigma.

## 2.2. Stigma as Symbolic Violence

I turn now from a sketch of the more popular-cultural engagement with fire to consider key themes in the relevant academic literature, first of all, stigma. Stigma as a sociological concept is most widely associated with Erving Goffman. His book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (1963) is often considered the foundational text on stigma within the social sciences. Goffman (1963: 3) describes stigma as “the phenomenon whereby an individual with an attribute which is deeply discredited by his/her society is rejected as the result of the attribute. Stigma is a process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity”. Goffman’s definition of stigma differs from previous 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholars as it emphasises the relational aspect of stigma and how it is determined by existing social norms and attitudes (Tyler, 2020). Despite Goffman’s emphasis on the role of social relations in producing stigma and the fact he was writing during political resistance against the racial stigma and segregation of Jim Crow, Tyler (2020) highlights how he does not account for the role of power relations in producing stigma. Goffman therefore contributes to a “passive” understanding of stigma, as he fails to account for the active purpose that stigmatisation serves (ibid.).

Tyler criticises how much of the existing literature understands stigma as a social problem that can be tackled, through campaigns or education, for example, while failing to recognise how “stigma is *purposefully crafted as a strategy of government*, in ways that often deliberately seek to foment and accentuate inequalities and injustices” (2022: 18–*emphasis added*). Tyler (2022: 17) argues that stigmatisation is “always enmeshed with wider capitalist structures of expropriation, domination, discipline and social control”, while “stigma is a more productive form of power than that currently understood in the contemporary social scientific literature”. Stigma often plays an active role in shaping politics. It is “propagated as a governmental technology of division and dehumanisation” in a political context where “‘stigma power’ is crafted and cultivated as a means of leveraging political capital” (Tyler: 2022: 7).

The social function of stigma can be developed when placed in the broader context of symbolic violence. Bourdieu argues that social inequality in contemporary society is maintained and enforced predominantly using symbolic violence rather than physical force. The agents enforcing symbolic violence aim to “turn their own vision of the social world, and the principles of division upon which it is based, into the official vision, into

[...] the official principle of vision and division” (Bourdieu, 1987: 13). Stigma is an example of how symbolic violence is enforced, insofar as Tyler (2022) similarly describes stigma as the “machine of inequality”. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1987, 1990) concepts of symbolic violence and misrecognition, Link and Phelan (2014: 24) argue that “many stigma processes serve the interests of stigmatizers in subtle ways”, and this is often through the “exploitation, management, control or exclusion of others”. Here, Link and Phelan (2014: 30) describe stigma power as “the capacity to keep people down, in and/or away by using stigma-related processes”. Using Bourdieu’s arguments around misrecognition, Link and Phelan (2014: 30) emphasise how the “interests of stigmatizers are often ‘misrecognized,’ hidden in processes that are seemingly unrelated to the direct actions of those who would stigmatize”, showing how insidious stigma power can be.

In contrast to Bourdieu, Tyler (2022) argues that stigma power is an integral component of the increasingly punitive authoritarian rule that has come to characterise the United Kingdom since the 2008 global financial crash, which shook the neoliberal hegemony. While Bourdieu suggests that symbolic violence and misrecognition maintain the existing hierarchy and status quo, Tyler presents stigma power, or symbolic violence, as a means of increasing physical force or exclusion, for example, through increasing discriminatory surveillance or rising prison sentences. An example of this is how Islamophobia is mobilised by labelling certain groups as “other” and “suspect” to increase securitisation (Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, and Nickels, 2011; Acik and Pilkington, 2018) through policies such as ‘Prevent’ (Hussain and Bagguley, 2012: 717). Islamophobic media outputs, against the backdrop of the war on terror, have led to “domestic counter-terrorism regimes governing, disciplining, and excluding Muslim subjects from the body politic in the UK” (Ali and Whitham, 2020: 2).

The mobilisation of symbolic violence and the crafting of stigma power have also been at the heart of welfare reforms and privatisation. Austerity was introduced in 2010 following the 2008 global financial crisis, and it has been pursued by successive Conservative governments ever since. As I discuss further in Section 2.3, austerity in the UK is characterised by welfare cuts, the further privatisation of public services, and deepening inequalities (Taylor-Gooby, 2013, Taylor-Gooby, et al., 2017; Hood & Waters, 2017). Tyler (2022: 251) argues that “the mass and overtly politicised stigma production from

above” was at the heart of the austerity’s “political project of the privatisation (enclosure) of public goods and service”. Dukelow, Whelan, and Bolton (2022: 627) similarly argue that stigma is a “potent force continually informing welfare state practices”. As Owen Jones (2016: x) describes, a “campaign of myths, distortion and [...] demonization was employed” in a programme to reduce the welfare state, and this has contributed to a universal hatred of the working class, who have become demonized as ‘chavs’, criminals, and ‘scroungers’.

Those experiencing poverty have been subject to “misleading, damaging and divisive depictions”, a form of stigma that Shildrick (2018: 784) defines as “poverty propaganda”. Examples of poverty propaganda include representations of the working class in television programmes like *Benefit Street* or the character Vicky Pollard in *Little Britain*. In contemporary Britain, Shildrick (2018: 784–785) argues that “poverty propaganda works to stigmatise and label those experiencing poverty and related disadvantages and thus effectively hides the real causes and consequences of poverty”. Poverty propaganda frames poverty and economic disadvantage as a consequence of individual behaviour, even though poverty is typically caused by policy and political decisions (Shildrick, 2018). The consequences of poverty propaganda are “both real and ideological”, as it not only contributes to social marginalisation and stigmatisation, but it also enables public acceptance of increasingly punitive and divisive policies (Shildrick, 2018: 785). For example, the public may become accepting or even supportive of further welfare sanctions that often target the most vulnerable citizens.

Stigma can also be applied to entire areas and the communities that live within them. Council housing estates today have “all too often become synonymous with the so-called ‘sink estate’ purported to be inhabited by only the hopeless, the workshy and the criminals” (Shildrick, 2018: 788). Slater (2018) defines the “sink estate” as a “derogatory designator, signifying social housing estates that supposedly create poverty, family breakdown, worklessness, welfare dependency, antisocial behaviour and personal irresponsibility”, a category that was “invented by journalists, amplified by think tanks and translated into policy by politicians”. In terms of policy, Slater (2018: 891) explains that “activating and amplifying” the sink estate discourse by “repeatedly condemning social

housing estates as precipitates that collect and incubate all the social ills of the world”, justifies “bulldozing those estates to the ground and displacing their residents”.

Wacquant (2007, 2008) conceptualises this type of stigma as “territorial stigmatisation”. Wacquant describes how concentrations of public housing become recognised as an “urban hellhole in which violence, vice and dereliction are the order of things” (2008: 238). This territorial stigmatisation causes areas to be perceived “to outsiders and insiders alike” as “the ‘lawless zones’, the ‘problem estates’, the ‘no-go’ areas or the ‘wild districts’ of the city, territories of deprivation and dereliction to be feared, fled from and shunned” (2008: 1). Territorial stigmatisation has real consequences for the inhabitants of these ‘problem places’, as they are transformed into “the urban outcasts of the turn of the century” who receive “disproportionate and disproportionately negative attention of the media, politicians and state managers” (Wacquant, 2008:1). Territorial stigmatisation is often mobilised politically as a justification for marginalising policy measures: “Once a place is publicly labelled as a ‘lawless zone’ or an ‘outlaw estate’, outside the common norm, it is easy for the authorities to justify special measures, deviating from both law and custom” (Wacquant, 2008: 240).

The government’s response to the 2011 English city riots is an example of how territorial stigmatisation is applied in the United Kingdom (Hancock and Mooney, 2013) and how it draws upon sink estate and welfare-dependency narratives. Following the death of Mark Duggan and the consequential 2011 English city riots, the sink estate discourse led to punitive welfare sanctions, stricter and longer sentences, and collective punishments (uniquely for households in social housing). Cameron’s initial public statement in response to the 2011 riots singled out “pockets of our society that are not just broken but, frankly, sick,” who have “a complete lack of responsibility, a lack of proper parenting, a lack of proper upbringing, a lack of proper ethics, a lack of proper morals” (Cameron, 2011). Going further, and illustrating the consequential nature of territorial stigmatisation, Cameron (2011) argued that “it’s about making sure we have a welfare system that does not reward idleness”. Most controversially, David Cameron even encouraged the eviction of social housing tenants in cases where family members are convicted for involvement in the riots, effectively penalising them twice for the same offence (Hancock and Mooney, 2013). Even though the riots began in response to Mark Duggan’s murder and did not take place on council estates, social housing residents were unfairly targeted in response.

The discussion so far about stigma and how it is mobilised against marginal social groups as a government technology is key to understanding the media and the state's framing of the Grenfell Tower community in the aftermath of the fire (see Chapter Five). Yet, scholars emphasise that the diversity of the Grenfell Tower residents, particularly in terms of occupation, could have been used to challenge social housing stigma; however, this has not been the case (Shilliam, 2018; Shildrick, 2018; Renwick, 2019). Shildrick, for example, suggests that the fire has the potential to disrupt the poverty propaganda discourse as it "reveals the dishonesty of popular depictions both of poverty and of those who reside in social housing" (2018: 789). Although Shilliam (2018) problematises the idea of the "un/deserving poor", he highlights how the Grenfell residents can be considered "deserving poor" according to a range of classifications. However, their association with a council estate meant "these residents were first and foremost assumed to display all the characteristics of an underclass – lazy, dishonest, parentally irresponsible," and this was further magnified by the fact the estate was "a multicultural inner-city one" (Shilliam, 2018: 171). As Shilliam suggests, the Grenfell Tower residents were not only immediately stigmatised as the result of their class and housing tenure, but this stigma was also racialised. Shilliam argues that the category of the "undeserving" poor is inherently racialised, as the "morality of the poor" has been racialised since Atlantic chattel slavery, as "moral sanction was embedded in the difference between free and unfree labour" (2018: 173). Shilliam describes how "Irish, South Asian and even white subjects have at times been 'blackened' as they were made to collectively bear undeserving characteristics and the stain of disorder" (ibid.). In this way, even the white Grenfell residents were racialised because of their status as social housing residents.

The fire happened in a political context of hostility towards those who are racialised as non-white. It followed Theresa May's "hostile environment" policy that she enforced as Home Secretary in 2012 and, more recently, Brexit which led to a rise in racist discrimination. While Grenfell should have challenged the "xenoracism and nativism that Brexit swelled", Renwick argues that "the far-right dined on the smorgasbord of contempt and prejudice" (2019: 28). As this suggests, similar hostility and racism arose in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire. For example, Tekin and Drury's (2021a: 918) study found that Twitter users attacked and delegitimised the Grenfell Tower victims by using racist and victim-blaming language, accusing the "liberal establishment" of being biased

against the white working-class population, and by ascribing the Grenfell victims with illegitimate identities, including “opportunists”, “illegals”, the “undeserving poor”, “criminals” and “fraudsters”. Similarly, in 2018, a video went viral of a cardboard model of Grenfell Tower being burned on a bonfire. Ali and Whitham draw attention to the comments being made by those in the video, such as “the little ninja’s getting it at the minute,” to which another responds by saying, “That’s what happens when they don’t pay their rent” (Ali and Whitham, 2021: 191). Ali and Whitham (2021: 204) argue that the claim “that hijabi Muslim girls deserved to die because they ‘don’t pay their rent’ illustrates the essentially political-economic nature of the racist logic inherent to austerity Islamophobia; it is not only that Muslim women and girls look different, but they are also somehow financially ‘taking advantage’”. For those responsible for the racist effigy, the Grenfell residents were simply figures of the undeserving poor, those who “throughout Britain’s colonial and post-colonial history, have been cast as racialized outsiders in the white British nation, taking up space and state welfare belonging to the more deserving” (Ali and Whitham, 2021: 192).

Thus far, this section has outlined how stigma is mobilised as symbolic violence against certain populations to achieve political outcomes. As this thesis will show, the Grenfell residents have been subject to a variety of different forms of intersectional stigma, broadly covering class stigma, territorial stigmatisation, Islamophobia, and racism. I now turn to the second analytical stage of the chapter, where I consider how neoliberalism has informed the political and social context that led to the fire.

### **2.3. Neoliberalism and Austerity**

In the aftermath of the fire, the social and economic rationality of neoliberalism was immediately put under the spotlight by the mass media (McRobbie, 2017; Erlanger, 2017; Tucker, 2017; Whyte, 2018; Jones, 2017); academia (Crouch, 2017; Madden, 2017; MacLeod, 2018; Cooper and Whyte, 2018; Hodkinson, 2018; Hodkinson, 2019; Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany, 2019; Tilley and Shilliam, 2018; Bhandar, 2022) and (predominantly left-wing) politicians (Williamson, 2017; Asthana, Elgot, and Mason, 2017; Adams, 2017). Just weeks after the fire, then-shadow minister for fire and emergency services, Chris Williamson, wrote in *The Independent* that “in the court of public opinion, it’s time we put neoliberalism on trial for Grenfell” (Williamson, 2017: n.p.). The fire has since been described as a “very neoliberal tragedy” (Hodkinson, 2018:



5), and the Grenfell residents have been referred to as “victims of a neoliberal regime” (Shildrick, 2018: 794). Bhandar (2022: n.p.) goes so far as to argue that the fire “has come to signify the worst aspects of a neoliberal mode of governance that took hold in Britain from the 1980s”.

Neoliberalism refers to “a distinctive political-economic philosophy [...] dedicated to the extension of market (and market-like) forms of governance,” which, “in the name of economic liberalization”, constructs “a capital-centric order in which the impediments to accelerated finance-oriented accumulation [are] minimized or removed” (Peck and Tickell, 2007: 28). In short, neoliberalism “seeks to make existing markets wider and to create new markets where they did not exist before” (Braedley and Luxton, 2010: 23). While the former is largely attained through deregulation, the latter is achieved through the “endless commodification of services” and the “privatisation of public assets and institutions”, where “needs formerly met by public agencies on the principle of citizen rights, or through personal relationships in communities and families, are now to be met by companies selling services in a market” (ibid.).

In the UK, the neoliberal turn began in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government and has persisted for the past four decades across different governments. Thatcher intended to roll back the “frontiers of the state” in the realm of public-service provision and ownership, particularly by selling off or privatising over 40 state-owned businesses, with the largest single privatisation being that of council homes (Boughton, 2018). The privatisation of council housing in the UK is “arguably one of the most iconic and significant applications of neoliberal policies worldwide” (Hodkinson, Watt, and Mooney, 2013: 4). As I will argue further in Section 2.5, what followed was the “commodification of housing provision over the last forty years of neoliberal politics” (Harvey, 2018 in Rolnik, 2019: xi), which saw housing be transformed from a social good into an asset (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Hudson and Tucker, 2019). Until the 1980s, “public housing represented both the partial decommodification of shelter and the protection of residents’ health and safety through a wider system of building regulations and control” (Hodkinson, 2019: 19–20). However, neoliberalism introduced the recommodification of housing in the UK (Watt, 2021; Hodkinson, 2019) and worked to dismantle public housing’s “protective shield against injustice” (Hodkinson, Watt, and Mooney, 2013: 4). This recommodification of housing is also an early example of “organised state abandonment” and of how the state extracts value from its social welfare

provisions to make them profitable (Bhandar, 2022), an argument I develop in Chapter Four.

Margaret Thatcher's government also kick-started the ongoing and aggressive deregulatory agenda that successive governments have pursued since. Deregulation refers to either the "explicit removal of regulations", "the undermining of the capacity or will to enforce existing regulations of business" (Tombs, 2020: 294), or the "shift to a more flexible interpretation of standards" (Nadj, 2019: 8). To make business more profitable and efficient, deregulation "reverse[s] the effects of business regulation which had emerged as a form of social protection" (Tombs, 2020: 294), which, as the fire shows, has fatal consequences. In Chapter Four, I examine how deregulation policies have directly enabled the use of dangerous materials on tall residential buildings, including Grenfell Tower.

More recently, austerity, or "sustained and widespread cuts to government budgets" (Gray and Barford, 2018: 541), has dominated public policy since 2010. In the UK, austerity is characterised by a series of increasingly punitive welfare reforms that have pushed already-marginalised groups further into poverty. Meanwhile, the National Audit Office (2018) estimates that local governments in England have seen a 49% real-term reduction in government funding between 2010/2011 and 2017/2018. As a result, local councils have had to cut, abandon, or outsource essential services (see Section 2.6). In terms of the fire, austerity cuts disseminated the fire and rescue service in the years leading up to the fire and "reduced funding most to fire and rescue authorities with the highest levels of need [...] as defined by the social and demographic factors" (National Audit Office, 2015:8).

Although austerity was framed politically as a response to the 2008 financial crisis, it should instead be understood as a "political rather than an economic programme" (Clifford and Morphet, 2023: 1221), which works to pursue "the neoliberal desire to shrink the (social welfare) state" (Farnsworth and Irving, 2018: 461). In the summary of his report for the United Nations (UN) on the impact of austerity on human rights in the UK, the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty, Philip Alston (2019:1), writes:

The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos. A booming economy, high employment and a budget surplus have not reversed austerity, a policy pursued more as an ideological than an economic agenda.

The social safety net has thus been “systematically and starkly eroded, particularly since 2010, significantly compromising its ability to help people escape poverty” (Alston, 2019: 8). This is not least exemplified by the fact that “life expectancy is falling for certain groups”, while there has been a “shocking increase in the number of food banks”, “major increases in homelessness and rough sleeping” (Alston, 2019: 3), and an increase in child poverty to 41% (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018).

For some, the Grenfell Tower fire “symbolizes the cruel inequality of the ‘age of austerity’ that followed the global financial crisis” (Shannahan, 2022: 269). Ben Okri (2017) captures this in his poem *Grenfell Tower 2017*, where he writes, “In this age of austerity/ The poor die for others’ prosperity”. Cooper and Whyte (2022) argue that the fire was an extreme act of “institutional violence”, a term they use to describe the acute psychological and physical harm caused by austerity policies. The institutional violence was caused by a complex chain of collectively produced decisions by the local authority, the KCTMO, and the contractors involved in the refurbishment, which centred around the “cost-driven downgrade” of the refurbishment (Cooper and Whyte, 2022: 209). The chain of individuals making the decisions about the refurbishment undermined and ignored the health and safety of the residents, despite repeated warnings by groups such as the Grenfell Action Group. Cooper and Whyte emphasise that these decisions were made within the political context of deregulation and austerity, which promoted the withdrawal of health and safety regulations and increased the vulnerability of working-class citizens (2022: 213).

#### **2.4. The Decline of Council Housing**

I turn now to consider the privatisation of council housing in more detail. The origin of the contemporary broken housing system is the 1980 Housing Act, which was introduced by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government and meant that council tenants had a statutory right to buy (RTB) their homes with large discounts on the market value. The price of the discount was determined by the number of years a tenant had lived in their homes, with the policy initially offering discounts between 33% and 50%. This policy led to the decimation of the council housing stock, as there was no commitment to use the capital receipts to replace the council homes being sold (Murie, 2016). Instead, local authorities were being subjected to financial straitjackets to prevent them from either borrowing or spending the capital from RTB sales to repair existing homes and build new ones (Hodkinson, 2019). The Conservative Governments of 1979-97 argued that if councils were able to spend all their receipts, they would be forced to borrow again, and

this would defeat the object of reducing public expenditure (Wilson and Bate, 2015). Restrictions were therefore placed on local authorities, which meant that they could only use 20% of the receipts from council house sales, while there were also additional restrictions on what they could be spent on (Murie, 2016). Councils were also starved of resources even to carry out basic repairs, as between 1979 and 1994, total expenditure on housing decreased by 60% in real terms (Hodkinson, 2019). This austerity was intended to encourage the purchase of council properties by making home ownership seem more attractive to those who can afford to maintain their own homes, while also reducing the supply of new council homes and thus inflating the price of existing housing.

The RTB policy transformed the British housing market. In 1981, the social rented sector accounted for 5.5 million households (32%), but this dropped to 4.4 million households by 1991 (ONS, 1981; ONS, 1991). Today, almost 2 million council homes have been sold without being replaced, while local authorities have been starved of resources to maintain existing stock (Minton, 2019). This has resulted in ballooning waiting lists, “while lack of maintenance [has] led to the deterioration of the existing public stock and consequently, to a large number of people living in squalid conditions” (Rolnik, 2019: 27). While Thatcher’s RTB policy significantly shrank the overall council housing stock, there was a notable variation between the properties that were sold according to house type, geographical location, occupational class, family type, and ethnicity (Peach and Byron, 1994; Kerr, 1988; Lynn, 1991). The RTB policy largely meant that wealthier council housing tenants, or those who lived in more desirable properties or locations, bought their council home, while those who were poorer or who lived in less desirable properties or locations did not. RTB sales were also very concentrated on houses, whereas sales for flats were under-subscribed (Peach and Byron, 1994). Subsequently, social housing has since become dominated by tenants or households on low incomes, in a process of “residualisation” (Pearce and Vine, 2013).

Rather than transforming Britain into a “property-owning democracy”, as was Thatcher’s espoused aim, RTB has transferred public housing stock into the private rental sector. In 2016, a House of Commons Select Committee Report found that 40% of council homes sold through RTB have been transferred to the private rental sector and are being rented out for far more expensive costs, with some of the landlords owning hundreds of properties (Minton, 2019). To make matters even worse, the shortage of social housing today has

meant that local authorities are now renting back former council properties from private sector landlords at these inflated prices.

These sales, as I have said, have not been replaced with new builds. Since 1980, there has also been a sharp fall in council house building as the government abandoned the post-war public housing strategy and began to fully embrace private sector building (Colenutt, 2020). The “state and local authority responsibility [for house building] has been surrendered to the market and property developers’ profits” (Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany, 2019: xxi). At the same time, the social housing sector has “been left with the responsibility, but not the funding, to provide housing for those on very low incomes, and specialised housing for the elderly, the homeless and those with health needs” (Colenutt, 2020: 19). As I show in Section 2.6, this has meant that local authorities today are increasingly turning to private-developer partnerships for solutions.

#### **2.4.1. Demunicipalisation**

Hodkinson (2018) points out that the RTB policy only had a direct impact on 14 households in Grenfell Tower, who bought their homes. Here, as in many other estates, the greater impact of the “neoliberal straightjacket” in housing was in the form of “demunicipalisation”, which he sees as vital to understanding the fire, along with the impact of austerity (Hodkinson, 2018: 8–9): “Instead of allowing local authorities to invest directly in repairing and modernising their remaining housing stock”, Hodkinson (2019: 6) shows, “both Conservative and Labour governments since 1979 have sought to make such funding conditional on local authorities agreeing to sell off or outsource to commercial actors the management, maintenance and even regeneration of public housing”. Although it was the Conservative governments from 1979 to 1997 who introduced privatisation, marketisation, and demunicipalisation policies, the New Labour government (1997–2010) adopted much of the previous Conservative thinking and continued to speed up the privatisation of council housing, especially through demunicipalisation, sometimes known as “privatisation through the back door” (Watt, 2021; Hodkinson, 2019).

The transfer of ownership, management, and repairs of public housing stock to independent, charitable, or private landlords by New Labour was most notably achieved

through the Decent Homes programme of 2000-2010 (Hodkinson, 2018). New Labour aimed to transfer up to 200,000 homes from councils to housing associations a year, and this became the main “option” for implementing its Decent Homes programme (Watt and Minton, 2016; Minton, 2019). Launched by Blair in 2000, the Decent Homes programme required that local authorities and housing associations ensure all homes were in a reasonable state of repair, with reasonably modern facilities and services, within 10 years. During this time, New Labour imposed a financial straitjacket upon local authorities, only providing them with the finance to meet the Decent Homes target if they opted for one of three demunicipalisation options (Hodkinson, 2019). What this meant was that management of council housing became privatised through Arms-Length Management Organisations (ALMOs), Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs), and the stock transfer of council estates to housing associations. The third option of the Decent Homes programme, known as the Private Funding Initiative (PFI), involves out-contracting a regeneration scheme to a private sector consortium for up to 30 years (Hodkinson, 2018; Hodkinson, 2019). Between 1998 and 2008, 1.4 million homes were transferred to housing association ownership, and 80% of those were transferred under New Labour (Boughton, 2019). By 2010, housing associations had overtaken local authorities as the largest social housing provider in England, managing 2.2 million homes, compared to the 1.8 million remaining council homes (ibid.).

This process of demunicipalisation transformed the management of the Lancaster West Estate. In 1996, the management of the estate was transferred to the KCTMO, and by 2002, the KCTMO also gained responsibility for major capital works for properties to meet the Decent Homes Standard that the New Labour government enforced (KCTMO, n.d.). While its name is misleading, the KCTMO is an Arms-Length Management Organisation, which is an arrangement that has become renowned for poor management and a lack of accountability (Minton, 2019). This is not least evidenced by the KCTMO’s failure or refusal to respond to the complaints and warnings by Grenfell Tower residents before the fire.

#### **2.4.2. Residualisation**

Evidently, then, the social housing stock in the UK has significantly shrunk since the neoliberal turn. At its peak in 1981, almost one-third of UK households lived in social

rented housing. Today, the social-rented sector is the smallest tenure group in England, making up just 16% of all housing (EHS, 2023). Meanwhile, the role of social housing in the UK has been transformed by a long period of residualisation. Residualisation is a concept used to describe how the social sector has “moved from housing a wide spectrum of society in the 1970s to the tenure provided for those most in need of it” (EHS, 2014: 25). This was prompted by Margaret Thatcher, who “flipped the post-war model [of housing] on its head” by aiming to shrink the role of the state in housing to an “‘ambulance service’ for the genuinely ‘weak’” (Hodkinson: 2019: 6). Since then, social housing has shifted “towards a position in which it provides only a ‘safety net’ for those who, for reasons of poverty, age, or infirmity cannot obtain suitable accommodation in the private sector” (Malpass and Murie, 1982: 174). Put simply by Pearce and Vine (2013: 657-658), the sector has moved from “a ‘public housing’ model, providing housing for a broad spectrum of households, to a ‘social housing’ model, housing only those unable to house themselves in the private market”.

The concept of residualisation captures also “the widespread tendency to regard council tenants as marginal”, where council housing is “a last resort for welfare-dependent groups” (Flynn, 1988: 299). In the socio-political imaginary, social housing is residualised through the increasingly negative and stigmatising discourse surrounding social housing and its residents. As Rolnik (2019: 39) describes, social housing was “deliberately marginalised and residualised” and it subsequently “became – both in political-social imaginary and in practical terms – the place of the weak, those depending on social handouts, incapable of managing financial assets”. Or, as Watt (2017: 2) puts it, council housing is increasingly “perceived as the ‘dumping ground’ for the most marginalised and disadvantaged in society, and the residents vilified as ‘scroungers’ and social outcast”. This is a marked contrast to how council housing was once a source of pride and a symbol of upward mobility (Tihelková, 2021). Grenfell Tower itself was built as part of the political goal of mass slum clearance and, therefore, represented a vast improvement in housing conditions. As shown in the BBC2 (2018) documentary *Before Grenfell – A Hidden History*, previous residents of Grenfell Tower and Lancaster West Estate recall how excited and lucky they felt to move into their new properties.

As I will show in Chapter Four, the residualisation of social housing has led to the increased marginalisation and “mis-recognition” (Tombs, 2019) of social housing tenants by their landlords or building managers. For example, using a “social harm” perspective,

Tombs (2019: 73) defines the “harms of mis-recognition” as the lack of respect for human dignity, integrity, well-being, and systematic contempt. Tombs (2019: 73) argues that the mis-recognition by the KCTMO and RBKC towards the Grenfell Tower residents was “pivotal in producing the conditions in which the fire became almost an inevitability – foreseen precisely and most tragically by the residents themselves” (ibid.). In other words, residualisation has meant that social housing is increasingly perceived as home to the “undeserving poor”, which enables the mis-recognition and marginalisation of social housing tenants by authorities.

## **2.5. Organised State Abandonment**

Placing citizens at greater vulnerability of harm is not an unbeknown consequence of neoliberal policies. Instead, neoliberal governance actively promotes the implementation of organised state abandonment, the process whereby the state actively abandons and withdraws its social and welfare responsibilities (Bhandar, 2022). The neoliberal agenda has produced a context characterised by the “organised abandonment of state responsibilities to citizens and residents to provide basic levels of safety and security” in the pursuit of private profit (Bhandar, 2022: n.p.). Organised state abandonment describes the way that the state’s mode of management either renders groups of people “irrelevant in their calculations”, or purposefully “extract[s] value from the lives of marginalised people who are deemed unworthy of the socio-economic security and political equality that are conducive to human flourishing or even just basic safety” (Bhandar, 2022: n.p.). As a result of neoliberal governance, certain populations that rely the most on the state to regulate and enforce building safety standards are increasingly “rendered absent, invisible and worthless in the minds of those making the decisions” (ibid.). For example, Bhandar highlights how ministerial announcements of repeals to fire safety legislation often do not make any “references to the lives of residents in high-rise towers who rely on statutory protections for their safety and security” but rather refer to the amount of money being saved for businesses (ibid.).

Using the concept of organised state abandonment, Bhandar (2022: n.p.) argues that “the meaning of Grenfell lies in the abandonment of the state’s responsibilities to provide minimum levels of safety and security to its constituents”. The Grenfell Tower residents, alongside many other “marginalised people”, were “deemed unworthy of the socio-economic security and political equality” by the state in its deregulation and privatisation



agenda (ibid.). As Peter Apps shows in *Show Me the Bodies: How We Let Grenfell Happen*, the state “deliberately ran down, neglected, and privatised the arms of the state that might have otherwise avoided [the fire]. And they allied with a corporate world that evinced an almost psychopathic disregard for human life” (2022: 4). Neoliberal governance prioritises profit maximisation at the expense of investment in social infrastructure and support, and the fire is evidence of how this “erosion of social protection” comes at a cost for certain populations who rely on the state’s protection (Tombs, 2020: 293). Grenfell is a “a story about the intentional removal of social protection” and “a story about contempt for those who, in the eyes of the powerful and the rich, simply ‘don’t count’” (Ibid., 306).

In a related vein, Renwick and Shilliam (2022: 110–111) challenge the idea that the Grenfell Tower residents were subject to organised state abandonment, putting forward instead the concept of “organised negligence”. As public duties were outsourced and their administration was deregulated, Renwick and Shilliam (ibid.) argue that the tower’s residents faced structural neglect rather than abandonment. If the tower’s residents were abandoned, they would be “free to determine their own rules of conduct”, but instead, they remain a “neglected community [...] trapped in rules that do not serve their interests or even provide for their basic safety” (Renwick and Shilliam, 2022: 111). It is possible to use both concepts, as they both capture the withdrawal of the state from protecting the working class and racially-minoritised groups. However, while organised negligence provides more analytic nuance to understand the social conditions that led to the fire, I find that “abandonment” more accurately speaks for some of the causal processes that I describe in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. For example, I don’t believe that “negligence” adequately captures the extent of, and dangers caused by, deregulation since the 1980s, and its extensive abandonment of health and safety regulations that were designed to keep people safe.

## **2.6. Housing Financialisation and Estate Regeneration**

In Section 2.4, I described neoliberalism’s direct role on the deterioration, stigmatisation, and commodification of social housing. Privatisation has meant that the council housing stock has declined, while austerity has meant it is deficiently maintained. The incentives for housing purchase have laid the foundations for housing commodification as they transformed thousands of renters into homeowners and landlords, and in this way, “homeownership and housing financialisation shaped the role of housing in the UK, transforming it from a social good into a financial asset” (Rolnik, 2019: 31). Here, I

examine how the financialisation of housing has transformed the housing market and the role of social housing providers. This section marks the beginning of the third stage of this chapter, where I explore the global, racial, and colonial character of the fire.

Housing financialisation refers to the transformation of the housing sector, the state, and the role of housing in society by financial actors, markets, and corporations. The financialisation of housing should be seen in the broader context of, and as an accentuation of, the contradictory gap between the exchange value and use value of housing (Watt, 2017), as housing becomes transformed into a “pure financial asset” (Christophers, 2016: 139) and “a mechanism for rent extraction, financial gain and wealth accumulation” (Rolnik, 2019: 5). While everybody needs somewhere to live, capitalist relations of accumulation mean that housing becomes commodified, and thus, its use value (as a home) is dominated by the exchange value (property as investment) (Watt, 2017:1). The number of empty homes in RBKC is evidence of the contradiction between the use and exchange value of housing today. After the fire, a freedom of information request revealed that there were 1,856 empty homes in the borough, with 696 that had been vacant for over two years (Who Owns England?, 2017 *in* Burgum, 2018), despite there being over 2,500 households on the council’s housing waiting list in 2016/2017 (RBKC, 2021).

The local and national governments have an increasingly prominent role in these processes of housing financialisation. There has been a rise in the “real estate state”, comprising “a political formation in which real estate capital has inordinate influence over the shape of our cities, the parameters of our politics and the lives we lead” (Stein, 2019: 2). While this is not a new phenomenon, Stein (2019: 3) suggests that “what is relatively new” is “the outsized power of real estate interests within the capitalist state. As real estate values have risen to absurd heights, so has the political force of real estate capital”. This is so much that Stein (2019: 2) argues that Grenfell’s “mass murderer” was “capital”, or specifically “real estate capital”, “rushing in and out of spaces with abandon in search of profit and growth”. The social housing sector is one of these spaces.

Housing financialisation has increasingly penetrated the social housing sector and transformed the way that local authorities and housing associations manage land and housing. Local authorities and housing associations have responded to central government

grant and funding cuts by “actively devising entrepreneurial solutions” (Beswick and Penny, 2018: 612) and effectively becoming “property speculators” and “arguing that if they cannot generate profits from commercial housing, they will be unable to fund social and affordable housing and other services” (Colenutt, 2020: 122). Following the global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent cap on government borrowing from 2012, for example, RBKC was required to finance infrastructure investment, such as the Grenfell refurbishment, through the sale of assets (Bulley, 2019). The refurbishment was therefore largely financed by the sale of council-owned basements in Fulham, which generated £8 million, of which £6 million was earmarked for Grenfell Tower (Apps, 2017). That said, there is evidence that austerity in RBKC was actually self-imposed by the council, and its implementation was selective (see Chapter Four). Dent Coad (2022) shows how RBKC’s capital reserves doubled between 2010 and 2016, after six years of austerity. Bluntly, Dent Coad explains, “While many councils approached the austerity programme with trepidation, RBKC was more than comfortable with its then c.£200 million in usable reserves” (ibid.,17).

Besides the sale of assets, local authorities and housing associations are increasingly entering private “development partnerships with property companies, trading in their land and buildings in return for public and private finance for regeneration” (Colenutt, 2020: 21). Increasingly, this involves the regeneration of council estates, consisting of “the physical remodelling of council estates and the introduction of a new ‘tenure mix’ in the new development” (ibid.). Put simply, regeneration today largely involves the physical renewal, or demolition, of council estates and the rebuilding of luxury apartments with private developers who intend to sell (often the majority of) properties while building a smaller percentage for social or affordable rent. This often leads to a net loss of social rent homes, as the number of social and affordable rent properties available depends on the level of profit that can be extracted from the development, a level that developers typically project to be lower than it transpires to be on completion (Colenutt, 2020). In 2015, a report by the London Assembly Housing Committee on fifty estates that had been regenerated in the last decade found that while the total number of homes on the estates had almost doubled, there had been a net loss of 8,000 social rented homes. Estate regeneration, then, often does not address the housing shortage for those who need it most. In processes of social housing financialisation, the right to decent housing has “become a by-product of commercial property ventures and the level of profit that the council can extract from these ventures” (Colenutt, 2020: 123).

To mark an estate for regeneration, local authorities may actively allow an estate to deteriorate so that the only option is to regenerate it. This process is known as “managed decline” (Watt, 2021). The outcome of managed decline is often the demolition of council estates under the name of regeneration and the subsequent displacement of the estate’s tenants (what people describe as “social cleansing”). In the documentary *Failed by The State: The Shadow of Grenfell* (2017), Emma Dent Coad argues this is what was happening at Grenfell Tower: “They [the council] were cutting back on all the repairs and maintenance, and they’ve been doing that for years, very deliberately; in this process we call managed decline”.

Alternatively, or in concert, an estate may be marked for regeneration through the formulation of a “blemish of place” (Wacquant, 2007). For example, local authorities or central government may activate and amplify the sink estate discourse by “repeatedly condemning social housing estates as precipitates that collect and incubate all the social ills of the world” to justify “bulldozing those estates to the ground and displacing their residents” (Slater, 2018: 891). Here, as Kallin and Slater (2014: 1354) put it, the state plays an “active role in constructing the blemish of place it then purports to remedy”. This was the case in the *Masterplan Report for Notting Dale South*, a proposed regeneration plan for Notting Dale, which was drawn together by Urban Initiative in 2009. Underneath the subheading “weaknesses”, the report writes that:

The ward of Notting Barns South suffers substantial issues of deprivation relating to employment, health and crime, however, the intensity of deprivation varies. The Lancaster West Estate (east) is within the 10% most deprived areas in the country, and similarly crime is more severe in the east of the study area (Urban Initiatives, 2009: 10).

While the report was correct in highlighting that the Lancaster West Estate was within the 10% most deprived areas in England, it falsely stated the crime rates were more severe in this area (Architects for Social Housing, 2017). Rather, as Architects for Social Housing (2017: 26) show, “its crime rates are shared by 40 per cent of areas [...] and is in fact far lower than in surrounding areas where terraced housing predominates”. This is exemplary of how the “myth” of estates as “homes to anti-social behaviour, crime and drug dealing” is “used by architects, developers, councils, journalists, and politicians to promote estate demolition, privatisation, and redevelopment” (Architects for Social Housing, 2017: 27).

This section has shown how the current housing situation, characterised by an acute shortage of affordable and decent housing, has global causes and implications in the rise of financialisation. The next two sections go further to show how the causes of the fire transcend national borders. I argue that the fire took place at the heart of a “global city” (Danewid, 2020; Bulley, 2019; Bulley and Brassett, 2021), where racial and colonial lineages in the everyday practices of the global city had disastrous consequences (Danewid, 2020; Bulley and Brassett, 2021; El-Enany, 2019).

## **2.7. The Global City**

London, among various other cities, has adopted a new urban form since the 1990s, which has allowed it to be conceptualised as a “global city” (Danewid, 2020; Bulley, 2019; Bulley and Brassett, 2021). Global cities can be understood as “nodal points in the global political economy” (Danewid, 2020: 393) that are marked by “their very high concentration of the world’s financial and related industries” and their “new conditions of rapidly increasing globalisation, financialisation and deregulation of the world economy” (Ancien, 2011: 2473). With the rising competition to climb the hierarchy of global cities, global cities are increasingly “characterised by redevelopment, urban expansion and real-estate speculation” (Danewid, 2020:293).

Global cities cannot function without “those who build its urban economy from below: the immigrants, refugees and casual workers who provide their wealthy neighbours with drivers, cleaners and other low-wage services” (Danewid, 2020: 294). Yet, race-making and the racialised assumptions about who belongs in certain spaces are central to the governance of global cities (Danewid, 2020). The global city produces and reproduces international and racial segregation “through everyday practices of consumption, circulation, production, and graphic design, drawing migrants in, dividing and housing them according to the financial interests of property speculators” (Bulley and Brassett, 2021: 558). As city centres are increasingly becoming characterised by “new, shiny corporate citadels and financial centres, glistening high-tech enclaves and quirky high-culture districts”, they are also facing “gentrification of the city centre, the displacement of the original occupants, the rapid increase in slums and homelessness, and the growing

polarisation of wealth” (Danewid, 2020: 294). Through these processes of gentrification, regeneration, and displacement, raced spaces and racialised populations become categorised as disposable and expendable (Danewid, 2020). In contemporary Britain, “it is the highrise tower block that best captures this image of ‘blighted’ urban space in need of regeneration and development by urban elites” (Danewid, 2020: 298). As Hanley (2012: 97) writes, “there is one phrase in the English language that has come to be larded with more negative meaning than “council estate” and that is the ‘tower block’”.

Preston (2019:1) argues that “London as a global city prides itself on being prepared for various forms of disaster and emergency”. Yet Preston (2019) shows how disaster preparedness is organised around the interests of the state and capital, rather than the protection of the citizen. Specifically, preparedness is designed to prioritise the continuity and stability of the state and capital. Humans, on the other hand, are only as valuable as their labour power. Preston (2019: 28) explains how disasters like Grenfell are exemplary of this:

The state is self-interested although it hides this with concern. It places certain citizens above others, social control and cohesion above citizens and itself and the continuity of Capital above humanity. The mask of the beneficent State sometimes slips, though, and this was profoundly true in the case of Grenfell Tower.

Preparedness is rarely designed for the poorest and most disadvantaged citizens. Preston (2019) shows how the impact and response to disasters are racialised in ways that are recognisable in the Grenfell Tower:

BAME people are more likely to be located in areas that are subject to disasters, less likely to have resources to avoid impending disasters, experience greater impact from disasters, are more likely to be subject to aggressive police and law enforcement strategies following a disaster, are less likely to receive official aid or relief efforts and are discriminated against in terms of compensation in recovery (Preston, 2019: 35).

Preston (2019) emphasises that analysing the fire through the lens of capital shows that it is undeniable that the ruling class benefited from the fire. Before the fire, Grenfell Tower was “considered to be an area of possible redevelopment for more expensive, exclusive private properties” and “the tower block itself was categorised as a visual eyesore for possible purchases of private properties in the area” (2019: 57). While Preston does not propose a conspiracy theory that the fire was intentional, he outlines why the preparedness did not efficiently protect Grenfell residents:

Attention is not paid to risks for marginalised groups. Rather than this being an accident (omission) the inattention is motivated by the potential (conscious or unconscious) benefits for certain groups. Powerful interests may not, ever, have wished for the residents of Grenfell to be harmed but had a vested interest in the non-presence of Grenfell Tower and its inhabitants (Preston, 2019: 34).

In neoliberal governance, the “inattention” to marginalised groups that Preston describes here can be understood as organised state abandonment (ibid.). In the operations of the global city, state preparedness and protection are reserved for powerful interests, while marginalised and racialised groups are subjected to organised state abandonment.

## **2.8. The Racial and Colonial Logic of the Fire**

The “quintessentially global character” of the fire is displayed by the fact that the victims of the fire, the tower’s subcontractors, and the materials used in the refurbishment came from across the world (Bulley and Brassett, 2021). Yet, Bulley and Brassett argue the fire is often portrayed as a “domestic” and “regrettable national problem” (2021: 555), which obscures legal and ethical frames of responsibility insofar as “the causes of the fire and the ways of holding those responsible to account have been consistently kept within the confines of the UK as a state, society and legal system” (Bulley, 2019: 1). Bulley and Brassett (2021) suggest that ethical, legal, and political responses to the fire have been state-centric, which consequentially downplays the global and social relations that pervade London and have produced the conditions that enabled the fire. Here, accounts of the fire tend to take the form of a “liability model”, which focuses on the individual and technical lines of accountability (Young, 2006; Bulley and Brassett, 2021). This is evident in the calls for legal accountability for those who are responsible for the refurbishment. However, Bulley and Brassett (2021) argue there should be a broader ethical responsibility approach that recognises how global injustices and inequalities can produce events like the Grenfell Tower fire (ibid.). While it is important to hold institutions like the RBKC and KCTMO to account, a critical response would ask “who is benefitting from this arrangement” and how racialised people from across the world came to London to live and die in social housing in a “wealthy, but racially and socio-economically segregated borough” (Bulley and Brassett, 2021: 562).

In a blog post entitled “The Colonial Logic of Grenfell”, El-Enany (2017: n.p.) argues that the Grenfell Tower fire is evidence of how the “unacknowledged” and “unredressed”

colonial past continues to “haunt” the present. There is often a disconnect between the presence of those racialised as non-white in Britain today and European colonialism, as Britain’s colonial history is hidden from the public sphere (El-Enany, 2017). Yet, several commentators have made a link between Grenfell and Britain’s colonial past (El-Enany, 2017; El-Enany, 2019; Lowkey in Riddick, 2017; Vulliamy, 2017; Bulley, 2019; Bulley and Brassett, 2021; Danewid, 2020). As the editors of *After Grenfell* write, “Britain’s colonial history and legacies of racial exclusion are central to understanding the context in which the fire took place” (Bulley, Ekins, and El-Enany, 2019: xx). Britain’s colonial legacies and imperial attachments are significant in uncovering, first, why North Kensington is home to such an ethnically and religiously diverse population; and second, why those racialised as non-white are disproportionately impacted by the housing crisis and disproportionately living in poor and overcrowded housing, like those in Grenfell Tower (Positive Money, 2023). The Grenfell Tower fire is evidence of how “inequality caused by historical injustices persist and can change shape over time” (King, 2021: n.p.).

Former North Kensington resident and journalist Vulliamy (2017: 1) captures the link between European colonial dispossession and North Kensington, writing just a few days after the fire:

Largely built by the Irish, who had begun arriving in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and continued to do so. It was settled in the 1940s by refugees from General Franco’s uprising against the Spanish republic, and during the 50s by those arriving from the West Indies on boats such as the Windrush, shipped by then minister of labour, Enoch Powell, to provide cheap workforce.

In the 1960s and 1970s, North Kensington then saw arrivals from northern Morocco (Cherti, 2009), so much so that the Golborne ward today is known as “little Morocco”, while Grenfell was reportedly known as “the Moroccan Tower” (Graham-Harrison, 2017a). Later, other generations of individuals and families fleeing conflicts in the Global South also moved to North Kensington, creating a “super-diverse” population with arrivals from countries such as Somalia, Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Bulley and Brassett, 2021; Vertovec, 2007; Downing and Dronn, 2020).

Lowkey similarly describes North Kensington’s relationship with colonialism by outlining how the investment of slave-owner money has shaped the area’s infrastructure and history, while also pointing out that the name of Grenfell Tower was itself taken from Field



Marshal Lord Grenfell (1841-1925), a senior British army officer who fought in several colonial territories and later commanded British troops in their colonial occupation of Ireland (Reddick, 2017; Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany, 2019; Danewid, 2020). While this may seem like a “strange coincidence”, as Danewid (2020: 297) puts it, it is in fact “deeply revealing of how racial and colonial logics continue to structure global cities like London”.

The colonial politics of space not only explains how those racialised as non-white came to live in North Kensington, but it is additionally used to explain how the mostly brown, black, and Muslim residents came to be confined in overcrowded and spatially segregated social housing in one of the wealthiest places in the world (El-Enany, 2017; El-Enany, 2019; Bulley and Brassett, 2021). Such housing conditions were not unique to Grenfell Tower; it is well evidenced that black, Asian, and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in poor-quality or overcrowded accommodation (McFarlane, 2014; Gulliver, 2016; Haque, Becares, and Treloar, 2020; Positive Money, 2023). Gulliver (2016: 30), for example, revealed that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups are “more likely to be living in older, poorer homes, and flats than housing, in some of the worst neighbourhoods, and to experience higher levels of housing deprivation”.

Historically, those racialised as non-white have experienced vast discrimination in access to safe, secure, and affordable housing. This can be traced back to the 1940s, when the British empire was declining and there was an acceleration in migration from former colonies in the wake of World War II (King, 2021). As I discuss in Chapter One, migrants from the New Commonwealth experienced discrimination both overtly and covertly in the public and private housing markets. This subsequently meant that they were forced to “buy houses using mortgage clubs and other collective ways of raising funds or to rent in specific districts of the cities they settled in” (De Noronha, 2021: 1). Notting Hill was one of those districts, somewhat because of the prevalence of unscrupulous landlords, such as Peter Rachman, who took advantage of the discrimination that migrants were subjected to. Under these conditions, council housing marked a vast improvement to the marginal housing conditions they endured in the private market.

When migrants could eventually access council housing, institutional and interpersonal discrimination by housing officers meant they were often more likely to be offered poorer-quality houses or in run-down neighbourhoods (King, 2021). Significantly, the

overconcentration of black, Asian, or minority ethnic groups in deprived areas persists today (ONS, 2022). To such an extent that most children who live above the fourth floor in tower blocks are black or Asian, in England, while 82% of the population is white (Dorling, 2011). This “hyper-segregation and differential quality of life”, as seen in North Kensington, reflects the “practices of the colonial era when British authorities instituted spatial ordering on the basis of ideas and practices of racial hierarchy and white European supremacy” (El-Enany, 2019: 57).

## **2.9. State-Corporate Violence and the Revival of Social Murder**

This final section of the chapter aims to draw together the various strands of the literature to argue that the Grenfell Tower fire was an instance of “state-corporate violence” (Tombs, 2020: 120). While the horizontal relationship between economic and political institutions in engaging with illegality has been conceptualised as state-corporate crime (Michalowski and Kramer, 2006), Tombs (2020) develops this concept to describe what happened at Grenfell as state-corporate violence. This concept is significant in capturing the relationship between economic and political institutions and how their “mutual dependencies have produced, and continue to produce, a range of physical harms, the effects of which look very much like the effects of that which we most commonly understand as 'violence'” (Tombs, 2020: 122). At both a local and national level, states are not only legitimising corporate harm and criminality through the absence of regulation or the lack of enforcement of regulations, but increasingly they are colluding with corporations by creating relationships with private companies and markets (Tombs, 2020). The fire exemplifies how state-corporate violence extends to people’s homes, producing extensive social harm and, in the case of Grenfell, the social murder of 72 residents (ibid.).

Following a thorough examination of how neoliberal policies concerning housing, deregulation, and austerity contributed to the Grenfell Tower fire, Radiven and Prideaux (2021:9) argue that the “incident at Grenfell should be construed as an economic State crime and thus be prosecuted as such”. Radiven and Prideaux (2021:20) come to this conclusion by drawing attention to the “criminality of economic activities including health and safety violations”, in the lead up to the fire and how “national policies have contributed to the disaster”. They suggest that further legislation is needed to prosecute offenders for state crimes. Unlike Tombs, Radiven and Prideaux (2021) place greater

emphasis on the state's liability for the fire and, to some extent, seem to portray corporate crimes as a by-product of state policies and government inaction and negligence. They draw less attention to the relationship between the state and the private sector, which, I suggest, is a limitation of their argument.

The state's culpability in the fire has led many to argue that it was an act of "social murder". Just two days after the fire, Labour shadow chancellor John McDonnell told Glastonbury Festival that those killed in Grenfell Tower were victims of "social murder" (Minelle, 2017). In the fire's aftermath and in accounts of the fire ever since, journalists, scholars, and social commentators have similarly used Engels' concept of social murder to describe what happened at Grenfell Tower (Chakraborty, 2017; Hodkinson, 2019; Grenfell and Social Murder, 2018; Medvedyuk, Govender, and Raphael, 2021; Renwick and Shilliam, 2022; Tombs, 2020).

Engels (1975 [1845]) developed the term "social murder" to capture the brutality of Victorian urban life, characterised by bad health and safety, high rent, overcrowding, and eviction. More specifically, Engels (1845: 95) describes the extent of the bourgeoisie's social and political control that "places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death". Social murder was the consequence of unregulated private greed, where the capitalist class knowingly forced people to live and work in deadly conditions and ignored any calls for improvement (Engels, 1845; Hodkinson, 2019). Medvedyuk, Govender, and Raphael (2021: 2) break down Engels' concept into four components:

The first is individuals – usually workers – die prematurely as a result of their living and working conditions. The second is that these living and working conditions are a result of workers' exploitation under capitalism. The third is there is a class within society – the bourgeoisie – that benefits from this exploitation. The fourth is since the bourgeoisie and ruling authorities are aware of these processes yet do nothing to change them, they are guilty of social murder.

This is a powerful summary of the concept of social murder, particularly as it shows that it is not accidental. As the final component shows, the "ruling authorities" are aware of the risks that lead to premature death, and so the concept is social "*murder*" and not manslaughter. As Chapter Four will show, each component is accurate in understanding the causes of the Grenfell Tower fire, as the victims died prematurely because of their living

conditions; lived in such living conditions because of neoliberal capitalism and its beneficiaries; and both private industry and the government knew the risks.

Reflecting this argument, Hodkinson (2019: 5) similarly argues that “the Grenfell disaster was neither an accident nor a one-off event but instead an act of [...] social murder”. While Hodkinson (2019) recognises that the comparison between Engels’ description of 19<sup>th</sup>-century social murder and the contemporary causes of the fire may seem misplaced, he shows how decades of neoliberal governance have worked to roll back state provision and social protection, which have had dangerous effects on housing and fatal consequences. Hodkinson (2019) traces how the neoliberal agenda, particularly privatisation, outsourcing, and deregulation, has transformed both the role of social housing and the legal standards governing building and housing safety and their enforcement. So, while social housing was originally introduced to tackle social murder, neoliberalism has transformed housing in a way that has created a housing emergency characterised by unsafe and insecure housing, “which deprives thousands of the necessities of life [and] places them under conditions in which they cannot live” (Engels, 1892: 95). While social murder is a concept that historically addresses relations between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, it can be updated with a critical lens of racialisation to account for the fire. As I showed in Chapter One, with my discussion of North Kensington’s Caribbean community, and in Section 2.8 of this chapter, the concentration of certain racial groups in urban areas often reflects the “discriminatory practices” that “placed them in precarious livelihood situations and in poor housing” (Daley, 1998: 1704; de Noronha, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

In sum, this chapter has presented a diverse range of critical literature that informs the project. The complexity of the Grenfell Tower fire meant that the chapter was divided into five sections. The first section explored some of the popular and cultural accounts of and responses to the fire. Here, I considered some of the competing representations of the fire and the wider community, while also accounting for some of the output that has come directly from prominent figures in North Kensington. I also explored the work of three of the participants in this research study, interviews with whom will feature in subsequent chapters (Emma Dent Coad, Lowkey, and Daniel Renwick). Attention was then turned to stigma and how it can be used as a form of symbolic violence. It was shown how stigma is often mobilised to enforce more restrictive policies on certain groups. This is a point I turn to in more depth in Chapter Five, where I describe how the Grenfell Tower residents were

subjected to this form of symbolic violence. The third section of the chapter concerned neoliberalism. Here, I discussed privatisation, deregulation, and austerity as neoliberal policies, before showing how neoliberal governance relies on the implementation of organised abandonment. I then argued that neoliberalism is responsible for the decline in council housing and the contemporary housing situation, which is characterised by indecent and unaffordable housing. The fourth section unpacked the global, racial, and colonial character of the fire. I located the fire in the context of a global city and showed how the residents, the contractors, and the materials used in the refurbishment came from across the world. I argued that the causes of the fire transcend national borders and are evidence of how the fire and the conditions that led to it can be understood as an extension of colonialism and racial ordering. The final stage draws upon the arguments made so far to argue that the fire was an act of state-corporate violence and social murder.

Thus far, this thesis has situated the Grenfell Tower fire against the backdrop of both the localised socio-political history of North Kensington and the national and global context that have led to the fire. It has emphasised how the fire was not an accident, as some may argue, but was caused by a complex chain of events that circled around class, race, ethnicity, religion, and immigration status. The following chapter will outline the methodology and philosophical positioning of the thesis. It will cover the research methods in greater detail and how the data was analysed, before addressing the ethical considerations behind the research project and the limitations I encountered. This will be followed by four empirical chapters that address the research questions outlined in Chapter One.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This thesis examines the Grenfell Tower fire as a longstanding and ongoing socio-political disaster by drawing on data obtained from twenty-four semi-structured interviews with participants who were directly affected by the fire or involved in its aftermath, combined with secondary sources, including data obtained from the mass media, the Public Inquiry hearings, the government, and the local council. It is the purpose of this chapter to outline the methodological framework and the philosophical underpinnings that informed this qualitative research study. The research design was informed by the philosophy of critical realism. It shares the ontological and epistemological propositions made by critical realism while not forcefully applying it, but using it as a loosely guiding meta-theory. This is because critical realism centres around a search for causation, while the research questions of this thesis go beyond searching for causal mechanisms. In Section 3.1, I therefore begin this chapter by outlining some of the key features of critical realism that were influential to the study.

Following this, in Section 3.2, I remind the reader of the research questions and describe how the research was designed to address these questions. Here, I also describe how the philosophical assumptions of critical realism guided this research strategy. In Section 3.3, I describe how I approached the qualitative interviews and the secondary data that they were cross-examined with. Here, I detail how I approached the sample recruitment, interview preparation, remote interviewing, and final analysis. Finally, in Section 3.4, I unpack my “blended status” (Chavez, 2008: 482) as a researcher and a North Kensington resident, and the advantages and disadvantages that came with this position. I discuss how I practiced reflexivity to manage this dual status and in re-presenting the participants.

#### **3.1. Critical Realism**

Critical realism evolved from the work of Roy Bhaskar (1975), who introduced a scientific alternative to positivism and constructionism by drawing on ontology and epistemology from both frameworks. Critical realism combines ontological realism with epistemological constructionism, as it maintains that “the world is real in the sense of it existing independently of our perceptions and beliefs, and that our understanding of it is socially constructed” (Hoddy, 2019: 113). In other words, there is an objective world that exists independently of our constructions; however, our understanding of the world is inevitably

our own construction, mediated by our conceptual “lens” (Bhaskar, 1989: 2–25; Fletcher, 2016; Maxwell, 2018).

Critical realism’s combination of ontological realism and epistemological constructivism is powerfully captured by its conceptualisation of reality as stratified into three domains: the real, the actual, and the empirical. According to Bhaskar’s theory, “the empirical domain includes those events that we actually observe or experience, and the actual is the domain of material existence, comprising things and the events they undergo. The real also includes ‘structures and mechanisms’ that generate those events” (Elder-Vass, 2010: 44). When witnessed, the events that occur at the actual level are often different from what is observed at the empirical level (Danermark et al., 2019; Fletcher, 2016). Critical realism’s multi-layered conceptualisation of reality is indicative of its understanding of the social world as “both socially constructed and real” (Parr, 2015: 195). The combination of ontological realism and epistemological constructionism is often implicit within much qualitative research, where it is generally accepted that “society, institutions, feelings, intelligence, poverty, disability, and so on” are “just as real as the toes on our feet” (Schwandt, 2015: 257), while “our understanding of the world is inherently shaped by our prior ideas and assumptions about the world” (Maxwell, 2018: 20).

Critical realism maintains that empirical data is evidence of real phenomena and processes, which can be used to make inferences about these phenomena and tested against additional data (Maxwell, 2018). At the same time, critical realism is a fallibilist philosophy, insofar as it recognises that “the world can only be known under particular descriptions, in terms of available discourses, though it *does not* follow from this that no description or explanation is better than any other” (Sayer, 2000: 2—*emphasis added*). In other words, some knowledge can be closer to the truth than others (Fletcher, 2016).

A distinctive feature of critical realism is its emphasis on uncovering the underlying or root causes of societal problems and thus understanding “what gives rise to the messy outcomes at the level of direct experience in the everyday world of the empirical” (Parr, 2015: 195). Unlike the positivist framework, this does not involve searching for regularities, patterns, or “putative social laws”; instead, critical realists maintain that “there is more to the world [...] than patterns of events. It has ontological depth: events arise from the workings of mechanisms which derive from the structures of objects, and they take place within geo-historical contexts” (Sayer, 2000: 14-15). Critical realism maintains that “context and

individual agency is intrinsically involved in causal processes” (Parr, 2013: 196), and it therefore recognises that the same causal mechanisms can cause different results, while different causal mechanisms can lead to the same result (Sayer, 2000).

### **3.2. Research Design**

Critical realism’s layered ontology of social reality is significant for the research design of this thesis. Its stratification of reality means that individual meanings, beliefs, and values are understood as real phenomena to be studied, though they are distinct from observable physical objects (Maxwell, 2018). According to this positioning, then, qualitative interviews are understood as a significant tool for obtaining data and evidence of the social processes that exist. Unlike social constructivism, however, critical realists also maintain that there are social structures that exist independently of human thought and activity and can therefore have causal impacts on the social reality of living subjects. This philosophical framework therefore calls for a combination of approaches in the analysis of the Grenfell Tower fire.

Using a mixed-method approach, this thesis examines both the “actual” and the “empirical” domains of reality to shed light on the “real” structures that caused the fire. In other words, by examining the “empirical” experiences of my participants in combination with knowledge about the “actual” events that preceded and followed the fire, I shed light on the way that the “real” institutions and structures, such as the government, RBKC and KCTMO interacted in a way that produced the fire and its aftermath.

#### **3.2.1. Research Questions and Methods**

To understand and explain the Grenfell Tower fire as a socio-political disaster with long-term causes and ongoing effects, I developed the following sub-questions:

1. What are the long-term causes of the fire?
2. How do the participants recall the immediate aftermath of the fire and the recovery response by the institutions present?
3. How have the bereaved, survivors, and local residents organised themselves politically since the fire?
4. Focusing on truth, justice, and change, what are the long-term consequences of the fire?



This study is primarily based on empirical data acquired through semi-structured interviews with twenty-four participants who were directly affected by the fire or involved in its aftermath. Qualitative interviews were used to uncover the “valuable core of thick, rich description emanating from the perspective of those who survived or managed the [fire]” (Phillips, 2022: 106). By speaking to participants who have direct experience of and insight into the causes of the fire and/or its aftermath, I was able to explore first-hand accounts of the participants “experiences, perspectives, and how [the] social issues intersect in place” (Mueller, et al., 2023: 1).

During the time of data collection, the Inquiry was ongoing, and the Metropolitan Police Service was yet to conclude their criminal investigation into the fire. I examined the qualitative interview data in combination with the analysis of a range of policy documents, Public Inquiry findings, and media reports. I closely followed the Inquiry and the commentary about it from media sources, such as the *Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry Podcast* and the daily roundups from *Inside Housing* and *ITV Evening News* with Rags Martel. In addition to this, I received Twitter notification updates from all the relevant groups, including Grenfell United, and kept track of their other social media platforms to ensure I was informed about any emerging information. I remained up to date with policy changes, debates, press releases, and statements from both the council and the national government, with a particular focus on Grenfell Tower, the housing crisis, and the building safety crisis. I also monitored the engagement with, and the relevant information shared by the RBKC online. Notes were made around these changes in a separate notebook, and throughout the analysis, they were used to not only contextualise the findings but contribute to and develop the arguments presented in the later chapters. By drawing on a combination of primary empirical data and secondary data sources, I move away from a static analysis of the “empirical” domain of social reality. Instead, I use multiple sources to produce an analysis of the fire that is “more or less truth like” (Danermark et al., 2002: 10), recognising that my participants recollections of the fire are “empirical” and may differ from what really happened (“actual”).

### **3.2.2. Interview Sampling and Recruitment**

I began the interview recruitment process by making a list of individuals that I identified as prominent and recognisable figures in the campaign, namely, those most present on the news, social media, or during occasions like the silent walk. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, I was cautious about who I approached for interviews. It was therefore important that

the potential participants, especially the bereaved and survivors, were already visible in the campaign, whether that was through social media or in person.

A total of twenty-four participants were recruited for this study. All participants were recruited using either purposive sampling or snowball sampling. As I have spent most of my life living in North Kensington, the initial source of sample recruitment was through existing personal contacts. In total, I had existing relationships with four of the participants that I interviewed, and I was introduced to four additional participants through mutual contacts that we share in North Kensington. Most of the remaining participants were approached through Twitter. I identified potential participants through Twitter based on their active engagement in online conversations around Grenfell and their apparent proximity to Grenfell. Those identified were sent a direct message where I introduced myself and explained that I am also a local resident of North Kensington. This message continued with a brief description of the study and how I would like them to take part. I contacted at least fifty-four potential participants on Twitter and received a response from thirty-three of them, who either agreed to take part or inquired about more information. In total, sixteen participants were recruited directly through Twitter or through a snowball sample that started at Twitter. As this shows, there were several potential participants who agreed to take part but, for various reasons, did not end up doing so.

All participants were asked for their email addresses and were sent the Participant Information Sheet and the consent form to the address provided. The email also explained that to participate in the research, participants were required to return the completed consent form. I explained that a completed consent form was required if they wanted to participate in the research. The email indicated that these documents were attached and should be referred to for more information. Each of the participants was given the option to use their real name or a pseudonym. In the consent form, participants were asked to indicate whether they wanted to take part in the study using their real names or whether they would like to be anonymised.

The option of anonymity is often unusual in social research, as the practice of using pseudonyms for real names has become the convention in the social sciences (Guenther, 2009). The decision to use pseudonyms is often taken for granted and rarely explained, even though “the decision to name or not to name is rife with overlapping ethical, political, methodological, or personal dilemmas” (Guenther, 2009: 412). In this research, each

participant was purposefully selected due to their active role in the campaign or their prominent public role, which meant that their comments were significant to the research topic. It was therefore important that participants were given the opportunity to take part using their real identities, as I was concerned that by using pseudonyms, there would be lost meanings, and I would be denying participants the right to be heard. I was also aware that many of the potential participants had spoken publicly about the fire, whether that was in academia, the mass media, or through social media. I was therefore confident that there would not be any harm caused by sharing the names of my participants if they consented. In total, nineteen participants took part using their real names. On the contrary, the option to use pseudonyms was also beneficial for the research design, as the option of anonymity meant that I was able to involve participants who otherwise would not have taken part. Five participants required a pseudonym to prevent compromising relations with the organisations that they are involved with or work for.

The interviews took place between October 2020 and October 2021. The sample included ten men and fourteen women. The interviews lasted between 20 and 100 minutes. The median length of time among all participants was approximately one hour. While the shorter interviews provided more concise and straight-to-the point data, the longer interviews tended to provide deeper insight into the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

As Figure 1 shows, four of the participants are survivors of the fire and members of the bereaved and survivors' group, Grenfell United, while two of the participants are residents of the wider Lancaster West Estate, and ten other participants are residents or former residents living nearby. The sample also includes: a firefighter who attended the fire; the Bishop of Kensington at the time; an ITV journalist; Councillor and former MP Emma Dent-Coad; and volunteers or people working closely with the community. The sample therefore involves a range of experiences and perspectives, but it is predominantly made up of local community members.

Although the sample includes Councillor Emma Dent-Coad, who, at the time, was a member of the Labour Party, the sample does not include representatives from other political parties. This is a limitation of the sample. However, several other councillors and MPs were approached for interviews. Notably, Felicity Buchan, the Conservative MP for Kensington, agreed to partake in the study but cancelled a few days prior to the interview

and only hours after the *Sunday Times* leaked plans for the demolition of Grenfell Tower (see Wheeler, Al-Khalaf, and Gadher, 2021). The leader of the RBKC Council, Councillor Elizabeth Campbell, was also approached for an interview, where her representative responded, stating that “the questions that you wish to ask Cllr Campbell will be covered in the hearings currently taking place in the Public Inquiry” and providing me with the Public Inquiry website.

**Table 1: Research Participants**

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Role (at the time of the interview)</b>	<b>Campaign Group, Organisation, or Institution</b>	<b>Date</b>
1	Denise	Local resident	N/A	26 <sup>th</sup> October 2020
2	Jess Lemay	Local resident	N/A	27 <sup>th</sup> October 2020
3	Rikeiya Elcock	Survivor	Grenfell United	17 <sup>th</sup> November 2020
4	Sue Duggins	Local Resident	Grenfell Community Campaigners	6 <sup>th</sup> January 2021
5	Gill Kernick	Grenfell Tower resident until 2014. Local resident living in a high-rise at the time of the fire	N/A	8 <sup>th</sup> January 2021
6	Dave Badillo	Firefighter	London Fire Brigade	12 <sup>th</sup> January 2021
7	Moyra Samuel	Local Resident	Grenfell Community Campaigners group and former Justice for Grenfell member	29 <sup>th</sup> January 2021
8	Lizzie Spring	Local Resident	N/A	2 <sup>nd</sup> February 2021
9	Eddie Daffarn	Survivor	Grenfell Action Group and Grenfell United	4 <sup>th</sup> February 2021
10	Lowkey	Local resident, rapper, and social commentator	N/A	18 <sup>th</sup> February 2021

11	Daniel Renwick	Campaigner, writer, videographer	N/A	9 <sup>th</sup> March 2021
12	Graham Tomlin	Bishop of Kensington	Church of England Bishop	10 <sup>th</sup> March 2021
13	Philip Lee-Morris	Emergency Response	Silver Commander and Ealing Council	25 <sup>th</sup> March 2021
14	Jenny	Immediate and ongoing response	Charity	31 <sup>st</sup> March 2021
15	Emma Dent Coad	Local resident, Labour councillor and former MP	Labour Councillor representing Golborne Ward in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea	1 <sup>st</sup> April 2021
16	Rags Martel	Journalist	ITV News	15 <sup>th</sup> April 2021
17	April	Local resident at the time of the fire, who has since moved house.	N/A	11 <sup>th</sup> May 2021
18	Tanya	Charity CEO. Immediate and ongoing emergency response	CEO of a Charity	17 <sup>th</sup> May 2021
19	Sue Caro	Local resident	Formerly Justice for Grenfell	26 <sup>th</sup> May 2021
20	Emma O'Connor	Survivor	Grenfell United	6 <sup>th</sup> August 2021
21	Jackson	Consultant working closely with the North Kensington community	N/A	17 <sup>th</sup> September 2021
22	Natasha Elcock	Survivor	Chair of Grenfell United	7 <sup>th</sup> October 2021
23	David O'Connell	Lancaster West Estate resident	Vice Chair of Lancaster West Residents Association	8 <sup>th</sup> October 2021
24	Joe Delaney	Lancaster West Estate resident	Grenfell Action Group	19 <sup>th</sup> November 2021

### 3.2.3. Interview Preparation

Preparing for each of the interviews was an important part of the research process. The sensitivity of the topic meant that ethical considerations were at the forefront of the interview preparation. I therefore had to rigorously assess how to prevent distress or harm from being caused to the participants involved. Exploring such a topical and sensitive topic requires an awareness of timing (Cowles, 1998), current affairs, and the participants involved. Before each of the interviews, I ensured that I had drafted an appropriate interview guide and that I was adequately informed about the participant I was speaking to and the most recent news updates concerning the fire or other related issues. There were times where I had to postpone interviews or recruitment for interviews due to the insensitive or inappropriate timing, when a potentially distressing development in events associated with the fire had recently taken place. For example, in the weeks prior to and immediately after the four-year anniversary of the fire, I made the decision to postpone the fieldwork and recruitment process, as I knew this would be a particularly difficult and intense time for many of those I wanted to speak to.

As I have mentioned, each of the research participants was purposefully selected due to their proximity to the topic, so it was essential that I was informed and updated about each of the participants and their involvement in the campaign. For example, I interviewed participants who: regularly spoke on the news; were guests on conference panels; were active online about Grenfell-related issues; or had published blogs, books, and articles about the fire. It was therefore necessary to consider the already existing data as I produced the interview guide, so that new knowledge could be acquired.

The interview guide was adapted for every interview, depending on their relation to the topic. Interviews with Grenfell survivors and North Kensington residents, for example, began with open-ended questions about what it is like to live in North Kensington and whether it has changed, while interviews with those who did not live in the area began by asking them to describe their role in the response effort. While drafting the interview guides before each interview, I would imagine myself in the role of that individual participant. This was useful to ensure that none of the questions were triggering or misjudged, but also to consider how their role can assist the research in ways that other participants cannot. For example, the Bishop of Kensington, Graham Tomlin, can assist in the research in different ways to Dave Badillo, a firefighter who attended the fire. Some questions or interview topics were recurrent throughout the interviews, while others were

abandoned all together. For example, I never asked any participants about the night of the fire or the people who were killed. However, all the participants were asked about the Public Inquiry, the response effort by local and national government, and whether any lessons had been learned.

Two participants became distressed during the interviews and cried. In both cases, this response arose while discussing the progress of the campaign. In response to this, I suggested that we could pause the interview, but both participants insisted they were willing to continue and were just angry or passionate about the topic. Following the interview, one of these participants emailed me, thanking me for the experience and explaining that it helped them “remember why [they] need to still fight for justice”.

#### **3.2.4. Remote Interviews**

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews took place either over the telephone (seven interviews) or via video call through Zoom (seventeen interviews). While online interviews are often deemed to be second best or as an alternative when the “gold standard” of face-to-face interviews is not possible (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014: 604), online interviews were found to have a range of benefits to this research.

The greatest advantage of conducting interviews remotely was that it provided a significant means of gaining access to otherwise less accessible participants. Particularly as the Grenfell Tower Inquiry was taking place during the fieldwork year, alongside a range of other related campaigns, most of those involved in the Grenfell campaign had been extremely busy. This also contributed to the diversity of the sample and the institutions or groups that it represented. Equally, however, it must be noted that the pandemic-created remoteness of the research to the site meant that there were fewer recruitment opportunities at local community events. While I was able to contact most of the people I wanted to involve in the research, there were several people who I was unable to access, neither through social media nor through snowball sampling methods.

Interview cancellations, delays, and postponements were a significant challenge throughout the fieldwork. This meant that the fieldwork took much longer to complete than anticipated. I found that interviews often took a long time to arrange, as respondents would take extended periods of time to respond to each message. Most interviews took place over

six weeks after the first point of contact. In addition to this, a quarter of the participants (six participants) cancelled the interview at least once, with some cancelling up to four times. The cancellations were just hours or days before the scheduled interview. As Deakin and Wakefield (2013: 613) found, a weakness of remote interviews is that “the distance between researcher and interviewee can make it easier for participants to drop out as they feel less committed to the process than with face-to-face interviews”. Though, given the gravity of the research topic, this flexibility might have been what the participants needed. It was important that the participants felt comfortable, and so the remote interviews were beneficial in ensuring that the interviews took place when it suited the participants.

Remote interviews were also beneficial for building a rapport with the participants (Weller, 2017; Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). It allowed the interview to feel less formal and less daunting (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013), which was particularly important due to the sensitive nature of the research project. Although the remote interviews were often beneficial for building rapport, they also seemed to result in over-disclosure by many of the participants (Weller, 2017). Specifically, some participants discussed conflict between themselves and other community members, often revealing personal and sensitive information, and this would also result in the conversation losing sight of its purpose. I ensured that I did not reveal this information in subsequent interviews with other participants or confirm or deny any knowledge of existing tensions.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

In this study, interview data was the primary point of analysis. Interviews were transcribed by myself using audio recordings or handwritten notes I had taken during the interview. Twenty-three of the interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission, using either a Dictaphone or the Zoom recording setting. Only one participant did not give their permission for audio recording, and I therefore made handwritten notes throughout the interview. This meant that a lot of data was lost during the transcription of this interview, as I struggled to engage with the participant and to make detailed notes at the same time.

Before I began the initial data analysis, I read and re-read each of the transcripts several times to ensure that I was familiar with the data. Following this, I began the initial analysis of the data by manually annotating the data using a pen and sorting the data into codes



using a highlighter. I used a flexible approach to coding the data. As Faherty (2010: 59) writes, there are “no absolute hard-and-fast rules” to coding, and I therefore used both a priori codes that arose from existing literature or arguments and emergent codes that arose from the interview data (Blair, 2015).

In the first stage of coding, the codes were developed according to organisational, substantive, and theoretical categories (Maxwell and Chmiel, 2014). Firstly, theoretical codes were used to identify evidence of prior theory or information. Here, I identified key concepts that arose in the literature, such as “stigma and “neoliberalism” and used them to produce initial coding categories (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Following this, I used organisational codes to identify topics or the subject of discussion (“RBKC”; “The Tories”; “the aftermath”) and substantive codes to identify the participants descriptions, concepts, and beliefs (“neglect”, “contempt”, “cover up”).

The decision to use existing concepts and arguments to produce theoretical codes was grounded in my critical realist view that context and “engagement with existing (fallible) theories” (Fletcher, 2016: 186) are important in developing explanations of reality. While Bhaskar condoned the use of existing theories as a starting point for empirical research, he maintained that one must “avoid any commitment to the content of specific theories and recognise the nature of all its results” (1979: 6). As Fletcher (2016: 184) put it, “initial theories must be treated as just that: initial theories. The initial theory facilitates a deeper analysis that can support, elaborate, or deny that theory to help build a new and more accurate explanation of reality”.

After the initial phase of coding, I uploaded each of the original interview transcripts onto Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Here, I began to analyse and code the transcripts a second time. This stage of analysis was important in ensuring that I had not missed or incorrectly coded any important findings. I later compared the codes and the annotations that I made at both stages of the analysis, and I developed, changed, and replaced some of the codes during the process.

The final stage of analysis involved refining, organising, and grouping the codes into larger categories according to the relationship between the codes. For example, the codes “privatisation”, “deregulation” and “austerity” were categorised as “neoliberalism”. The

categorised data was organised into separate Word documents and printed. I once again made additional annotations by hand. I found having the physical documents easier to refer to during the writing-up stage.

### **3.4. Researcher Positionality**

I was born in North Kensington, attended state school in Ladbroke Grove, and lived there permanently until I was 18, before moving to Manchester during term-times to attend university. Most of my family still lives in North Kensington or in the area more commonly known locally as Ladbroke Grove. I had close friends and family friends who lived in Grenfell Tower, and I spent a significant amount of time in Grenfell Tower before the fire. I therefore experienced and witnessed many of the issues that have been described by residents, such as the broken lifts and noisy building work.

I was awake at the time of the fire with my mum in my family home in North Kensington when the noise of helicopters made us aware that something was happening outside. We initially assumed that the helicopters meant that there had been a stabbing (something that felt somewhat like a regular occurrence in the area). I only became aware of the fire about five minutes later when I saw live images of the fire being posted on social media by old school friends. My mum and I then went outside and watched the fire (from around a kilometre away) until it was daylight, while calling and texting the people we knew living there. At the time, I wanted to go to the tower to help, but my mum would not let me because she thought the tower was going to collapse. In the consecutive days after the fire, I went to the base of the tower and around Latimer Road several times, where I witnessed some of the chaos that most of my participants describe. Like thousands of people in North Kensington, my mum has since been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and a prevalent trigger for her and many others is the sound of helicopters. I have always found it difficult to come to terms with the helplessness that I felt that night and the days after the fire, and so this PhD has been my way of attempting to do something to show the horrific devastation that occurred that night and in the aftermath.

The attributes that I share with the participants may lead some scholars to categorise this study as “insider research” (Roseneil, 1993; Greene, 2014). However, I would not go as far as arguing that I am an “insider” (Bukamal, 2022; Manohar et al., 2017), as I am not closely tied into the “Latimer” community that surrounds the tower, nor do I sufficiently

represent the diversity of the Grenfell residents (a point I build on in Section 3.4.2). Instead, I would suggest that Chavez's (2008) description of a "partial insider" is a more accurate description of my position to the research participants. A partial insider refers to those "who share a single identity (or a few identities) with a degree of distance or detachment from the community" (Chavez, 2008: 475).

I argue that my position as a partial insider has provided a range of benefits for the research. I believe that my personal ties to the tower, my social proximity to many of the participants, and my social class have provided benefits for engaging in "nonviolent communication" (Bourdieu, 1999: 610) and allowing for "an equalized relationship between researcher and participants" (Chavez, 2008: 479). In other words, my relative proximity to the participants became a means of tackling the power asymmetry that is inherent in every research relationship and further reinforced "every time the [researcher] occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy of different types of capital, cultural capital in particular" (Bourdieu, 1999: 609). The shared attributes that I describe are beneficial in reducing feelings of judgement and thus minimising any potential harm, unnatural behaviour or impression management by the participants. In addition to this, my "blended status" as a researcher and as a North Kensington resident distinguishes my research from most other researchers examining the fire, as I have greater social, cultural, and first-hand "knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field" (Chavez, 2008: 479).

Traditionally, there is a methodological assumption that the researcher should be distant from the research participants to produce objective and accurate data (Sherif, 2001; Kusow, 2003). This search for objectivity is largely associated with positivist philosophy. In contrast to this positioning, however, critical realism emphasises that all knowledge is fallible by nature. Instead of striving for a false claim of objectivity, I have used my dual position as a researcher and as a North Kensington resident to attain rich, insightful data that may have otherwise not been attainable. For example, my proximity to the fire also meant that I was able to gain access to participants who otherwise would not have taken part (Chavez, 2008; Hodkinson, 2005). Writers such as Andrew O'Hagan (2018), in his much-criticised article misrepresenting and defaming Grenfell residents and campaigners in *The London Review of Books*, have caused many of the North Kensington residents to be suspicious of outsiders. Several of the participants I spoke with informed me that they wouldn't have taken part if I was not a local resident, and they only agreed to participate after asking me additional questions about where I was from and what my intentions were.

One potential participant, however, remained wary of me as a researcher and refused to take part in the project.

### **3.4.1. Practising Reflexivity**

The position of the researcher can have a significant impact on the research process and outcomes (Cresswell and Poth, 2017; Al-Natour, 2011; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), particularly when it involves sensitive research (Manohar et al., 2017). As a researcher, it is therefore important to situate myself in relation to the research and to acknowledge how I may influence it (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). For this study, self-reflection was a “mandatory ongoing process” to “identify, construct and critique” my position within the research process (Manohar et al., 2017: 3). Although I am critical of whether complete objectivity is possible in any sociological research, regardless of the methods used, I argue that it is still important to maintain some detachment so that the data can generate significant knowledge and understanding.

The sensitivity of the research topic and the emotive data it subsequently produced meant that the research was in many ways at greater risk of researcher bias (Cowles, 1998). The fact that I am a local resident and a consumer of the media also meant that I already had preconceived ideas about the fire. It was therefore important to both acknowledge and reflect on my feelings throughout the research so that I did not interpret or respond to my findings based on emotion. Furthermore, it required that I reflect on my own role in the collection and production of data.

For the most part, emotionality is positioned in opposition to rationality, intellectual work, and professionalism in social research. However, it is increasingly being recognised that the researcher’s emotions are a necessary part of research, allowing the researcher to enter the participant’s world and develop a greater understanding of it (Emerald and Carpenter, 2015: 747). Recognising and reflecting on my emotions was central to this research project. In exercising reflexivity in this way, it becomes apparent how analysing our own emotions can indeed be a significant tool for amplifying and drawing our attention to what we observe (Emerald and Carpenter, 2015). Central to this was ensuring that I did not allow my emotional response to overpower or misinterpret the words of the participant (Cylwik, 2001).

I attempted to address and acknowledge my biases by using a separate notebook to make reflective comments to sum up my thoughts and emotions during the fieldwork. After each of the interviews, I wrote down how I felt during the interview, my understanding of the situation, and any other emotions that stood out at moments in the interviews. This was organised chronologically and filed alongside the interview transcripts. In addition to this, I also made general entries about my thoughts and ethical concerns throughout the project.

I faced some of my own personal challenges during the research. The feeling of an “ethical hangover” (Loftland and Loftland, 1995: 28) for gathering data on sensitive issues. It was also sometimes difficult to manage the project as both a researcher, and as a person who witnessed the fire first-hand and knew people affected by it. While I wanted to remain grounded and remember why the project is important to me, it was also important to manage my emotions and try to detach myself. This was a contradiction that I repeatedly needed to tackle.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, I often came away from interviews with feelings of both “gratitude and debt” (Liamputtong, Rice, and Ezzy, 1999: 41). This affected my position as a researcher in two ways. Firstly, it led to an increased sense of responsibility and fear that “failing to do something to help that person’s situation would be letting [them] down” (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007: 340). Secondly, it led to an increased feeling of unease and reluctance to present data that may contradict their arguments. This is a limitation of (partial) insider status identified by Woodward (2008: 538): “Whilst it may facilitate greater insights, the researcher could be implicated in excessive subjectivity and in privileging one position”. This was particularly the case in Chapter Six, which considers some of the various campaign approaches. In collaboration with my supervisors, I ensured that my proximity to the community did not cause me to favour some perspectives or arguments over others. In doing so, I outlined the various stances and the advantages and disadvantages of the positions, while refraining from personally criticising any individuals or participants.

### **3.4.2. Re-Presenting the Participants**

Although all qualitative researchers need to reflect on their positionality as researchers, this is a particularly pressing ethical issue when dealing with participants who, as I show throughout this thesis, have been marginalised, ignored, and “deauthorised, dismissed as neither credible nor coherent” (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996: 9), both prior to the fire and

in the aftermath. It is therefore important not to overstate my closeness to the participants and to instead emphasise that the role of the researcher in this thesis is not one of “representing” but rather “re-presenting”. This distinction was made initially by Marx but developed by Spivak (1986) to describe the tension between “re-presenting” a subject (describing them or speaking “about” them) and “representing” them (acting as a proxy or speaking “for” them’) (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996). In this study, I used qualitative interviews to understand “the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of people’s experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Kvale, 1996: 1). It is important to take on this role as a researcher and to emphasise this distinction between “re-presenting” and “representing” for several reasons.

Firstly, and most obviously, although I did grow up locally and within social housing, I am a white woman who, at the time of data collection, had lived in Manchester for 6 years, did not survive the fire, or suffer any bereavement, and therefore cannot fully understand or speak on behalf of those who did. Furthermore, the fire has also been linked to discrimination on multiple fronts by the lawyers at the Public Inquiry, with Leslie Thomas QC urging the Inquiry to consider how racial discrimination played a role in the fire and Danny Friedman QC later describing the fire as a “landmark of discrimination against disabled and vulnerable people” (Friedman, 2021: 52). Overall, then, while I share some social and structural similarities with the residents of Grenfell Tower and the local community, my whiteness produces a certain separation from the majority of those who were killed, survived, or suffered bereavement from the fire.

Regarding the sample itself and issues of its internal difference and representability, it includes a range of individuals from different genders, racially-minoritised groups, organisations, campaign groups, and cultures, whose differences are significant and should not be represented as one “community”. Throughout the study, several participants problematised the label “North Kensington community” by emphasising that there is not just one community but a vast number of communities. This thesis, then, treads the fine line between presenting what is shared among the Grenfell community and communities, and the different experiences of individuals, according to differences of personal circumstance and those of more structural determination, among people, who come from different social groups, organisations, and areas within North Kensington. In this thesis, I therefore use the term “North Kensington community” to broadly describe the residents

that reside in North Kensington, rather than to capture a group that shares the same attitudes or interests.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the philosophical and methodological approach to data collection and analysis used in the research. I described how the epistemological and ontological positioning of critical realism and its key ideas around context have loosely guided the data collection techniques used in this thesis. The method of data collection used in this study was twenty-four semi-structured interviews in combination with different secondary sources, including the mass media, the Public Inquiry, and published reports from the government and local council. I provided a step-by-step description of the interview process, including how I recruited the interview sample, how I prepared for each interview, and the advantages and disadvantages of remote interviews that I experienced. Regarding data analysis, I drew upon critical realism's emphasis on using contextual knowledge to produce rich and important data to bring us closer to understanding reality. In doing so, I used a flexible approach to data coding, where I produced both a priori and emergent codes. Finally, I described some of the advantages and disadvantages of my "blurred" position as a researcher and North Kensington resident and how I managed the consequences of this positioning. I then complicated the idea of representing the participants and brought attention to their internal differences. I now turn to the first of my four empirical chapters, which interprets my participants' experiences and understandings of the causes of the fire in relation to analytic themes of neoliberalism, organised state abandonment, and marginalisation.

## Chapter Four

### Profit Before People:

#### Neoliberalism, Organised State Abandonment, and Marginalisation as Causes of the Grenfell Tower Fire

Before the refurbishment that took place between 2014 and 2016, Grenfell Tower was a concrete building designed to contain fire through compartmentation. This meant that if a fire started in a flat, by design it should stay in that flat, allowing firefighters to attend and extinguish it. On the night of the fire, however, compartmentation was broken, and the fire was able to travel from floor 4 to the top of the 24-storey building within 20 minutes. It was the task of Phase 1 of the Public Inquiry to determine the direct causes of the fire and the fire spread. It concluded that the fire started as the result of a faulty fridge inside flat 16 and that the principal reason for the flames spreading so rapidly up, down, and around the building was “the presence of the aluminium composite material (ACM) rainscreen panels with polyethylene cores, which acted as a source of fuel” (Moore-Bick, 2019:12).

Underneath the ACM cladding, which was manufactured by French-firm Arconic, were combustible “polyisocyanurate (PIR) and phenolic foam insulation boards”, which the Inquiry found similarly “contributed to the rate and extent of vertical flame spread” (Sir Martin Moore-Bick, 2019: 12). Most of the insulation was Celotex’s RS5000, while a smaller amount of insulation was Kingspan’s K15.

Just a year before the Grenfell Tower fire, the original architect of the tower stated that its design and solid concrete construction meant it “could last another 100 years” (Gras, 2016 *in* Hodkinson, 2019: 2). However, the Grenfell Tower Regeneration Project, led by the KCTMO and overseen by the RBKC, transformed Grenfell Tower from what Sam Stein QC, representing the bereaved and survivors, described as a “safe vertical village” to a “combustible death trap” (Stein, 2018: 85). While the Public Inquiry has established the immediate causes of the fire and fire spread, this empirical chapter goes further to critically examine the long-term causes of the fire and to determine how and why combustible cladding and insulation was attached to Grenfell Tower. Unlike the Inquiry, which has a narrow remit set by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, this chapter builds on Chapter Two, which sets out the complex social and historical context in which the fire can be studied, to examine what critical realists understand as the “empirical” reality of the fire, through data obtained by qualitative interviews, and the “actual” reality of the fire, through secondary data sources. By accounting for the real and actual domains of reality, this chapter maps out the



multiple and interacting causes of the fire, arguing that not one single cause bears ultimate responsibility. It also gives greater insight into the “real” domain, and particularly the global, political and economic structures that caused the fire, and produced the predominantly racialised and working-class victims of the fire.

In this chapter, I introduce a tension that reoccurs throughout the thesis concerning whether the circumstances surrounding the fire are exceptional to Grenfell or unexceptional. On the one hand, I suggest that the material and political causes of the fire, namely neoliberalism and organised state abandonment, are not exceptional to Grenfell, and, as fires like Lakanal House show, suggest that the fire could have happened elsewhere. On the other hand, as I introduce in Chapter One and continue to show in the final analytical stage of this chapter, the North Kensington community itself, its conflictual relationship with the council, and its resistance against super-gentrification amidst the community’s historical social polarisation beside the super-rich, makes the fire exceptional. With that being said, I argue that these experiences represent processes and struggles that happen every day throughout the country. Critical realism’s distinction between the three domains of reality is significant for navigating the tension between the exceptional or unexceptional features of the fire. By accounting for not only the “actual” domain of reality, being here, the socio-political events that produced the material causes of the fire that I argue are unexceptional, but also the “empirical” domain, I show how the same causal mechanisms produce different results.

This chapter maps out the wide-ranging causes, accounting both the exceptional and the unexceptional, to argue that not one cause bears ultimate responsibility for the fire. It is structured around three key analytic stages: neoliberalism, abandonment, and marginalisation. The first stage examines how neoliberal governance in partnership with private business led to the widespread use of combustible materials on tall residential buildings across England. In Section 4.1, I unpack how the deregulation drive that began in the 1980s enabled building regulations to become ambiguous and flexible for private business. I show how the guidance in Approved Document B (a key document outlining how to meet the building regulations) authorised the use of Arconic’s ACM cladding on tall residential buildings, while the flexibility of the document enabled the insulation manufacturers to access the tall residential market. I go on to consider the influence of the private sector and the corporate market upon the building regulations (Section 4.2) and how the privatisation of the Building Research Establishment (BRE) has transformed its relationship with the private market and its impartiality (Section 4.3). As this stage

predominantly focuses on the topic of building regulations, it mostly draws upon secondary data sources to understand reality at the “actual” domain.

In Section 4.4, I move onto the second analytical stage. Here, I build upon the arguments made so far to argue that the fire was caused by a political strategy that I consider organised state abandonment. Put simply, organised state abandonment is a product of the neoliberal ideology that puts profit before people. As I discussed in Chapter Two, organised state abandonment describes how “the state and capitalist interests” abandon its welfare and social responsibilities in the pursuit of profit in a way that subsequently “render[s] particular groups of people vulnerable to precarity, injury and premature death across multiple scales” (Bhandar, 2018: 9). Here, it is those who live in tall residential buildings who, as I show, are predominantly working-class and racially minoritised. As the next analytic stage shows, the context for organised state abandonment was set by the central government, and it can be traced down to the decisions made locally concerning North Kensington and the Lancaster West Estate.

The final analytical stage is marginalisation. In the lead up to the fire, the residents of North Kensington were subject to multiple forms of marginalisation, due to the council’s vested interest in reclaiming public land for regeneration and privatisation (Section 4.5) and its institutional indifference towards the North Kensington residents (Section 4.6). In Section 4.7, I argue that Grenfell’s cladding itself was a way of concealing and hiding Grenfell Tower and its residents from the borough’s richer inhabitants. Section 4.8 shows how the RBKC, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), and the contractors involved in the refurbishment silenced, ignored, and disregarded the voices of the Grenfell Tower residents.

Section 4.9 concludes this chapter by drawing together the strands of my argument to show how the Grenfell Tower fire is the result of “real” political and economic structures dependent on profit accumulation, including the government, RBKC, and KCTMO, that give rise to “actual events” (deregulation, privatisation, and housing financialisation policies) that produce the empirical experiences of marginalisation and abandonment. I develop existing analyses of the fire by tackling each domain of reality, reflecting how the causes of the fire are produced in the “real” and the “actual” domains, yet they experienced in the empirical. Overall, I argue that the fire was caused by the implementation of organised state abandonment, both nationally, through the government and private

business, and locally, by the RBKC, the KCTMO, and the contractors, who overlooked the welfare and safety of the Grenfell residents in favour of profit. Through an analysis of the “actual” and the “empirical”, I argue that Grenfell’s refurbishment and its emphasis on the building’s appearance was a consequence of gentrification, housing financialisation and locally adopted neoliberal policies that have produced a context of marginalisation for the working-class and racialised residents of North Kensington.

#### **4.1. Deregulation**

Although the Inquiry found “compelling evidence” that Grenfell Tower’s external walls “failed to comply” with the building regulations (Moore-Bick, 2019: 13), this does not show the full picture. In accordance with the first analytical stage that I described above, this section shows how the widespread use of combustible cladding and insulation on residential buildings has resulted from decades of building deregulation. Even though Grenfell’s external walls were technically non-compliant, the state, in “the rush to deregulate, to cut costs for business”, purposefully allowed “the statutory provisions for fire safety” to become “poorly defined and their interpretation uncertain” (Bhandar, 2018: 4). In relation to Grenfell Tower, the building relations became so vague and ambiguous that it was possible to consider dangerous and combustible materials as compliant.

Since the neoliberal turn, deregulation has significantly reduced the number of building regulations in the UK and allowed them to be increasingly ambiguous and flexible. Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) traces the causes of Grenfell’s combustible cladding and insulation back to the Thatcher governments (1979–1990), which “changed building regulations from prescriptive to performance based” so that the regulations set broad outcomes that buildings must achieve, rather than outlining rules or a list of banned materials. The Building Regulations 1985 revised previous legislation and ultimately cut the regulations from 306 to 25 pages, and this meant that the regulations no longer included technical details but instead turned them into generic statements. In relation to Grenfell Tower, the current building standards around fire spread across the outside of the building are covered in one sentence that has not changed since the 1980s: “The external walls of the building shall adequately resist the spread of fire over the walls and from one building to another having regard to the height, use and position of the building” (HM Government, 2021). It is on this basis that Sir Martin Moore-Bick concluded that Grenfell Tower’s external walls were not compliant with the regulations because “they did not adequately resist the spread of fire having regard to the

height, use and position of the building. On the contrary, they actively promoted it” (Moore-Bick, 2019: 13). However, alternative analyses show that the cladding was lawful because of the ambiguity within Approved Document B at the time of the fire<sup>7</sup>.

As performance-based building regulations are often vague, “approved documents” are provided as official guidance on how to comply with the regulations. Legally, one cannot be held liable for breaching the regulations if the requirements outlined in the approved documents are met (Apps, 2018). Approved Document B provides fire safety guidance about external walls and insulation, and it is this guidance that enabled highly combustible materials to be permitted on residential buildings. As Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) tells me, the document is “not up to scratch” or “fit for purpose”, as “there’s so many different routes to compliance of how a building firm is allowed to put flammable cladding and flammable materials on the outside of a building”. In Approved Document B, there are two routes to compliance with building regulations: the linear route and the large-scale testing route. In the next two sub-sections, I critically assess each route to compliance outlined in Approved Document B to show how it is culpable for the use of combustible materials on tall residential buildings.

#### **4.1.1. Approved Document B: The Linear Route**

The linear route states that the “external surfaces or walls” must be of “Class 0” or “Euroclass B” standard (HM Government, 2010: paragraph 12.6) and the “insulation product, filler” used on buildings above 18 metres “should be of limited combustibility” (HM Government, 2010: paragraph 12.7). However, there are several inconsistencies with the various classifications (Class 0, Euroclass B, and limited combustibility) in the linear route. Although Arconic’s ACM cladding was supposedly classified as a Class 0 standard, it cannot be considered the Euroclass B standard, nor is it of limited combustibility. As this shows, Class 0 is a significantly easier requirement to meet than Euroclass B, and a material does not need to be of limited combustibility to be Class 0.

The “limited combustibility” standard is rigorous and requires the materials to survive in a 750°C furnace for two hours (Apps, 2018). It is therefore an exceptionally harder requirement to meet than Class 0 and Euroclass B. This standard alone would prohibit both

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<sup>7</sup> Approved Document B has since been revised.

the cladding and insulation used on Grenfell Tower as non-compliant. However, in terms of the cladding, Approved Document B sets out that this standard is only required for “insulation product, filler” (2010: paragraph 12.7). Despite this, on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2017, just eight days after the fire, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) wrote to social landlords suggesting that the standard for cladding was limited combustibility, stating that “the core (filler) within an aluminium composite material (ACM) is an ‘insulation material/product’, ‘insulation product’, and/or ‘filler material’ as referred to in Paragraph 12.7... of Approved Document B” (Dawes, 2017: 2). This could suggest that the cladding was not compliant; however, as Dr. Barbara Lane wrote in her expert report to the Public Inquiry, “no guidance is provided on which regime takes precedence when differing classifications are obtained for the same material or product” (Lane, 2018: para 2.29.3). The lack of guidance on this issue means that it is admissible to use Class 0 products, even if they are not considered Euroclass B or of limited combustibility.

The Inquiry revealed damning evidence to show that Arconic, the manufacturers of Grenfell’s cladding, were aware of the combustibility of their product, yet continued to actively target countries with weaker regulations. Specifically, the weak Class 0 standard meant that Arconic targeted the UK with products that were banned in other countries. Arconic viewed the United Kingdom as the “PE [polyethylene] market”, as the product was banned from other countries, including Poland, Russia, and Kazakhstan (Apps, 2021). Claude Schmidt, representing Arconic, revealed in his evidence to the Inquiry that he believed Arconic was able to sell their product to use upon the UK’s high-rises because of this lower Class 0 standard (ibid.). The Inquiry also revealed a report written by Claude Schmidt responding to the failure of a test in 2011, which stated: “For the moment, even if we know that PE material in cassette has a bad behaviour exposed to fire, we can still work with national regulations who are not as restrictive” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 67, 2020). The reference to national regulations that are not as restrictive would apply to the UK. In fact, the PE material in the cassette form that they describe here was used on Grenfell Tower.

The government was aware of the dangers posed by the Class 0 classification as early as 1991; however, investigations by *Inside Housing* reveal that the government deliberately concealed and played down this information (Apps, 2021a). This came after the government funded the installation of a pilot cladding system on Knowsley Heights, an

eleven-storey tower block in Merseyside, as part of the government's "Estates Action programme". In 1991, just weeks after the building was installed with a Class 0 rainscreen cladding system, a fire started outside the base of the building and rapidly travelled vertically up the tower. In response to the failed pilot system at Knowsley Heights, archival data revealed by Inside Housing revealed that an official from Housing Management Estates Action (HMEA), the government team that administered the programme, requested to "play down the issue of the fire" (ibid.). Another letter written by the same individual wrote that the tower was "overclad using techniques relatively new to public sector housing in this country but which are being replicated on other blocks" (ibid.). From this letter, we can conclude that the government did not want the health and safety risks of cladded buildings to interfere with the Estates Action programme. At this stage, it is notable that the residents directly affected by the decision were those living on estates.

Following the Knowsley Heights Fire in 1991 and another cladding fire at Garnock Court in 1999, a committee of MPs investigated the risk of cladding fires and concluded that ministers should scrap the Class 0 standard entirely and require all systems to be non-combustible or to pass a large-scale test (Apps, 2022). The report wrote that "we do not believe that it should take a serious fire in which many people are killed before all reasonable steps are taken towards minimising the risks" (Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, 1999: para 19). The Class 0 standard was amended in 2019, around twenty years later, following the Grenfell Tower fire that killed 72 people.

The Inquiry found that the government was warned as early as 2000 that the UK could "become a 'dumping ground' for inferior products that could not be sold in other member states" as the result of the Class 0 classification (Millett, 2022: 10). Despite this, the government resisted changing to the Euroclass standard so that they wouldn't limit the market. In the early 2000s, the UK was supposed to transition the test standards to harmonise with the rest of Europe; however, the government refrained from introducing Euroclass A2 as an alternative to Class 0 because it would "severely restrict the market choice in terms of materials for specifiers" (Millett, 2022:128). The Inquiry also found that a representative of the plastic insulation industry also lobbied against switching to Euroclass B, emphasising that many of its member products would only achieve Euroclass C or Euroclass D and therefore would be "prevented from entering the market" if the

country required Class B as a minimum (ibid.). Euroclass B is tougher than Class 0 but still permits some combustible materials. While there were documents revealed in the Inquiry that suggested there would be a transition period to the European standards from 2002, where after three years, new products entering the market would be required to meet Euroclass B, this was never introduced. At the time of the fire, Approved Document B wrote that materials must be either Class 0 or Euroclass B.

#### **4.1.2. Approved Document B: Large-Scale Testing**

According to the linear route alone, the insulation used on Grenfell Tower would be classified as non-compliant. The large-scale testing route, however, offers an alternative route to compliance for materials that do not meet the standards set out in the linear route. While the Class 0 standard authorised the use of combustible cladding on tall residential buildings, the large-scale testing route is responsible for how combustible insulation came to be used on buildings above 18 metres. Not only does the Class 0 standard already permit some combustible materials, but failing that, manufacturers can also manipulate large-scale tests to get their products onto buildings. This shows how both routes to compliance outlined in Approved Document B are flawed and inadequate in ensuring fire safety.

The second route to compliance involves a large-scale test that is known as “BS 8414” and involves setting fire to a model wall to see if the fire spreads. If it passes this test, the manufacturers can market this type of insulation for use on high-rises (Apps, 2018). Often, many combinations of materials are not physically tested at all but instead undertake what is understood as a ‘desktop study’, where they use data from previous tests and consider whether a new combination would pass if it were tested (ibid.). Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) references both large-scale tests and desktop studies to highlight the extensive number of ways that companies can attempt to get combustible materials onto buildings:

If the materials aren’t right, then they look at a different route by adding different stuff to it to make it okay and if that still doesn’t work, they do a mock up. If that still doesn’t work, they do a computer-based study \*laughs\* until they find a way to get their products, to make money, onto the side of a building.

Dave’s comment here about “adding stuff to make it okay” is evidenced in the Inquiry, which revealed that several large-scale tests have been rigged by manufacturers, arguably

in collaboration with the Building Research Establishment (BRE) (see Brady, 2021). Kingspan's K15 insulation had been paired with cement particle board cladding panels, while Celotex's insulation was paired with additional fire-resisting boards made of magnesium oxide (Apps, 2021b). Neither of these boards reflect how the insulation would be installed in the real-life application and instead were only included so that they passed the large-scale test.

The large-scale fire test was introduced in 2006, following the amendment of Approved Document B. Before 2006, Approved Document B clearly banned combustible cladding and insulation on buildings above 18 metres high. However, in 2006, there were changes to the wording of Approved Document B that meant combustible insulation could be permitted if it passed a large-scale fire test. This subsequently led to the widespread use of combustible insulation on tall buildings. As the former 2000 version of Approved Document B meant that combustible insulation was prohibited, Kingspan, Celotex, and other companies that mainly produce plastic-based insulation could not access the high-rise market until the 2006 version. Between 2012 and 2016, with the new guidance and legislation, the market value of the main plastic insulation products in the UK doubled (Tubb, 2018). In 2015, the trade magazine *Urethanes Technology International* reported that Celotex's technical director Rob Warren had told them regulatory change was the "greatest driver" of plastic insulation sales (*Urethanes Technology International*, 2015, cited in Tubb, 2018).

An investigation by *Inside Housing* revealed that the lobby group representing the plastic insulation industry, the British Rigid Urethane Foam Manufacturers Association (BRUFMA), supported the changes in the wording of Approved Document B (Apps, 2017). Both Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU, 2021: 18) are critical of the influence that the British Rigid Urethane Foam Manufacturers Association (BRUFMA) had on Approved Document B. However, Simon Storer, the chief executive of the Insulation Manufacturers Association (IMA), formerly BRUFMA, responded to these findings with the comment that BRUFMA was "extremely small" in 2005 and it would be "remiss" to suggest they were particularly influential in such lobbying (Apps, 2018). Despite this, Sky News has since revealed that IMA advertises it is "influencing UK and local government, specifying authorities, relevant approval and certification bodies", and has "high levels of involvement in the drafting and regular revision of British and European Standards [and] the Building Regulations" (Tubb,



2018). At the time of writing (March 2024), the IMA website lists a range of “benefits of membership” which include the “opportunity to influence Government bodies and NGOs via a variety of committees” and “direct input into relevant British Standards committees” (Insulation Manufacturers Association, n.d.).

While this section has introduced how the insulation industry has lobbied the government against switching from Class 0 to Euroclass B, the next section will go further to demonstrate the extent of influence that corporate lobbying, and therefore private interest, has upon the government and building regulations. It will show how private lobbying has contributed to regulation changes to Approved Document B, which, as it has been shown, enabled the use of combustible materials on residential buildings.

## **4.2. Corporate Lobbying**

In conversation with me, Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) argues that the impact of the Kyoto Agreement and the lobbying of the insulation industry is something that does not receive enough recognition while discussing Grenfell Tower. Lowkey argues that “a lot of people make the assumption that the cladding was only put there for aesthetic purposes” but fail to recognise how “the reason for cladding being put on buildings is the Kyoto agreement, and the Kyoto agreement stipulated that Britain had to lower their carbon emissions”. As Lowkey suggests, the government has aimed to reduce heat loss by insulating new and refurbished buildings since the Kyoto agreement of 1997, and there is evidence that corporate lobbying has played a key role in this (Tubb, 2018). Following this, Lowkey argues, the lobby group BRUFMA, who represent the plastic insulation industry, “approached the British government and said, ‘Look we will insulate all of your buildings, just subsidize us to do so’ and so, what that meant was that numerous buildings across the country were insulated in, many cases in stuff that, because of deregulation since the Thatcher years, was flammable.”

In 2011, for example, the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) invited representatives from the insulation industry onto a Green Deal Committee to look for ways to push insulation into more homes (Tubb, 2018). The committee was made up of ten firms and construction industry groups, including four BRUFMA members, one of whom was Celotex, the manufacturer of the insulation used on Grenfell Tower (ibid.). Writing about

the DECC, Celotex's technical director Rob Warren headed a (now-deleted) post with "Celotex enter government", boasting that his position in the committee meant he was "working inside government" to "shape this critical policy enabling the insulation industry to maximise the benefits" (ibid.).

The impact of the building industry and manufacturers on government legislation goes beyond corporate lobbying. Deregulation has meant that there is what Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) describes to me as an "incestuous relationship between industry and government". Deregulation, he says, "entails the penetration of regulatory bodies by captains of industry", "which reaches the point where you can literally have the technical director of one of the companies involved in the fire advising the government on building regulations". Here, Lowkey specifically discusses Celotex, the company that made the combustible insulation used on Grenfell Tower and is part of the French multinational Saint-Gobain Group. Mark Allen is the technical director of Saint-Gobain and was a member of the (now-abolished) Building Regulations Advisory Committee (BRAC) at the time of the fire. The BRAC was a "statutory advisor body" that "provides expert advice to the Secretary of State on building regulations or related matters" (BRAC, n.d.). So, Lowkey explains, the technical director of the group responsible for manufacturing Grenfell's combustible insulation was also an expert advisor to the government on building regulations. This relationship reflects a clear conflict of interest and is an example of how neoliberal governance has allowed "the border between state authority and private provider and their corresponding legal duties [to] become blurred and difficult to discern" (Bhandar, 2018: 2).

### **4.3. Privatisation of the British Research Establishment**

After 75 years of being a building research agency for the government, the Building Research Establishment (BRE) was privatised in 1997. This meant that the BRE was now required to win work from commercial clients and bid for government research contracts to gain funding. Subsequently, as Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) puts it, this meant "the people doing the testing were being paid by the people whose product they were testing. So, in order to make money, they had to make sure enough of these things passed the test". The Fire Brigades Union (2019: 43) argues that this transformed the relationship so that "contractors requiring tests [were] treated as 'clients'", where "the compromised nature of the relationship was highlighted by BRE sponsorship of the cladding industry awards". What emerged with the privatisation of the BRE, therefore, is a conflict of interest that puts

public safety at risk. As Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) describes:

When you privatise a body that is meant to be testing stuff, it goes from having a more antagonistic relationship with business to a more amicable relationship and sort of camaraderie between it in business, which says that we will work with you to get your materials onto buildings, rather than we're making sure that your materials are safe to be on buildings.

Both Celotex and Kingspan went to the BRE to take multiple large-scale tests, and the Inquiry has revealed evidence of a compromised relationship between them. For example, footage was shown of Phillip Clark, representing the BRE, appearing to offer advice to Celotex during its first test on a system containing its RS5000 insulation in 2014 (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 95, 2021). This is problematic as Phillip Clark, as a representative of BRE, should not have been offering any advice as he is supposed to be an impartial examiner assessing the products compliance with Approved Document B. This, therefore, is evidence of a shift from an antagonistic relationship to an amicable relationship with the corporate client. The Inquiry also revealed that the BRE wrote three reports for Kingspan to support its case that their combustible product was suitable for high rises and excluded the fact that the test was a failure from the report (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 97, 2021).

There is also evidence that the BRE's vested interest in gaining contracts for large-scale testing influenced the changes to the 2000 version of Approved Document B. Combustible materials were completely banned from the 1992 version of Approved Document B; however, as an Inquiry into the fire at Garnock Court in 1999 began, the newly privatised BRE was developing its large-scale testing method and insisted to the government that it would "certainty make sense" to use the test for all forms of cladding (Apps, 2018). This led to a review of Approved Document B and later the endorsement of the full-scale fire test 'Fire Note 9' by the 2000 guidance. Put simply, combustible cladding was entirely banned from being used on high-rise buildings prior to 2000; however, following the BRE's encouragement, it became permissible if it passed a full-scale fire test that was undertaken by the BRE. This test, however, was only for external surfaces that didn't meet the requirements of the approved document, and combustible insulation was therefore still banned. As it was mentioned earlier in this chapter, it was in 2006 that large-scale testing was introduced for insulation.

Thus far, I have argued that the widespread use of combustible materials on tall residential is a consequence of neoliberalism's deregulation drive, which has enabled ambiguity and

flexibility. Although Sir Martin Moore-Bick outlawed Grenfell's cladding as uncompliant, I have described how Grenfell's ACM cladding attained a Class.0 certification and how Arconic purposefully marketed its combustible products to the UK due to the weak regulations. There is also evidence that the government was aware of the shortcomings of Class 0 but refused to switch to European standards to prevent limiting the market. I show how large-scale testing has enabled the manipulation of tests, as manufacturers like Kingspan and Celotex have marketed their products as being suitable for cladding systems that they were not suitable for. I considered evidence of a questionable relationship between the government and the private sector and between the BRE and its private clients.

#### **4.4. Organised State Abandonment: 'A neoliberal system that puts profit before people'.**

The Grenfell Tower refurbishment was dependent on a collaboration between global private interests and neoliberal governance. The prosperity of this collaboration relied upon organised state abandonment and the increased vulnerability of those who rely on the state for protection. This section will argue that the fire was caused by what Moyra (local resident and campaigner, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021) describes as "a neoliberal system that puts profit before people". Here, I use the concept "organised state abandonment" to describe a political agenda that pursues profit with a proactive "callous disregard for the value of human life" (Bhandar, 2022: n.p.).

The longstanding objective of building regulations is to ensure the health and safety of people in and around buildings. In stark contrast to this, the deregulation agenda abandons the objective of health and safety to make business more profitable, efficient, and flexible. Without enacting organised state abandonment as a mode of management, the success of the private market would be limited. For example, if the state legislated rigorous building safety regulations to protect those who lived in tower blocks, it would severely restrict the materials and corporations who could access the high-rise market. As Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) put it to me, the deregulation policies that preceded the fire were "*obviously* not done for safety reasons". Dave tells me, "You look at the government, and then you look at the building industry, and it's all about money. They just want to get their stuff on the side of the buildings, and they will find any way they can with complete disregard for fire safety". This is not least exemplified by the Building Regulations 1985,

which can be considered one of the earliest causes of the Grenfell Tower fire. As mentioned previously, this policy cut the building regulations from 306 to 25 pages to allow flexibility for businesses, and fire safety became secondary to this aim. Behind this policy was the proactive and strategic abandonment of the populations that rely on the state to set and enforce protection and security (Bhandar, 2022).

The government's refusal to amend the building regulations to ensure fire safety is evidence of organised state abandonment. A chilling illustration of this lies in the similarities between the fire at Lakanal House in 2009 and Grenfell in 2017, which include the issues around combustible cladding, the "stay put" advice and internal breaches contributing to smoke and fire spread. The fact that the warnings were ignored and the regulations were not amended "tells us something about how we are governed, and the priority our political and economic system places on human life – especially when those lives are likely to be poor, immigrant and from ethnic minority backgrounds" (Apps, 2022: 3). Like Grenfell, the vast majority of the Lakanal House victims (five out of the six fatalities) were from ethnic minorities. Even though deregulation has proven to be fatal, Chapter Seven shows how the deregulation agenda is still at the forefront of government policy, which continues to "cut red tape" and reduce regulations. This is an example of how neoliberal governance actively disregards certain populations as collateral damage as it pursues deregulation and privatisation at any cost (Bhandar, 2022).

Organised state abandonment does not target all populations equally. At the heart of these policies is "the calculated indifference towards working class and racialised people" by "politicians, policymakers and corporate lobbyists who have pursued a deregulation and privatisation agenda at any cost" (Bhandar, 2022: n.p.). Consider here the Class 0 standard. As I have already discussed, the government withheld from scrapping or modifying the Class 0 standard to preserve and protect the private market. By refusing to address this issue, the government actively withheld from protecting the lives of those who were being put at risk by combustible cladding materials. Here, it is important to consider what lives were "marked for disposability" (Nadj, 2019:1) by the government's organised state abandonment, namely, the demographic of those who live in high-rise buildings. The English Housing Survey (EHS) (2018) reports that local authorities or housing associations own the majority of high-rise flats, while black and minority ethnic groups and households in the 20% most deprived areas of England were more likely to live in flats (EHS, 2018: 13). In addition to this, and as mentioned in Chapter Two, Dorling (2011) found that most

children living above the fourth floor in tower blocks in England are black or Asian, even though the English population is 82% white. Although there has been a rapid increase in luxury high-rise flats, Dorling (2011: 2) highlights how “high-rise living with children in Britain is almost always not luxury living. Most of these children are poor”. By making the proactive decision to withhold from addressing the deficient Approved Document B, those who are “racialised, migrant, working class, those living with disabilities, single mothers [...] in their manifold intersections” were “rendered absent, invisible, and worthless in the minds of those making the decisions” (Bhandar, 2018: 5).

The next section marks the beginning of the final analytical stage of this chapter. Here, I continue to argue that the national government set the precedent for organised state abandonment to be adopted locally. It is therefore possible to trace how it has been implemented in North Kensington. As Bhandar powerfully argues:

The council, the KCTMO and all the private contractors involved in the refurbishment simply did not have sufficient regard for the lives of the people living in Grenfell Tower. But this is only the case because they are operating in a context created by state and private actors – one characterised by the organised abandonment of state responsibilities to citizens and residents to provide basic levels of safety and security (2022: n.p.).

In the next analytical section, I build on the arguments I have made in this chapter so far to show how residents of North Kensington and Grenfell Tower have been disregarded, marginalised, and abandoned in favour of profit. I argue that the council, KCTMO and private contractors have subjected the Grenfell residents to organised state abandonment, which has trickled down from national government policies to local decision-making. In the next section, I turn from the “unexceptional” and generalisable causes of the fire to the “exceptional”. This is a key contribution of the thesis, as I argue that analysing the Grenfell Tower fire as simply an unexceptional outcome of neoliberal deregulation, privatisation, and outsourcing masks the intersectional role of class, race, and religion operating locally as a driving force behind the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, a structurally safe building, with deadly materials. In doing so, I show the importance of accounting for both the “actual”, as I have done so far, and the “empirical”, which I draw upon for the remainder of the chapter.

#### **4.5. ‘They’re like a group of property developers’: The Council’s Regeneration of North Kensington.**

As I discuss in Chapter One, North Kensington has been experiencing an ongoing process of property investment, land-value inflation, and gentrification. The gentrification of North Kensington and its title as a “super prime residential district” (Savills, 2016: 2) has transformed how the council manages land and property in the area and the working-class and racialised residents who live there. Eddie Daffarn (Survivor, Grenfell United, 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021), who was the co-author of the Grenfell Action Group blog, understands gentrification as a leading cause of the fire. He uses the metaphor that “if you threw a dart at a dartboard and you came up with gentrification, you’ve got the bullseye”, and this is because of “how we were then treated by the Council, what they thought of us”.

Most of the long-term residents that I spoke to reflected on the material and symbolic changes that have occurred in North Kensington over the period they lived there. One milestone of gentrification that several participants commented on was the release of the film *Notting Hill* (1999), which has been criticised for its representation of the area and its exclusion of the cultural and economic diversity that characterises the area (The Guardian, 1991; The Octavia Foundation, 2011). Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) argues that the film “whitewashed an area with a rich history of resistance” and that this “served an important purpose” in making Notting Hill “more appetising to property portfolio investment”. He continues to argue that RBKC was “the main vehicle” for making Notting Hill more appealing for portfolio investments and this has meant that a lot of housing “has been replaced with global capital”, where housing was “replaced with portfolio investments, the purchasing of property as something to sell on for massive profit”. Prime property prices increased in Notting Hill by 66% within the five years that followed the year 2000 (Savills, n.d.). Although the gentrification of North Kensington pre-existed the film, it “became both a representation of the ongoing change, as well as [...] an actor in its own right. The film became part of the reconstruction of urban space, from an immigrant working-class area to an upper middle-class area” (Widmark, 2015: 144). The reconstruction of urban space described here has real consequences for the existing residents, and I argue that the fire is evidence of this.

In *One Kensington*, Emma Dent Coad, a long-standing RBKC councillor since 2006, argues that the council has been “100% complicit in driving up the cost of housing” (2022:

94), insofar as it has become “rampantly developer-friendly, focusing its energies on inflating land and property prices while supporting a process of managed decline of much of our social housing to soften up residents for more drastic change” (2022: 97).

Significantly, Rock Fielding-Mellen, who was deputy council leader at the time of the fire and oversaw housing and regeneration at RBKC, has run a property development company since 2009, and during his time at RBKC, he was often treated to dinners and entertainment by property lobbyists (Booth, 2021). This is indicative of the blurred or “incestuous” relationship between the RBKC councillors and the private property market.

As the value of property and land in North Kensington faces ongoing and rapid inflation, many of my participants point to the council’s interest in reclaiming public land and social housing to privatise or regenerate for financial gain. As I describe in Chapter Two, housing financialisation has transformed property into a mechanism of financial gain (Rolnik, 2019), and neoliberal reforms have transformed the role of local government, subsequently making these practices common among many councils. Since the implementation of austerity from 2010, councils are increasingly engaging in property investments to generate future income (Möller, 2017). It is important to note, however, that RBKC had vast reserves, so austerity is not a sufficient cause of its housing privatisation and regeneration, and hence also of the fire. Austerity is better seen, in this context, as a part of the broader condition wherein neoliberal outsourcing, privatisation, and cost-cutting further extended and entrenched themselves in local authorities.

Embracing the neoliberal privatisation agenda, RBKC privatised or intended to privatise several community assets that were predominantly used by the working-class community. In doing so, my participants describe how the council sold off important community spaces, subsequently leading to the physical and symbolic displacement of its working-class community. Daniel Renwick (writer, videographer, and campaigner, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021) tells me how “pre-fire, you had a very clear movement against what were the municipal buildings, what were there for the service of people for free”, and the “privatisation of these things”. As Eddie (Grenfell survivor, 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021) puts it, the Council, rather than “safe-guarding and [being] the custodians of our communities”, they would “kind of exploit our communities and find ways to take our libraries, take our colleges, take our information centres and hand them over to property developers and private education”.

Eddie was one of the founders of the Grenfell Action Group blog, which challenged the



council about many local issues concerning privatisation and marginalisation. In a blog post entitled ‘What Future for North Kensington Library?’ published on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2016, Grenfell Action Group describes the council’s proposed leasing of the library to the Notting Hill Prep School as a “blatant land grab” (2016b: para 4), which makes one “wonder if there is a single public building in North Kensington that is not at risk of being plundered by RBKC on behalf of their friends in private education or other private ventures” (2016b: para 7). The post continues to highlight the struggles that coincide with the North Kensington library:

We recall the loss of the Sir Isaac Newton Centre which was taken out of the community’s hands and sold (or leased) to another private independent school (Chepstow House), the recent loss of the Maxilla Children’s Centre, the change of use of the London Lighthouse to a private museum, the loss of Inn on the Green, the misappropriation of community space on Lancaster West Estate, the regeneration of the Silchester Estate, the continuing threat to West London Stables, etc. (ibid.)

As the blog post points out, there were several examples of how the existing working-class residents were being symbolically and materially displaced from North Kensington, which my participants believe was driven by the council’s plan to gain private contracts and make profit.

As I mentioned earlier, it is not enough to suggest that this is a consequence of the central-government austerity programme that was putting pressure on councils across the country. As Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) put it to me, “There’s no other council in London who had the level of reserves they had and [they] was holding back on them and still cutting costs on important things for community”. In March 2017, RBKC had £274 million in reserves (Syal and Jones, 2017). Yet between 2010 and 2017, RBKC cut spending on Planning by 81%, Housing by 76% and Regulatory services by 22% (Benjamin, 2017). As Cooper and Whyte (2018: 209-210) point out, the RBKC is:

One of the few local authorities in the country that has ample resources to ensure that the housing it owns is adequately maintained, and to ensure adequate levels of regulatory scrutiny in housing and building standards. Yet, instead of investing in those areas of social protection, RBKC developed a council tax rebate scheme that benefits the borough’s richest residents.

Around the same time these cost-cutting decisions were made, RBKC also gave tax rebates to the richest residents in the borough. In 2014, RBKC gave a £100 tax rebate to residents paying the top rate of tax just weeks before local elections, which the leader of the council’s Labour group, Robert Atkinson, described as “bribing the electorate with its own

money” (Syal and Jones, 2017).

In relation to social housing, Eddie tells me that the council wanted to “reclaim the land for their own purposes” to “build this mixed tenure of housing with property developers”. The land that the Lancaster West residents were living on was a “gold mine”, and the council “didn't even have to dig for the gold, all they had to do was just kind of marginalise and remove the people living there”, and that’s what he suggests “they were setting out to do”. Before the fire, this process was already happening at the nearby Silchester Estate. In 2015, the residents of Silchester Estate were informed about a regeneration plan that proposed to demolish the estate to build more dwellings; however, this plan was resisted by the Save Our Silchester Campaign as residents suspected they would lose their homes and be relocated elsewhere (Grenfell United, 2021). This was a fair analysis, as the Inquiry revealed that the council’s decant policy did not guarantee a Right-to-Return for residents moving out of demolished estates. Despite the former leader of RBKC, Nick Paget-Brown, arguing that it is an “over-hyped and inaccurate” accusation that the council’s “decant policy” does not include a right to return, and was therefore an act of social cleansing, the documents said the council would “seek to negotiate a right of return for as many affected residents as possible” but “this cannot be guaranteed” (Apps, 2021c). Plans to demolish the Silchester Estate have since been dropped following the fire.

There were also plans to demolish Grenfell Tower. As I discuss in Chapter Two, the Notting Barns South Draft Final Masterplan Report (Urban Initiatives, 2009: 38) describes plans to demolish Grenfell Tower as it “blights the area, provides no outdoor space for residents and is difficult to refurbish”. These plans pre-existed the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, which led some to believe that once refurbishment had occurred, the tower was safe from demolition. For example, Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) describes how the local regeneration plan was leading to the “demolishing of a lot of the flats in Latimer Road, like Silchester Estate”, but “we had always thought that Grenfell was safe because it had already had the refurbishment”. Although the demolition plans for Grenfell Tower were stalled during the refurbishment, documents revealed by the Inquiry show that there were considerations to proceed with the demolition later. In his witness statement, the former deputy leader of RBKC, Rock Fielding-Mellen, recalls how he responded to the plans to refurbish Grenfell Tower by ensuring that it would not “hinder or obstruct any future potential regeneration of the whole Lancaster West Estate” (Fielding-Mellen, 2019: 2). After being reassured that the

refurbishment project would not necessarily stop a future regeneration of the estate, emails from 2012 reveal that he wrote to Laura Johnson, RBKC's director of housing, that he is "glad to hear [she is] keeping the bigger, longer-term potential [for the estate] in mind" (ibid.).

Amid the regeneration and privatisation plans, my participants describe how the existing residents who lived in and used these spaces were treated as though they were "taking up space" and "[standing] in the way of profitable real estate ventures" (El-Enany, 2019: 58). This is evidenced by the council's apathy towards the residents who were being displaced from the area. Former MP of Kensington and Councillor Emma Dent Coad (1<sup>st</sup> April 2021) tells me about a time she heard a RBKC councillor ask, "If people can't afford to live here, why should they expect [the council] to subsidise them?". Significantly, this echoes a comment made by Robin Wales, the Mayor of Newham, who told a group of 29 mothers from Focus E15 hostel that "if you can't afford to live in Newham, then you can't afford to live in Newham". These comments reflect the wider change of rhetoric that accompanied neoliberal policies of housing privatisation and austerity, whereby council housing was transformed from a council provision to a "subsidy" and council tenants were reimagined as the "undeserving poor". As Cooper and Whyte (2018) argue, the residents of Grenfell Tower resemble the populations that were vilified by anti-welfare ideology that enabled austerity, and it is within this context of "palpable disdain for social housing tenants" that "undoubtedly amplified a culture of negligence and institutional disregard directed at Grenfell tenants" (Cooper and Whyte, 2018: 213).

The connection between this rhetoric and the Grenfell Tower fire is made in the documentary *Push* (2020). Here, a man featured in the film describes a similar comment made by a RBKC councillor, who said, "If you can't live in Notting Hill, you shouldn't be in Notting Hill". Reflecting on the comment made by the councillor, he powerfully conveys the connection between this attitude and the Grenfell Tower fire:

So, people who have lived there all their lives are just being treated like they're pieces of shit and it's wrong isn't it? Makes me sick, talking about it brings tears to my eyes. You can't just disregard them, like they're rubbish. Like in that fire, they just burnt them (*Push*, 2020).

This comment has parallels with a comment made to me by Daniel (writer, videographer, and campaigner, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021) that "they wanted Grenfell gone and then they burnt it to the ground [...] they wanted the building gone and then they clad it in 30,000 litres of

petrol”. Daniel explains how this was a feeling that was articulated by many of the young people in the area immediately after the fire. While he does not suggest that they set the building alight intentionally, it is a significant way of capturing how the level of disregard towards the working-class residents prior to the fire presented itself in the refurbishment.

Many of my participants discussed friends and family who had been displaced as the result of gentrification and the rising cost of living in North Kensington. One participant who identified as middle-class told me that she and her family were also unable to continue living there because of the expense. Some of my participants went further to argue that the council had a vested interest in the social cleansing of North Kensington. Daniel argues that the marginalisation and displacement of the North Kensington community were part of the council’s long-term plan for the borough. He suggests that the council is “duplicitous in the way that they talk because they can’t admit that their plans are to push a lot of the people who live in North Kensington out of North Kensington in 10 to 15 years”. Unlike the arguments made so far, Daniel goes further than suggesting that the council is primarily concerned with property development and argues that the council has “utter contempt” for the “community of North Kensington” and that they “look down their nose, very overtly, at working-class life and have contempt for it; they don’t want that”.

#### **4.6. Institutional Indifference: ‘It’s not that they actively hate people, it’s that they don’t care’.**

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea is marked by extremes of wealth and poverty living side-by-side, and this social polarisation is also prevalent politically. The borough is controlled by a Conservative council, and it has been since 1964, yet all the wards in North Kensington are safe Labour seats. This means that most North Kensington residents have never been represented by a local authority that they voted for. Many of my participants contextualise the fire in relation to the council’s institutional indifference towards its working-class residents in the North of the borough, often arguing that the fire and the chaotic aftermath would not have happened if it were in South Kensington. The feeling among many of the participants, as Joe (Lancaster West resident, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021) summarises, is that “there is an institutional indifference around here. It’s not that they actively hate people; it’s that they don’t care”.

Many participants point to the disconnect between the RBKC councillors and the residents of North Kensington. As Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) puts it, the local authority is “predominantly rich, white Conservatives who look after their own”. This means that the council is inclined to implement policies that benefit the wealthier residents of the borough, and this is often at the expense of its working-class, racialised, and social housing residents. April (local resident and volunteer, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2021) argues that the council responds to and represents the “richest of the rich, the most powerful people in the country [who are] sort of dipping in and out of Kensington and Chelsea, making all the decisions there”, while the only time they communicate with the North Kensington community is “by telling them what to do or consulting with them”. In contrast to the wishes of the North Kensington residents who are resisting privatisation and gentrification, the council and the residents it represents want “the extra space for the private schools, the luxury flats, and you know, expensive restaurants, and [they] genuinely would be quite happy if the rather irritating people who are clogging up the bit of prime land would bugger off to wherever else they want them to be”. The material consequences of gentrification that are described here, such as the building of luxury flats and the opening of expensive restaurants, often lead to the physical, symbolic, and psychological displacement of the existing working-class residents.

The fact that many of the RBKC councillors are white and upper middle-class has led some participants to argue that they cannot understand or represent the residents of North Kensington. Moyra (local resident, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021), for example, describes how the council is “so removed from the lives in North Kensington”:

They’ve got a huge majority in the council, the Conservatives, and they just seem to be... they have no idea what the day-to-day demands for ordinary working-class people are. You know? The leader of the council was called out; I remember when she became a councillor, “Have you ever been in a tower block?” and she had never been in a tower block. Can you believe it?

Here, Moyra shows how detached the council is from the lives of many social housing residents by using the example of Councillor Elizabeth Campbell, who admitted she had never been in a tower block before she was elected the leader of the council in 2017. Despite being elected as a replacement for Councillor Nicholas Paget-Brown, who resigned after the fire, it is controversial that his replacement was another councillor who has little experience with social housing. As April (local resident, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2021) put it to me, there is “a disconnect between the people who are making the decisions and the people who are actually living on the ground [...] It’s like it’s from two separate worlds; the

people who were largely making the decisions about what's going on have never been in a bloody tower block.”

Some participants comment that there is some class prejudice within the council. Joe (local resident, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021) argues that many of the RBKC councillors “think that they’re self-made millionaires, you know, and all everyone has to do is pull themselves up by their bootstraps and that”, and so “according to their logic, all the rest of us are just completely lazy and just poor for the sake of it”. Moyra (local resident, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021) lives on a nearby estate and similarly comments on how the council’s attitude that social housing tenants are the “undeserving poor” means that they have the attitude of “why do we have to listen to you? You have to be grateful for what you’ve got”. As I show later in this chapter, the narrative that the Grenfell residents should be grateful for their homes and their refurbishment can be traced from the council, KCTMO, to the contractors. As Moyra comments, it was often used against Grenfell residents to dismiss their complaints.

The voting structure and the ward boundaries allow the council’s marginalisation of North Kensington to become further entrenched. As Joe (Lancaster West resident, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021) tells me:

Nothing that they do around here responds to the area, and it’s simply because of the demographics and the voting structure. You know they know that they're never going to get the wards in the north of the borough for councillors, so they don’t care about the wards. You know, as long as they get voted in Chelsea, and Earls Court, and Brompton, and the rest of it, their seats are safe. So, they have no reason to feel under threat.

Most of the wards in Kensington and Chelsea are safe Conservative seats with voters who are some of the richest in the country. The Conservative Council, therefore, does not feel threatened by the Labour Party or any other parties. As Joe suggests, the Conservative Council knows that it will not win the North Kensington seats and that this will not change the overall leadership. Consequentially, the council does not feel obligated to accommodate for its working-class residents, and it is therefore able to pursue policies that are damaging for its North Kensington residents without their overall power being threatened.

#### 4.7. ‘Building Botox’: The Beautification of Grenfell Tower

Considering the gentrification, displacement, and institutional indifference that I have described so far, this section argues that the cladding panels were attached to the external walls of Grenfell Tower to beautify the building. As the initial plans for the tower’s demolition were stalled, the refurbishment was used as a temporary solution to prevent the concrete building from blighting the image of the area, particularly in relation to the newly developed Kensington Academy and Leisure Centre (*KALC*) project and the ongoing gentrification of North Kensington. The cladding transformed the image of Grenfell Tower from a council block to what would be perceived as a shiny, new-build tower resembling the other luxury flats that are transforming skylines across the world. Many participants held this view.

Many commented on the fact that the Grenfell refurbishment was prompted by concerns about the appearance of the tower beside the new Kensington Academy and Leisure Centre (*KALC*) project, which saw the building of a new school and leisure centre at the base of the tower. Considering these plans, the council and the KCTMO met to consider the refurbishment of the tower alongside the *KALC* project in 2011. Jenny (31<sup>st</sup> March 2021), a project coordinator for a charity that works with the survivors, emphasises that the “block was refurbished *purely* because the Kensington Academy was built right next to it, and it was a brand-new building, and basically, they didn’t want Grenfell to look like its poorer cousin”. Here Jenny references the terminology used in an email sent in 2011 that wrote the TMO was “keen to investigate the opportunity to clad Grenfell Tower and replace its windows”, which would “have the advantage of addressing one of its *worst property assets* and prevent it looking like a *poor cousin* to the brand-new facility being developed next door” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 52, 2020—*emphasis added*). As this email reveals, the cladding and its benefits for the appearance of the tower were mentioned in one of the very first emails regarding the refurbishment. This suggests that the appearance of the building overshadowed the issues of decline in the building.

The *KALC* project was opposed by some of the Lancaster West Estate residents at the time it was being proposed. It was around this time in 2010 that the Grenfell Action Group blog was formed, which raised concerns about numerous issues, including the obstruction to fire engines and the loss of green space at the base of the tower. Residents were also critical of the expenses being used on the *KALC* project, while the nearby Grenfell Tower was suffering from what many residents understood to be managed decline. Despite this, the

voices of the Lancaster West residents were disregarded, and the KALC project proceeded. Even though it meant Grenfell Tower was eventually refurbished for the first time since it was built, the fact that the refurbishment was provoked by concerns about the KALC project cannot be overlooked. As Rikeiya (survivor, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2020) puts it to me, the council perceived the “ugly” Grenfell Tower as an obstruction to the new school, which was built to attract the “best kids to go there” and to achieve “outstanding rating[s]” from Ofsted<sup>8</sup>. Rikeiya believes that the cladding was used as a way for the council to tackle this issue “as quick as possible, as cheap as possible”. The residents were an afterthought during the KALC project and in the planning for the Grenfell Tower refurbishment.

The 2014 Grenfell Tower Planning Application writes that the “reason” for the “materials to be used on the external faces of the building(s)” is “to accord with the development plan by ensuring that the character and appearance of the area are preserved and living conditions of those living near the development suitably protected” (RBKC, 2014: n.p.). It states that the “changes to the external appearance of the building” will “provide positive enhancements to the appearance of the area” (ibid.). Notably, it comments on the living conditions who live nearby rather than those inside Grenfell Tower, which reaffirms the argument Akala made outside the burning tower that the cladding was used to prevent “the rich people opposite” from having to “look at a horrendous block” (Channel 4 News, 2017).

Changing the appearance of the building so it has a “fresher, modern look” (Rydon, 2016 in Architects for Social Housing, 2018) is not necessarily a bad thing in itself. What makes it problematic is that it took precedence over the performance of the cladding, the interior of the building, and the living conditions of its residents. Joe (Lancaster West resident, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021) describes Grenfell’s regeneration as “building botox”, as it focused on the appearance of the building while doing little to maintain its internal functionality. He tells me that “the focus was just to make it look good. It was building botox and that was it. You know, tart it up a little, but don’t do anything about the sort of underlying issues that were in it”. Philip (25<sup>th</sup> February 2021), who attended the immediate aftermath of the fire while working as a Local Authority Liaison Officer (LALO) on behalf of Ealing Council, tells me how Grenfell’s refurbishment “wasn’t about improving the lives or the quality of living for the residents. It was nothing about that. It was about making it pretty from the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ofsted* is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. It takes responsibility for the inspection of services providing education and skills for learners, including primary and secondary schools.



outside, and 10-12 million pounds... that could have transformed the inside of that building”. As Philip suggests, that amount of money could have made vast improvements for the living conditions of the Grenfell Tower residents, but instead the Inquiry found a catalogue of health and safety issues inside the building after the regeneration was completed (Moore-Bick, 2019). Put simply, “the general appearance of the estate was improved for the benefit of wealthier inhabitants living around them” (Rozena, 2022: 11), and this was at the expense of the residents living there.

The council’s emphasis on cost-cutting, or value engineering, is an example of how the refurbishment process prioritised the aesthetic from the outside over its functionality (Rozena, 2022). Leaderbitter, the firm building the KALC project next to Grenfell Tower, was awarded the Grenfell Tower refurbishment project in 2012 for a total that was valued at over £10 million. However, the project stalled, as the estimated value was substantially above the KCTMO’s budget of £8.5 million. The council used “decisive influence” and overruled the TMO to remove the original contractor, noting in a project meeting that “value for money is now the primary driver for the project” (Apps, 2020). In 2014, the KCTMO put the contract out to tender again, and it was then awarded to Rydon for the reduced price of £8.7 million (Wilmore, 2017). The proposed cladding was later switched from the fire-retardant zinc composite rainscreen cladding to the fatal combustible ACM panels following an email from KCTMO’s project manager that wrote: “We need good costs for Councillor Rock Feilding-Mellen and the planner tomorrow at 8.45am!” (ibid.). Following this, the then-Chair of RBKC’s housing committee, Councillor Feilding-Mellen, approved changes to the contract that saw the downgrading of the cladding to make cost savings (ibid.). Grenfell’s cladding was downgraded for a total savings of £293,368 (O’Neill, 2017). Meanwhile, the Inquiry has revealed that Rock Fielding-Mellen did not ask questions about any of the properties of the cladding other than the colour (Apps, 2021d). If the refurbishment was concerned about the living conditions of its residents, one can assume that the council would have inquired further about the differences between the two materials. As Preston (2019: 34) argues, “attention is not paid to the risks for marginalised groups”.

The council’s decision to switch from fire-retardant zinc composite rainscreen cladding to the cheaper, combustible cladding is a fatal embodiment of state violence. In the “drive to cut down on cost and gentrify the area”, the council “compromised the basic health and safety of the residents” (Nadj, 2019:1), and it is significant that the residents were largely

from racialised backgrounds. Moyra (local resident, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021) argues that “you’ve got to actually look at institutional racism in decision-making, you know, from what products you buy. If you think, ‘Oh, it’s just them, we’ll buy the cheapest one’”. Racialised populations are disproportionately subject to processes of corporate-state violence (Tombs, 2020), and the Grenfell Tower refurbishment is an example of this. The Grenfell residents were “marked for disposability” (Nadj, 2019: 1) by the state and the private companies involved in the refurbishment, who, in the pursuit of profit, subordinated them to “precarity, injury and premature death across multiple scales” (Bhandar, 2018: 9). Prioritising value for money over the safety and quality of the cladding directly caused the death of 72 people, 85% of whom were from ethnic minorities.

The cladding panels were not only used to conceal the “ugly” concrete building, but my participants argue they were also used to hide its working-class and racialised community to maintain the area’s whitewashed and gentrified image. Philip (LALO, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021) argues that the cladding was used to deceive onlookers about the residents who lived in the tower, arguing that there was an “underlying tone of ‘if we make it pretty, people might believe that different people live there’. Because if it looks prettier, it must be more expensive, so there couldn’t be anyone undesirable living there”. As a result, Philip suggests, the affluent groups coming in alongside the area’s gentrification wouldn’t think “the riffraff” are “still there”.

Rikeiya (survivor, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2020) similarly argues that the refurbishment served the purpose of making the building look more aesthetically pleasing for onlookers and acting as a façade to conceal the residents inside it. The cladding was used to hide both the “ugly” concrete building and the “undesirable” residents who live within it. She highlights how the refurbishment “wasn’t good for [the residents] personally”, but “it was for everybody else”, it was to “appease shoppers at Westfield, to appease everybody around in the area that didn’t want to look at this tiresome old building”. She suggests that “there’s probably racial or classist motivations behind the renovation” and that the cladding served the purpose of putting a “façade around the building to hide what was inside it”, whether that is to hide “the state of the building inside” or “the people, the colour of people, the status of the people, and the welfare of the people inside the building”. The refurbishment was used to keep racialised and “poor” residents “hidden, masked, and cladded”, while “their daily struggles are not addressed or managed, but shielded from view” (Brabazon et al., 2019: 114–115).

In contrast to these arguments about the classed and racialised basis of the exterior beautification, two of my participants highlight how the issue of combustible cladding is not confined to working-class or racialised residents. Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) argues that the fire is a “national scandal that’s been disguised as a local scandal, meaning that they very quickly cordoned it off as something that only affected, you know, Muslims in social housing”. He emphasises the scale of the cladding crisis and how “if you were to say that cladding is disproportionately placed on buildings that working class, black and brown people live in, you’d be wrong.” He highlights that the fire could have happened in “a community in Manchester, just as easily. The fridge could have exploded in a student halls in Manchester”. In support of Lowkey’s point, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) identified 481 buildings over 18 metres tall in England with ACM cladding that appear unlikely to meet Building Regulations. This includes 226 in the private residential sector, 160 in the social sector, 56 student accommodation buildings, 31 hotels, and 8 publicly owned buildings (DLUHC, 2022: 8).

Similarly, Jackson (17<sup>th</sup> September 2021), a local consultant who works closely with both the RBKC and residents of the Lancaster West Estate, argues that inequality and class are irrelevant to understanding the fire at Grenfell Tower. He highlights that regardless of whether “that tower had been smartened up inside and wealthier people lived in it, it wouldn’t have prevented the fire. Would it?”. He also highlights how there are “loads of buildings across the country”, including private dwellings, “with the same cladding and they haven’t taken it down, have they?”. He argues that the cladding crisis is a national issue, and therefore the local politics are irrelevant to the fire, as the population living within Grenfell Tower could not have prevented the fire.

This perspective is an important addition to understanding the causes of the fire, as it emphasises the complexity of the issue of combustible cladding and its significance on both a national and global scale. Despite this, it does not negate the argument from my other participants that the cladding was used for beautification. The refurbishment of Grenfell Tower differs from the examples given by Lowkey and Jackson, as it involves the refurbishment of a physically safe council building compared to the initial construction of a new building, which includes cladding. In other words, a building that was predicted to

last another 100 years was over-clad with the declared intention of matching its aesthetic with the new KALC development and improving the image of the wider area.

#### **4.8. The Silencing of Residents' Voices.**

It is well documented that the Grenfell residents were disregarded and ignored by the KCTMO and the RBKC prior to the fire. Since 2010, the Grenfell Action Group blog warned and complained about numerous safety issues with both the KALC project and later the Grenfell Tower refurbishment. These blog posts, which are still accessible today, were immediately brought to light by the media as the fire was still burning. In the aftermath of the fire, one specific blog post became infamous, wherein the Grenfell Action Group predicted that “only an incident that results in serious loss of life of KCTMO residents will allow the external scrutiny to occur” and 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!” (Grenfell Action Group, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016). Less than a year later, this prediction came true.

When I asked Eddie (survivor, 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021, a co-founder of the blog, about his experience with the KCTMO, he told me:

I don't use these words glibly or unthinkingly, but my best description of the TMO is that they were a mini-Mafia; they were a non-functioning organization who had no concern for their residents. Their only interest was pure self-interest [...] [The TMO] is not there to look after people in social housing; it's there is there for them to get as much money and as much work as they could out of it.

The KCTMO was driven by self-interest, and profit was therefore prioritised over the welfare of the residents, which is reflective of how organised state abandonment operates at a local level. Even though the KCTMO is a non-profit ALMO, an investigation by Ebrahimi (2017) found that almost two-thirds of the £58 million income it gained at that time from rent and housing benefits was spent on management fees (£14.5 million) and interest charges (£13 million). This left only £19 million, or just £1 in £3, to be invested into maintenance and repairs for the housing stock (Ebrahimi, 2017). So, while properties in the borough were falling into what Eddie describes as a “slum-like” condition, most of the rent extracted from tenants was being spent on management fees and interest charges.

Although many of the Grenfell Action Group complaints were valid, the KCTMO responded by threatening, ignoring, and silencing them. Eddie's description of the

KCTMO as a “mini-Mafia” is indicative of its threatening and underhand behaviour. There are several examples of how the KCTMO and the council attempted to discredit, manage, or silence Eddie and the Grenfell Action Group blog. For example, following a complaint about the services on the estate and the building of the Kensington Academy in 2011, Laura Johnson, the former head of housing at RBKC, asked the KCTMO to do a tenancy status check on Eddie Daffarn (Simpson, 2021). It is fair to assume that, in response to Eddie’s complaints, Laura Johnson ordered this with the hope of challenging or threatening Eddie’s future residency in the building. From around 2013 onwards, the Grenfell Action Group blog was blocked from the KCTMO’s server to stop the staff from reading it, and in July 2013, Francis O’Connor, the second founder of the Grenfell Action Group blog, was threatened with legal action by the RBKC because of one of his blog posts concerning fire safety (Roberts, 2017).

In conversation, Eddie tells me he puts the threatening and undermining behaviour down to:

People with power being able to disempower people like myself, like Francis O’Connor, like the leaseholder group, people making legitimate knowledge-based concerns but minimising us, side-lining us, and I think the reason is because of this awful culture inside the organization that had been identified as far back as 2009 in the Memoli report that Robert Black had been brought into change.

The Memoli report that Eddie mentions here, published in 2009, highlights how deeply rooted this culture of contempt is within the KCTMO. The executive summary of the Memoli report opens with the sentence: “There are a number of tenants, leaseholders and freeholders within the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea who feel aggrieved that their problems have not been resolved by the TMO despite several years of complaining” (Memoli, 2009: 3). In terms of behavioural complaints, it was reported that “one resident commented that they felt they were treated as the “scum of the earth”, while “words such as ‘malevolent’ ‘mistrust’ ‘malaise’ and ‘treated with contempt’ were often used when describing the TMO generally” (Memoli, 2009: 27).

Although the Memoli report brought all these issues to the surface, little had changed by the time that Grenfell Tower was undergoing its refurbishment. In Eddie’s second witness statement for the Public Inquiry, he describes how the KCTMO marginalised, undermined, and stigmatised him based on individual prejudice:

The personnel held prejudiced views about how residents should behave: essentially to be thankful for their service; or effectively be damned. Their dealings with me were institutionally biased, and in many instances, animated by individual prejudice. In their eyes I was stigmatised as a ‘trouble maker’. They went out of their way to discredit me, my views were there to be managed, or discounted, or both. (Daffarn, 2020:3)

The contractors also reproduced these attitudes. Eddie gives an example of a Rydon contractor who “created this awful mess that they were proposing to do in our own flats, and we asked [the Rydon manager], would he want this in his own house? He said, ‘You know, if I was getting it for nothing, I wouldn’t mind’”. Eddie states that “this attitude, that we were getting the refurbishment ‘*for nothing*’ so shouldn’t complain, permeated the whole refurbishment process” (Daffarn, 2020: 4).

Gill (former Grenfell Tower resident, 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021) argues that you can “track a narrative of aggressive, rebel” from the KCTMO to the contractors, and what this does is “create a context in which you wouldn’t listen because you’ve created a story to discount their views”. The Inquiry has revealed that Rydon, the contractor responsible for the refurbishment, internally labelled those who raised concerns as “rebel residents” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 25, 2020). In Gill’s book *Catastrophic and Systemic Change: Learning from the Grenfell Tower Fire and Other Disasters*, she highlights how Rydon manager Simon Lawrence, while describing Grenfell’s “rebel residents” during his Inquiry hearing, “used the word ‘aggressive’ three times and ‘vocal’ nine times” and he admitted that he was “‘tipped off’ by the building manager at the KCTMO that ‘there were several vocal residents ... one of which could be extremely vocal and was quite well known by the TMO’” (2021: 161). This “extremely vocal resident” was Eddie. This narrative, Gill tells me, is one of the reasons why the Grenfell residents were silenced. Another reason why the residents were silenced, Gill tells me, is due to “the failure [of organisations] to understand how important tacit knowledge of those at the frontline is” in “the prevention of catastrophic events”.

The importance of understanding the knowledge of those at the frontline, or in this case, the resident voices, is proven by the fact that the Grenfell Action Group could have prevented many of the failures that happened on the night of the fire. This includes the issues with fire engine access, which was something that the Grenfell Action Group raised in 2013 (GAG, 2013). David O’Connell (Lancaster West resident, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2021)

argues that “a lot of the failures in a lot of the ways things were done” were the result of how “people were treated [...] They weren’t regarded as smart enough to make decisions for themselves or to be consulted properly”. I argue that the assumption that the Grenfell residents were not smart enough to be heard is the result of prejudice based on class, race, and housing tenure.

Lizzie (local resident, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2021) argues that the residualisation of social housing has transformed the way that the council and social housing providers manage social housing and its residents. She tells me that social housing is now perceived as housing the “mad, bad, or sad” and this means that housing providers often adopt a paternalistic role, which portrays them as heroes protecting the needy and vulnerable (Ejogu and Denedo, 2021). Lizzie argues that one of the fundamental causes of the fire is that there is an attitude among RBKC and central government that social housing residents “are some sort of subset of the population who need to be facilitated and supported”, and this means “they absolutely cannot interact with [social housing residents] as fellow intelligent adults”. The role of the housing provider has shifted from the “job being to provide housing, into the job being to manage the lowlife that live in housing, as they’re now perceived”. In relation to Grenfell, Lizzie relates this to “the dismissing of people’s concerns and the threatening of them with legal consequences if they didn’t shut up [...] it was like a horrible confirmation that people can be seen as not mattering”. It reflects the asymmetry in power as housing providers think they know best and therefore dismiss, ignore, or undermine the voices of the residents.

The picture is further complicated by the perceived race, ethnicity, and immigration status of the residents. As Baroness Doreen Lawrence, the mother of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager who was murdered during a racist attack in 1993, argued in *The Guardian*:

Many of the people in Grenfell Tower were immigrants or refugees whom the authorities thought they could ignore. In fact, even worse than ignoring them, it felt to me that because of their race and background these tenants were met with an attitude from authorities of “you should be grateful that you have somewhere to live at all, so stop making a fuss”. (Lawrence, 2018, para. 8)

The argument made here is twofold: firstly, Lawrence argues that race, ethnicity, and immigration status meant that the authorities felt they could ignore the Grenfell residents. This argument is supported by Sue Duggins (local resident, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021), a white

resident living in a nearby tower block that was also clad with combustible materials, who told me that:

Where I live in my block... Obviously, I've got a lot of residents who also aren't white and a lot of them, whenever anything goes wrong, they'll come to me. Because they know I can get it sorted more than they can, often because there's a language barrier; often because I think the council think, "Oh they don't really know what they're saying. So, we can get away with not doing it properly".

Secondly, Lawrence argues that race and immigration status meant that the authorities believed that the Grenfell Tower residents were "lucky" to have a home at all. As I explain in Chapter Two, Shilliam highlights how the Grenfell residents were, by multiple measures, the "deserving" poor, yet their association with a council estate and their racialisation meant "these residents were first and foremost assumed to display all the characteristics of an underclass – lazy, dishonest, parentally irresponsible" (2018: 171). The racialisation of the residents meant that the local authority, KCTMO, and contractors treated them like they should feel "lucky" to have a home, and they should be grateful that it is being refurbished "for free", as the Rydon worker commented.

This section argues that the Grenfell tenants were ignored, disregarded, and silenced by the council, KCTMO, and the contractors involved in the refurbishment. At the heart of this silencing was the idea that the Grenfell residents were not smart enough or deserving enough to be heard. This assumption is not only based on class prejudice and social housing residualisation but it is also inherently racist. Even though the Grenfell residents were the "deserving poor" across several categories (Shilliam, 2018), the race of the residents meant that they were perceived as less worthy to be listened to and heard, and they were undeserving of sufficient housing and living standards, which consequently led them to harm, injury, or a premature death (Bhandar, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I set out to examine how the research participants understand the longer-term causes of the Grenfell Tower fire and to unpack how and why combustible materials came to be used on tall residential buildings such as Grenfell Tower. Here, I considered the national policies that led to the widespread use of combustible materials on residential buildings and the local explanations for the tower's refurbishment. I argued that since the neoliberal turn in the late 1970s, national governments have aimed to shrink the state to enable the prosperity of private business, and this has involved the implementation of



organised state abandonment, which makes certain marginalised groups more vulnerable to harm and precarity (Bhandar, 2018).

The chapter began by focusing on the material and regulatory causes of the fire. In Section 4.1, I argued that the contemporary cladding crisis directly results from deregulation and the guidance that was given in Approved Document B. I critically examined the Class 0 classification, showing how it is not fit for purpose. I outlined how the linear route for compliance was not only contradictory, but it considered materials that meet the Class 0 classification as compliant (Section 4.2.1). Yet, the government was aware as early as 1992 that the Class 0 classification was not fit for purpose as it approved dangerous materials to be used on residential buildings. The second route to compliance outlined in Approved Document B, which I discuss in Section 4.2.2, was large-scale testing. There is evidence that private insulation companies have manipulated these tests so that they could approve their products for use on tall residential buildings, allegedly in collaboration with the privatised BRE (Section 4.3). The government, the manufacturers, and the BRE were all aware of the dangers of Approved Document B and the materials that were being used on tall residential buildings; however, this was hidden or played down in the pursuit of profit. I present evidence of a blurred or “incestuous” relationship between the government and the private market, which results in a clear conflict of interest that puts lives at risk (Section 4.2).

The second stage of this chapter argued that the fire was caused by neoliberal governance that depends on the implementation of organised state abandonment (Section 4.4). This is evidenced by the government’s refusal to address the dangers brought by deregulation, despite being exposed to several warnings. I showed how organised state abandonment disproportionately affects racialised, working-class, or marginalised groups who are considered “disposable and expendable” by the state (Danewid, 2020: 300). This section introduced the third stage of the chapter, as I argued that the neoliberal agenda and its emphasis on organised state abandonment have been adopted locally by the RBKC, KCTMO, and its contractors.

The third analytical stage turned to the local causes of the fire. In Section 4.5, I argued the council has increasingly adopted the role of property developers as they privatise and

regenerate public spaces and consequently marginalise and displace its existing working-class and racialised residents. I then argued that the council treats the residents of North Kensington with institutional indifference, and this has become further entrenched because of the ward boundaries in the borough (Section 4.6). Section 4.7 suggested that Grenfell's cladding was used as a form of beautification in alignment with the nearby KALC project and the ongoing super-gentrification of North Kensington. The cladding was used to hide both the "ugly" concrete social housing building and its residents inside to maintain the whitewashed and reimagined image of the area. The residents were an afterthought to the appearance of the building throughout the entire refurbishment, and this is evidenced by the fact that the council prioritised value for money over the safety and functionality of the building (Rozena, 2022). Finally, Section 4.8 argued the Grenfell Tower residents were ignored, silenced, disregarded, and threatened by the council, KCTMO, and its contractors. A narrative was used to silence them, which framed them as troublemakers, complainers, scroungers, or stupid. I argue that the Grenfell residents were treated as the "undeserving poor", even though they were a diverse and hardworking community. The racialisation of the Grenfell residents, however, meant that this was overlooked, and they were immediately understood as "undeserving" and "lucky" to have a home at all. That the fire could have been prevented if the residents had been listened to is evidence of how organised state abandonment, implemented both nationally and locally, is a prominent cause of the fire.

## Chapter Five

### Understanding the Immediate Aftermath of the Fire: Abandonment, Blame, and Securitisation

This chapter turns from the causes of the Grenfell fire to explore how the informants in my study understand the immediate aftermath of the fire, with a particular focus on how the state responded to the disaster, where a marked difference is observed between the retreat of the humanitarian state and the immediate and extensive intervention of the security state. I use the accounts of participants who were present during the aftermath to demonstrate the role of the local, national, and security state in the response to the fire. On the one hand, I argue that the response to the immediate aftermath of the fire was a product of organised state abandonment and a continuation of the processes of indifference and neglect that were happening before the fire, while on the other hand, I argue that it was also the product of a self-interested state that worked to protect itself and maintain social order.

In Chapter Four, I use Bhandar's (2018; 2022) conceptualisation of organised state abandonment to capture the way that the Grenfell Tower fire was caused by neoliberal governance, which set the precedent of abandoning safety and social welfare responsibilities in the pursuit of profit and business prosperity. I examined how organised state abandonment was implemented nationally by consecutive governments, and I traced this down to decisions made locally about Grenfell Tower, its refurbishment, and the treatment of its residents. Chapter Five develops the arguments made in the previous chapter, as I argue that the chaotic aftermath of the fire was an extension of the organised state abandonment implemented before the fire. The variety of government bodies who were involved in the aftermath, including, for example, Ealing Council and the London Local Authority Gold (LLAG), means that the state's response to the fire is too complex to label as organised state abandonment. Instead, I argue that the principles of organised state abandonment implemented locally prior to the fire penetrated the council's response to the aftermath.

The first analytical stage of this chapter argues that the principles of organised state abandonment and its emphasis on outsourcing, calculated indifference, and the abandonment of responsibility meant that the Grenfell survivors and the families of those missing were left deserted at the scene of the fire by the council, who should have been responsible for the humanitarian response. In Section 5.1, I begin by describing the stark

absence of the local and national government in the immediate hours and days after the fire. Here, I show how the abandonment by the government was not just felt by the survivors and the families of those missing, but it was also experienced by the voluntary institutions that fulfilled the humanitarian duties of the state, and even by the schools that were attended by the victims. I also critically examine the council's approach to fulfilling its statutory duty of providing emergency accommodation to those displaced by the fire. I show how it was apathetic, inhumane, and disorganised. In Section 5.2, I show how the "outsourcing of responsibility" before the fire (Bhandar, 2018: n.p.) led to the outsourcing of humanity in its aftermath. I consider the organisation of the Westway Centre, which was initially opened as an official rest centre managed by RBKC but was overtaken by Ealing Council. This, I argue, is another case where the RBKC fulfilled its minimum statutory duty (to open a rest centre) but continued to abandon its humanity for its constituents, thus relying on external volunteers. Finally, in Section 5.3, I describe the council's response to the fire as a continuation of the indifference, marginalisation, and neglect that they imposed on the North Kensington community before the fire. Besides this, I show how councillors used racist and Islamophobic slurs to justify their abandonment of their constituents, both at an individual and an institutional level.

The second analytical stage of this chapter argues that the state's response to the fire was governed by self-interest. First, Section 5.4 argues that the response by the council and central government aimed to mitigate the reputational, legal, and political consequences for themselves. I argue that "rather than being an accident (omission)", the government's handling of the aftermath was "motivated by the potential (conscious or unconscious) benefits for certain groups" (Preston, 2019: 34). Here, I critically assess the council's delay in activating LLAG, the government's refusal to put RBKC in special measures, the immediate announcement of the Public Inquiry, and central government's announcement of its unattainable housing promise and emergency fund. Second, I introduce a key finding of this thesis. Although the government was found to be largely absent and passive in their humanitarian emergency response, the *security state* was present at the scene immediately. I show how the state was present in the aftermath in the form of security, excessive police presence, and surveillance, an aspect of the response that is infrequently recognised. This, I argue, is indicative of how the state prioritised maintaining social order and protecting the political status quo over the protection and welfare of the victims of a humanitarian disaster.

## 5.1. Abandonment

In the early hours of 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, the Grenfell Tower fire was burning, survivors were escaping the building onto the streets, and loved ones were looking for the missing. During this time, the council was absent, its staff had not been deployed, and the emergency response team could not access the major incident room in the town hall (Apps, 2022). During emergencies, the affected local authority becomes the “category 1” responder, and the local authority’s chief executive becomes the “gold commander”. As a category 1 responder, the RBKC is expected to lead the recovery effort and to organise the provision of shelter, welfare, rest centres, and other forms of humanitarian assistance in the event of an emergency (Maxwell-Scott, 2022). RBKC was therefore both the local authority that owned Grenfell Tower and the organisation legally responsible for the humanitarian response. Yet, my participants describe the response as chaotic and disorganised, while many argue, as Natasha (survivor, 5 April 2020) put it to me, that “the chaos happened because the council went into hiding”. Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) similarly tells me that the “local government seemed to be hiding”, while the area was “like a warzone”, and there “just seemed like there was no help, no guidance from anywhere”.

All the while, my participants also criticise the response by then-Prime Minister Theresa May and the central government, who were similarly found to be absent and withdrawn. Anger became strong towards Theresa May the day after the fire, when she attended the scene at Grenfell Tower but did not meet with any survivors. The Public Inquiry hearings have since found that “witnesses from every part of society and government, from parents looking for missing children to national security advisers in Downing Street” recall a “void or absence of government” (Friedman, 2022: 21).

Eddie (survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021) tells me about his experience of the “utter absence of a response” by the government once he escaped the tower at 1:35 a.m. on the night of the fire. He escaped relatively early, as the fire started in Flat 16 at 12:54 a.m. but only started to spread up the exterior cladding at around 1:09 a.m. (Moore-Bick, 2019). Despite being clearly identifiable as a survivor, not least because he was walking around with a wet towel around his shoulders that he had used to escape, he was shouted at by the police and was left abandoned on the street without any official help:

I went to the sports centre; I was then shouted at by the police to move, “Get back, get back”, and then moved back round to the back of Notting Dale House, where we stood in the street after being told some buses were going to come and pick us up, until the community came and rescued us and took us into the Rugby Portobello [a

local children's, youth, and family support charity], where we were looked after, I would say, for the next three or four days without a proper response from the authorities.

After escaping a burning building, Eddie describes how the survivors were left on the street as they awaited help and support that did not arrive for days. Despite not having any possessions and being left homeless, the bus that was supposed to pick them up did not come, and they were left without any communication from the local or national government. He questions, “If it hadn’t been for the community, how long would we have been standing in the street?”.

As Eddie nods to, many of the Grenfell survivors and families went days without seeing or speaking to anyone from the RBKC, KCTMO, or central government. This meant that survivors were forced to seek refuge in unofficial rest centres that had been opened in the community. In the absence of leadership by the council, multiple community centres, youth clubs, local charities, and religious buildings opened their doors to offer shelter and aid. In a report notably entitled *Mind the Gap* (2018), Plastow outlines the response of the voluntary sector to the Grenfell Tower fire, and found that “the first and principal responders to the plight of the people affected by the Grenfell Tower fire were friends, neighbours, and local voluntary organisations with deep experience of working with the local community” (2018: 24). It was the local community who set up the first key rest centres, rather than the local authority, and these included but were not limited to the Rugby Portobello Trust; the Harrow Club; the Clement James Centre; St Helen’s Church, and the Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre.

The absence of the authorities also meant that the families and friends of those missing were forced to gain information through a method of trial and error, often by searching multiple rest centres and hospitals looking for their loved ones. Social-media speculation meant that there were rumours spreading about the death toll and about specific victims (who have since been confirmed dead) being sighted alive, which further exasperated the suffering of the families searching for them. As Danny Friedman KC (2022: 41) put it to the Inquiry, there were “constant rumours but lack of concrete facts”.

Neither the KCTMO nor the RBKC had an accurate or up-to-date list of Grenfell Tower residents. In the morning of 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017, as the fire was burning, it took the KCTMO over two hours to send a list of residents to the London Fire Brigade, yet the emergency

plan document that it eventually sent included information that had not been updated since 2002. It incorrectly stated that there were 120 dwellings, not 129, approximately 330-360 residents, and that the living number of vulnerable residents was between 8 and 12, all of which was false (Monroe, 2022). When the KCTMO did eventually compile a spreadsheet of the status of the missing and safe, it contained inaccurate information about several people who died in the fire, which misled some families to believe their loved ones were safe when they were not (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 274, 2022).

The absence of an up-to-date list harrowingly meant that the survivors and the families were left to compile their own list of the safe and the missing people. Without a coordinated response to the fire by the government or any representatives to speak to, the survivors and residents were forced to organise themselves to find their loved ones. While taking refuge in the Rugby Portobello Trust, there was a coordinated effort among the residents and the families to establish a list of those who had marked themselves as safe and those who were still missing. This is partly how the group of bereaved and survivors formed the group Grenfell United. Jenny (charity volunteer, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021) tells me the formation of Grenfell United was a consequence of the fact that “they [survivors and residents] just didn’t have anyone to rely on”, and it was therefore up to the survivors and residents to “make a list of people and try and find out who had come out of the building and who hadn’t”. From here, they also created a WhatsApp group to share information and organise meetings between the group. Grenfell United began from “improvisation”, as the bereaved and survivors came together “to fill the humanitarian gaps that they were individually and collectively experiencing” (Friedman, 2022: 43). In these circumstances, the community spaces that opened as unofficial rest centres turned out to be vital for the coming together of the survivors and the collation of information about those who were missing.

The intervention by the unofficial rest centres and community institutions was not simply an act of charity or kindness; rather, it was based on necessity amid the abandonment by the state. In a study on the faith groups’ response to Grenfell, Plender (2018: 32) reveals how several of her participants believed their services were called upon to such an extent due to the lack of response by the council, with one interviewee saying, “The council were not great – [the faith groups] had to fill in the gaps.” Another describes how “the council collapsed. Groups like St. Helen’s Church, The Clement James Centre, and The Westway Centre ‘became’ the local government, as people lost trust in the council. But people don’t

lose trust suddenly, it was lost before” (Plender, 2018: 32). This quote is significant as it points to the historical and entrenched distrust between the community and the council, and how this was heightened in the aftermath.

Tanya (17<sup>th</sup> May 2021) is the CEO of a local charity that was central to the immediate aftermath and long-term response to the fire. She tells me how her team arrived at the scene on the morning of the fire, working to provide necessities like water and nappies while simultaneously going through the charity’s database to find out who lived in the tower so that they could help find people. The next day, they opened the centre and created a survey where they contacted people:

So, we were just contacting people by address; we were asking them, “Where are you? Are you okay? Do you have your basic needs met? Do you have a key worker?” and starting to allocate key workers to people—all that kind of thing. Also, so we did it in concentric circles by postcode and address, so first off, people in the tower, then we called people in the walkways, and then out, you know, in the streets, to cover all of North Kensington. (Tanya, charity CEO, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021)

Despite this key emergency role, the charity received little support from the council. When I asked about the council’s involvement with the charity in the aftermath, she laughed and responded, “They didn’t have a fucking clue. They didn’t have a clue. They don’t know anyone; how can they connect with people? Obviously, they can’t”. RBKC were “essentially [...] running like headless chickens; God knows what they were doing, but definitely [the charity] didn’t have any support”. Not only did the local authorities fail to offer support to the charity, but they seemed to make it more difficult:

We’re a tiny organization really [...] all the emphasis was on us, and it wasn’t even [the council] weren’t helpful, they were actually making things worse for us, and really, the lack of recognition that organizations like ours and others ones, were really holding up the whole community between us, but rather than saying, “okay, we know the key organizations, we’ll support with the funding, so at least you don’t have to worry about that”, they kept sending all these surveys out. “Oh, we need to understand what organizations are operating in the borough” and then another survey and then another consultation, and then we were just like, oh, fuck off. You’re not even funding us, why on earth? (Tanya, charity CEO, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021)

This quote describes the pressure that the charity was under and the lack of acknowledgement the local authorities gave it. This charity, among other voluntary institutions, was at the forefront of the humanitarian relief effort, a role that is expected to be fulfilled by the local authority as the category 1 responder. Meanwhile, the council could not even identify which groups were at the forefront of the response, showing how detached they were from the community. Instead, the council had to rely on surveys to



identify the key organisations, and following all of this, Tanya explains that the charity still did not receive support or funding from the council. Several of my participants commented on the overwhelming number of surveys seeking to understand the community following the fire. The council's reliance on surveys is indicative of the long-term polarisation and distance between the council and the North Kensington community. This is an issue that was addressed in the first Grenfell Tower Recovery Taskforce (GTRT) report, which describes how "prior to the fire, there is evidence to suggest that RBKC was a council that was too distant from the community it served" (Independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce, 2017: 4).

Issues around funding were also described by another participant, April (local resident, 11 May 2021) who works with a local primary school that was attended to by several children living in Grenfell Tower. She tells me that "even the school had nothing, nothing from the local authority. No help, no guidance". When funding did become available, the local authorities did not seem to inform them of this:

Even funding, obviously there's pots of money, and the rest of the country think, "Well, everyone who's affected by Grenfell must be sorted now because we raised so much money, they're all okay". You know, yet schools... I was finding out about potential funding through social media. Like, why the hell are the local authority or the government not going "right, you are the school most affected, and you are the schools most affected, you need to know that there's money you can apply for here" (April, local resident, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2021).

There were 67 children who lived in Grenfell Tower, and there were 17 children who died in the fire. Children made up over 23% of the fire's fatalities. Yet, the council was found to insufficiently support a local school that was attended by multiple children who died. This is indicative of how the council abandoned even its most vulnerable citizens in the face of a major emergency. The findings laid out in the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report entitled *After Grenfell* (2018) support this argument. In a report based on interviews with Grenfell families, the EHRC found that "although many of the children of respondents were offered some form of counselling, mainly via individual schools, some were not", and there was "no way of knowing what the wider uptake of counselling was for children affected by the fire or when that counselling materialised" (2018: 54). It also found that many of the children were offered group counselling sessions at school rather than one-to-one sessions (ibid.). David Isaac, the EHRC chair, argued that "while authorities sought to respond to the disaster, children received disjointed mental health and educational support. Their needs and rights have slipped through the cracks" (Doward, 2019: n.p.).

As a category 1 responder, the council was responsible for undertaking contingency planning to prepare for an emergency, and for providing rest centres and emergency accommodation for those who were displaced (Maxwell-Scott, 2022). Although the residents of Grenfell Tower were offered emergency hotel accommodation, it was insufficiently organised and lacked humanity. First, the lack of and insufficient communication coming from the council meant some survivors were not informed that they were eligible for emergency accommodation in the immediate days after the fire (Monroe, 2022). Second, the absence of an up-to-date list of residents meant there was no structure to match emergency hotel accommodation with the needs of those displaced; in terms of size, space, and special requirements for those with disabilities or young children (Studd, 2022). For example, Philip (Ealing Council, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021) tells me about a disabled wheelchair user who survived the fire and was put into a hotel room that was “totally un-adapted”, meaning that “she couldn’t shower there. She had to get a cab ride to go to a gym every day to use the disabled gym shower, every day”. Besides this, Imran Khan (2022: 61), a lawyer representing a group of BSRs, told the Public Inquiry about a family of four who were put in a hotel room with one bed, which left a disabled and pregnant woman forced to sleep on the floor, as her disability did not allow her to use the bed. Third, the council was also found to be immensely insensitive in its distribution of emergency accommodation, as it placed several traumatised survivors in rooms on the high floors of hotels. For example, there was one case where a family of five was offered a hotel room with one bed on the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor of a hotel (Maxwell-Scott and Condron, 2022: 5).

In response to these issues, James Maxwell-Scott, representing RBKC, told the Public Inquiry that “finding hotel rooms for over 70 households on the first night took a lot of work and should be regarded as an achievement. It was inevitable that some hotels would be of a higher quality or in a better location than others” (2022: 121). This argument, shockingly, overlooks the RBKC’s failure to adequately fulfil its contingency planning responsibilities, and its subsequent failure to make prior arrangements for displaced victims in the case of a major incident. It is important to note here that working-class and racialised groups are “more likely to be located in areas that are subject to disasters, less likely to have resources to avoid impending disasters” (Preston, 2019: 35), and thus more likely to rely upon emergency accommodation. To classify the distribution of emergency accommodation as an “achievement” undermines the trauma caused by the significant

mistakes made by the council, and overlooks that it is the council's statutory duty as a category 1 responder to provide emergency accommodation. Instead, this quote subtly implies that the survivors should be grateful for the council's insufficient and inhumane fulfilment of its statutory duties. This assumption that they should be grateful for the services provided by the state has followed the Grenfell Tower residents since before the fire, and throughout its aftermath, as I show later in this chapter.

After providing survivors with below-par emergency accommodation, and thus doing the bare minimum to fulfil its statutory duty, the council once again abandoned many of those who were in need. Once survivors were put into hotel rooms, the Inquiry found that the RBKC left many families for days without any communication. An email revealed in the Inquiry shows a housing officer from Hammersmith and Fulham Council writing that there were twelve families in a Premier Inn who had not been contacted by RBKC since placement in the hotel or since six days after the fire, and had not been provided with contact details for RBKC (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 272, 2022).

After the fire, there were 845 residents from the surrounding low-rise finger blocks who were also forced to evacuate their homes. While the RBKC offered survivors hotel accommodation, the residents from the low-rise finger blocks were advised to stay with friends and family at the first instance, and only the elderly, vulnerable, and later, families with children, were offered hotel accommodation. The Westway Centre was ultimately open for emergency overnight accommodation for those in these low-rise finger blocks, yet Joe (Lancaster West resident, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021), among other participants, describes how the council's poor communication meant that residents "slept rough [on the estate] for the first two nights after the fire. They were sleeping rough on the grass around the estate". Even though only around 20 residents made use of the beds in the rest centres, the local authority did not chase up or question where and whether the remaining families found accommodation (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 272, 2022). The council once again met the minimum legal requirement by providing a rest centre and emergency accommodation, yet it failed to ensure the support was accessible or suitable to those who needed it. The council's organisation of emergency accommodation and the rest centre is evidence of the continued disregard and institutional indifference shown towards the survivors.

## 5.2. Outsourced Responsibility, Outsourced Humanity

The Westway Centre was the official rest centre provided by the council, but as I have briefly touched on already, many of the survivors went to local rest centres opened by the community. The council only confirmed the Westway Centre as the official rest centre on the evening of 14<sup>th</sup> June (Studd, 2022), bearing in mind the fire started at 12:54 a.m. on the same day, and most of the unofficial community rest centres opened their doors immediately. Extraordinarily, the failing recovery response by the RBKC meant that the organisation of the rest centre was soon taken over by the Ealing Council. While this may problematise the idea of organised state abandonment, I suggest that it reasserts how the RBKC abandoned its responsibility for its constituents and relied upon external volunteers to fulfil its duties. It also points to how neoliberal outsourcing has disseminated the role of the council in providing safety and security for its constituents (Bhandar, 2022).

One of my participants, Philip (25<sup>th</sup> February 2021), worked as a Local Authority Liaison Officer (LALO) for Ealing Council during the aftermath. Arriving at the scene on 17<sup>th</sup> June, Philip describes how he expected to only work one nine-hour mutual aid shift at the Westway Centre, but later that evening, the entire response was handed over to Ealing Council. Philip describes how, within half an hour of arriving, he realised that “nothing had been done” by the RBKC for three days:

There were no operation reports, there were no updates on what was going on with the housing, there was nobody on the ground taking control of the database, nobody knew who was in the building at this stage—three days later, nobody had floor plans, the Fire Brigade didn’t have the floor plans. All these things, there’s a long list of stuff they didn’t have.

After arriving at the scene and being alarmed by the council’s lack of progress in responding to the fire, Philip tells me he contacted London Local Authority Gold (LLAG), a group that provides support from across London in response to major disasters and emergencies. Philip explained to them that they had “been lied to for three days” by RBKC, and later, the course of the Westway Centre management was transferred to Ealing Council:

So, the evening, midnight of that day, the whole thing was handed over to Ealing Council, the council I worked for. So, the entire rest centre, humanitarian efforts, the donations, the housing, anything to do with the council service, visas, everything else was all done by Ealing Council [...] So, to put it into perspective, when I arrived, there was no computer system. There was no access to IT. This was three days in. So, we were using sports centre’s email addresses to receive really restricted documents and information that’s really sensitive.

After half an hour of being a LALO at the scene, Philip's role shifted to being a Silver Commander, which he explains meant he was "the tactical on-ground commander for the whole of Gold [...] reporting directly to COBR, so the Prime Minister's office". Theresa May, Philip tells me, "Didn't know she was being lied to, and the Prime Minister could hardly go on TV and say, 'I was lied to by Kensington and Chelsea Council'". She was being told by the chief executive of RBKC that "everything's fine, everyone's being rehoused, everything's calmed on the ground, and it's all business as usual". This is significant, as Philip not only suggests that the council was lying to the LLAG, but he also tells me they were lying to the central government. It is evidence of how the council's recovery process was driven by self-interest, a point I turn to in Section 5.4.

Working alongside Philip at the Westway Centre was his colleague from Ealing Council, Rupinder Hardy, who gave evidence at the Public Inquiry. Like Philip, she similarly explains that when she arrived at the rest centre on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2017, there appeared to be a lack of "grip", as it was disorganised and chaotic, and there didn't seem to be a clear command structure (Hardy, 2020: para 30). She told the Inquiry that the first comment she made in her notebook was that the "Council aren't helping, volunteers are doing everything" (Hardy, 2020: para 33). She comments that she could not identify council officers at all because they were not wearing ID badges or high-vis, and while some senior RBKC officers did find her in the first couple of hours at the centre, she asked for them to be removed as they were not adding value to the response and did not have an official role in the response (Hardy, 2020: para 60). Rupinder's comment that councillors were not wearing identifiable attire reaffirms the argument that they were "hiding".

In conversation, I asked Philip why he believed the council responded in such a way, and he told me that the council did not consider themselves liable or responsible for the fire:

In their view, they had palmed over responsibility for the residents to the KCTMO. In their view, they were picking up the slack for a mistake made by another company. So, "We've assigned this responsibility to them, so why are we getting involved? They should be taking responsibility because we no longer control this building", and that's why they kept saying, you know, trying to suppress things and saying, "Well, we're not responsible, the KCTMO are responsible for the building", etc., so they thought that that meant humanity was also transferred over to another company.

Transferring humanity to another company, as Philip put it, is a feature of the "political ethos of neoliberalism" which is premised on the "abandonment of responsibility" (Bhandar, 2018: n.p.). Philip suggests that the council rejected and thus abandoned its

responsibility for the disaster victims under the pretence that it had outsourced its management of its housing stock to the KCTMO, the council. This abandonment of responsibility pre-existed the fire. This is evident by the fact that outsourcing before the fire meant that the council did not have adequate resources to respond to the emergency. I have already discussed how the council had to undertake surveys to understand the community and the institutions operating there. In addition to this, as I have already touched on, neither the KCTMO nor the council had an up-to-date list of who was living in Grenfell Tower and whether they had any vulnerabilities. As Richard Millett KC, counsel to the Inquiry, points out, “the responsibility for providing that kind of information lay with the council, even if they might need to co-operate with the TMO to get it”, so far as “RBKC needed to have up-to-date and accurate information about who was living where and whether they had vulnerabilities or not in order to discharge its obligations under the contingency legislation, regulations and framework” (Millett, 2022a: 78).

The abandonment of responsibility can be traced throughout the countless institutions and companies that are implicated in the Grenfell Tower fire. As Daniel (videographer, writer, and campaigner, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021) puts it to me:

Where the state should have existed, it didn't, and it didn't exist because it was being tendered out or privatised and there was a disregard [...] In a world where nobody is responsible, you just pass the buck. [...] Whether you're RBKC or the TMO, whether you're the fire service, it doesn't really make a difference, it's always somebody else's fault.

The KCTMO also abandoned its responsibility for its residents in the aftermath of the fire. Not only was it absent at the scene of the fire, but it has justified its absence to the Public Inquiry by emphasising that it was not a category 1 or category 2 responder to the emergency. In doing so, the KCTMO denied accountability for the aftermath by emphasising that it did not have an official role in the humanitarian response, thus “passing the buck”, as Daniel argues. Despite this, Allison Monroe KC (2022) representing the BSRs Team 2, highlights how the KCTMO is an arm's length management organisation (ALMO), which handled the management for the entirety of RBKC's housing stock, and thus performed the functions of a local authority internal housing department. Allison Monroe KC therefore points out that “an authority's housing department is, of course, part of the authority itself and, therefore, part of a category 1 responder. As such, it is fully integrated within the authority's emergency plan and provides staff trained to act as part of

a co-ordinated response with other local authority departments” (2022:21). It is therefore unacceptable, as Danny Friedman KC put it to the Public Inquiry, that the KCTMO’s “contribution to the emergency response was essentially reduced to providing delayed, incomplete, and inaccurate information on residents and conducting delayed and inconsistent repairs for the walkway blocks” (2022a: 64).

### **5.3. Calculated Indifference and Stigma**

The indifference shown towards the Grenfell Tower survivors and families in the aftermath of the fire is a continuation of the marginalisation and neglect that characterises governance dominated by organised state abandonment and its policies. As Eddie (survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021) describes, the fire is a “tragedy of three acts”—a powerful metaphor that captures the connection between the way the residents were treated before the fire, the fire itself, and the aftermath of the fire. It presents the aftermath as a continuation of the indifference, marginalisation, and neglect that the working-class and racialised North Kensington residents were subjected to before the fire. As I mention in Chapter Four, Eddie was one of the founders of the Grenfell Action Group blog that reported numerous concerns around the tower’s refurbishment before the fire, yet was repeatedly silenced and marginalised by the council, KCTMO, and its contractors. Just as they were treated before the fire, Eddie describes how they were ignored and marginalised in the aftermath. Before the fire, the council had been “heavily criticised for many years as being out of touch, detached and elitist in nature, only concerned with the interests of their wealthy residents” (Watt, 2017: 2). After the fire, my participants argue that the aftermath of the fire would have been significantly different if it involved its wealthier residents:

As we all say on the ground, if the tower would have been in South Kensington, this would never have happened. If there was a fire, the response would have been so much different, but because we are in North Kensington, in a working-class community, we were treated a certain way. So, we know that [this is the case] both before and after the fire, and during. (Moyra, local resident, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021)

Moyra claims that the working-class community was aware that they were treated differently from their wealthier counterparts before, during, and after the fire, an argument that validates the metaphor used by Eddie.

The racialisation of the North Kensington residents was also found to be a decisive factor in the council’s abandonment of its residents. In the closing remarks to her evidence in Module 4 of the Inquiry, Hanan Wahabi summarises the feelings expressed by several of

the participants I spoke to. Hanan Wahabi is both a bereaved family member and a survivor who escaped the tower, and she argues in her Inquiry hearing that the response by the local and national government would have been different if the victims were richer and “less ethnic”:

In my experience, in the eyes of local and central government, our Grenfell and North Kensington community are second class, the people with needs and problems. I cannot help but feel that had our community lived in a different part of the borough, on the more affluent side, had we been from a different class, had we been less ethnic, the response in the aftermath would have been immediate (Wahabi, 2022: 41).

Eddie (survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021) similarly argues that class and race “fundamentally did play a part” in the way the Grenfell survivors and bereaved were treated in the aftermath of the fire, because alternatively, he asks:

If we'd been rich white middle-class people in a community living in a block in Chelsea, would the response of the government and the local authority on the night and subsequently, been different to what it had been in Grenfell? And I think that the answer would probably be yes, it will be very different.

These comments are significant as they draw attention to how class, race, and ethnicity determine the value assigned to human life and, as Preston (2019) argues, how humans are only as valuable as their labour power. Unlike their wealthier counterparts in South Kensington, the North Kensington community was marginalised as “surplus” (Danewid, 2020: 297) both before and in the immediate aftermath of the fire. It points to how the organised state abandonment of the Grenfell Tower victims rested upon “the calculated indifference towards working class and racialised people” (Bhandar, 2018: n.p.).

On the one hand, I suggest that entrenched institutional indifference presided over the council’s response to the fire, while on the other hand, I show how it can be seen as a product of “racist ideologies and class spite”, which are at the heart of organised state abandonment (Bhandar, 2018: 2). Philip (Ealing Council, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021), for example, tells me that a RBKC councillor was fired because “he was told by the Prime Minister’s office to go down to the area and see what was going on, and he said, “Have you been there, Prime Minister? It’s like little Africa””. To some extent, this suggests that the council’s abandonment of humanitarian help was premised on the race and ethnicity of the victims. This lack of humanity, I argue, demonstrates how race and ethnicity can determine the grievability of human life. As Butler puts it, “forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are



eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable” (2016: 24).

Once councillors did attend the scene, Philip tells me that they continued to show racist contempt towards the victims. He tells me that his team “had to arrange the most minutest things” upon arrival. For example, when he “arrived it was about 80 degrees inside the sports centre [the Westway Centre where victims were seeking help]”, to which the council officers responded saying, “Well, they’re from the tropics, they’re used to this heat, aren’t they?”. Emma Dent Coad recalls the comments that Philip discusses, among a series of other racist comments, during the Grenfell Tower second-year anniversary debate in the House of Commons, where she described how:

In the early days after the fire, my predecessor as MP wrote to the council to air her concern about the numbers of people roaming around the streets “like gangs”. A senior council officer was told to go down to the site but refused, saying, “It’s like little Africa down there.” Another said that the area was full of people “from the tropics”. A senior officer regularly, in front of others, referred to my neighbours as “muzzies”. A recent visitor to the walkways was congratulated by a senior councillor for entering the “lion’s den”. I say “vulnerable”; they say “volatile” (Dent-Coad, 2019: paragraph 8).

Rather than seeing the Grenfell residents, their families, and the local community as victims of a disaster, these comments show how they were foremost racialised in ways that precluded their status as victims. The racialisation of the Grenfell community meant that their lives were not considered “grievable, worthy of protection, as belonging subjects with rights that ought to be honored” (Butler, 2016: 29). Their racialisation redacted their victimhood and justified the refusal of the state’s humanitarian support. Additionally, and this is a central part of my argument, it also meant that the Grenfell victims were framed as being threatening or dangerous.

Philip (25<sup>th</sup> February 2021) tells me that “none of the senior [council] officers came to the area [...] because they were told that it’s dangerous. [There were] email exchanges between the senior officers [...] saying they’re all like gangs”. The email that Philip refers to here was written by a RBKC councillor on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2017 and states, “There are separate local communities, rather like gangs they don’t go into another territory, and we need to understand the makeup of the area” (Channel 4 News, 2018). Additional comments from the same email show how racialised this conception of the community is, as it writes that “there are language problems, lack of education, and understanding how anything

works” (ibid.). Emma Dent Coad (Labour Councillor and former Kensington MP, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021) similarly tells me that the council were “getting instructions from central government to go [to the tower]” yet “there was lots of reluctance to do so, they thought they were going to get beaten up. [...] because, of course, you know, ‘North Kensington people are feral, hordes, violent’”.

Crucially, I argue that the council deliberately weaponised and employed racist and territorial stigma as a government technology (Tyler, 2020) to frame the North Kensington community as aggressive and violent to justify the abandonment of its constituents. Despite there being little evidence of unrest, the chief executive of RBKC, Nicholas Holgate, informed a strategic co-ordinating group meeting just one day after the fire that there was “great concern over community tension”, with “hostile residents very vocal in negative comments towards the incident” (Friedman, 2022: 26). He is also said to have expressed concern to Jo Farrar from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) that “several people could make this worse than it is, and the council is worried that they might need assistance from the police” (Friedman, 2022a: 26). On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, two days after the fire, in a briefing, Nicholas Holgate told John Barradell<sup>9</sup> and London Resilience that the “general community feeling is of hurt and anger. This is being stoked by a small number of known local instigators who continue to fabricate stories in order to further their aims” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 273, 2022: 194). The same discourse that was used to discount the complaints of the Lancaster West residents before the fire, namely that they were “rebel residents”, was mobilised against them in the immediate aftermath.

As Jemphrey and Berrington (2000: 470) argue, the aftermath of disasters is always “inherently political” insofar as one group or interest can “impose its account, over and above others, being a function of institutionalized power”. An example of this is the Hillsborough disaster, which “required the police to protect themselves from blame and, therefore, to become active in scapegoating supporters” (Jemphrey and Berrington, 2000:

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<sup>9</sup> At the time of the fire, John Barradell was the chief executive of the City of London and the deputy chair of the London Resilience, a group that is designed to ensure London’s preparedness in the event of an emergency. From 16<sup>th</sup> June 2017, once the London Local Authority Gold (LLAG) was activated, he played a leading role in the response.

480). In a similar way that the police used their institutionalised power to deflect blame onto the victims of the Hillsborough disaster, the council attempted to frame the Grenfell community as threatening and hostile to deflect blame onto the Grenfell community for the chaotic aftermath of the fire. A clear example of this was put to the Inquiry by Danny Friedman KC, who argued that “RBKC deliberately and consistently lobbied against local residents as agitators with agendas, and on that, civil unrest became the official explanation for the delay in moving from response to recovery [in the emergency programme, as set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004<sup>10</sup>]” (Friedman, 2022: 49).

#### **5.4. Managing a Political Disaster**

Danny Friedman KC told the Public Inquiry that “the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire was a humanitarian crisis, but it was also a political one”, and the “crisis was political because the disaster was undeniably human-made, and its victims remained under the governance of those in part who made it” (2022:15). Here, he is talking about RBKC and DCLG, but I extend this to argue that the response by the council and the central government was concentrated on managing the reputational, legal, and political consequences for themselves.

Significantly, Joe makes a statement that closely resembles that made by Danny Friedman KC. Joe (local resident, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021) powerfully argues that the RBKC has been “managing a disaster since the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, but a public relations one, it’s not a humanitarian one”. Both statements point to RBKC’s interest in protecting itself against its liability for the fire and the aftermath. One way the council did this, I argue, was by demonising the victims using racial and territorial stigma, as I argued in the previous section and will build upon in Section 5.4. The other, in terms of the aftermath, was by covering up its failings, regardless of what consequences this had for the victims, which I turn to now.

One of the key failures identified by the Public Inquiry was the delay in activating London Local Authority Gold, a pan-London strategic protocol that involves all 33 boroughs. It was suggested to the RBKC as early as 6:30 a.m. on the morning of the fire, but it was

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<sup>10</sup> The primary legislation for understanding the aftermath of the fire is set out in Civil Contingencies Act 2004. This legislation imposes duties on the Category 1 and Category 2 responders in the event of a major emergency.

declined by the chief executive of the RBKC, Nicholas Holgate, who stated, “That looks like we can’t cope” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 273, 2022). The council continued to refuse help from multiple government bodies, despite being overwhelmed and ill-prepared, while Nicholas Holgate is said to also have been “reluctant to take housing assistance from Labour councils” as they sought accommodation for the Grenfell survivors (Khan, 2022: 49). If this is the case, Imran Khan, representing the BSRs, told the Inquiry that “it would suggest that petty party politics took priority over the lives of our clients” (Khan, 2022: 50). Besides this, in a telephone call, Nicholas Paget-Brown, the then-leader of the council, is said to have given Mayor of London Sadiq Khan the impression that everything was “under control” (Khan, 2022). This finding can be seen to substantiate what Philip told me about the council misleading the central government and the LLAG about the progress being made on the ground. Despite the chaos that was occurring on the ground, which was exacerbating the trauma of the victims, the RBKC was more concerned about its reputation and party-politics than the welfare of their constituents.

It is disputable whether the RBKC should have been the category 1 responder at all, considering it is implicated in the causes of the fire. Yet, the government ignored this conflict of interest. Some of my participants suggest that the central government was deliberately protecting the Conservative Council, particularly as the government refrained from putting them into special measures. Several participants suggest that this should have happened in the immediate days after the fire, while some maintain that it should still happen now. April (local resident, 11 May 2021) argues that in the immediate aftermath of the fire, the RBKC “should have gone into special measures after their lack of response”. She highlights that “the government turned around and said they failed, and yet everyone’s forgotten about that”. She expresses frustration that central government has still not held RBKC accountable:

It's almost like, ‘Oh, we've said they failed; we give them a little bit of a... you know, they’ve been naughty boys, we’ve caned them, and now they can go back to being...’. You know, it’s just nobody’s been held, they’ve been allowed to get away scot-free, absolutely scot-free, and they’re never going to get held to account, I don’t think. Not really, because they’re too powerful.

The process of government appraisal of the council’s response requires closer inspection. Theresa May set up the Independent Grenfell Tower Recovery Taskforce to address RBKC’s response. The Grenfell Tower Recovery Taskforce meeting was chaired by Theresa May on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2017, just two days after the fire. The Grenfell Tower Recovery Taskforce (GTRT) was supposed to be an “on-statutory intervention to make sure that

Kensington and Chelsea Council was able to deal with the long-term recovery from the Grenfell Tower tragedy” by providing “external support and challenge to the Council and assurance to the Secretary of State up until March 2020” (RBKC, 2020: n.p.). However, after publishing five reports, it eventually concluded in March 2020, stating that they “*remain unable* to give you unequivocal assurance that RBKC is effectively delivering a recovery for the bereaved and survivors and the wider community in North Kensington” (Independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce, 2020: 1-*emphasis added*). Specifically, it states that they “*remain concerned* about the pace of change; the culture across the council; and the quality of the relationship with the bereaved and survivors and the wider affected community” (ibid.). Despite this, the government concluded that it is confident RBKC no longer needs support from the taskforce, which consequently stood down on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 (Barker, 2020a). All the GTRT reports condemned the recovery by the RBKC, yet the government proceeded to conclude the taskforce with little evidence of change. This begs the question of *why* the GTRT taskforce was started in the first place, as it reported the long-term failure of the Council’s recovery but did not seem to intervene or provide external support or challenge, as it set out to do.

Joe (Lancaster West resident, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021) argues that the GTRT was used to avoid putting the RBKC into special measures. Describing the GTRT, Joe tells me how “there was some central government team that came into report on [RBKC] and basically manage things because, you know, you can’t put a *Conservative Council* in special measures”. This is even though “all of [the] reports are devastatingly bad. There’s not one of them that’s positive about anything [related to RBKC] at all”. Joe makes a comparison with Labour councils that have been put into special measures. Darlington, for example, only had one department that was failing, the Children’s Services, which he is “not saying is good”, but “it was one department. You know, every department of K&C was found to be failing immediately after the fire”.

Instead of having a proactive and hands-on role in the humanitarian response to the fire, the central government made public announcements that did not respond to the immediate needs on the ground. As the Grenfell families were still searching for their loved ones, and the council was largely nowhere to be seen, then-Prime Minister Theresa May quickly announced a Public Inquiry into the fire, just one day after the fire. Clearly, the announcement of a Public Inquiry did not reflect the needs and demands of those on the ground, and instead, the immediate feeling among the Grenfell community, as Jenny

(charity volunteer, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021) puts it, was that “people thought, ‘Oh no, this is just like the government, you know, government led Inquiry, of course it’s going to be a whitewash’”. Writing in Politics Home, Grenfell United member Karim Mussilhy recalls how, “Hours after the fire, a Public Inquiry was announced. We wanted the criminal investigation to go first, but we had no choice” (Mussilhy, 2022: 1). On the one hand, I suggest this announcement was made so that the government could be seen *publicly* as “responding” to the fire, and on the other hand, I suggest it played a long-term role in containing the consequences of the fire on the government. I consider the latter point further in Chapter Seven.

Suspensions of an Inquiry “cover-up” became prominent with the appointment of Sir Martin Moore-Bick on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2017. The very fact that the judge and the remit of the Inquiry were determined by the government stirred up suspicion about its credibility. These concerns are explicit in a video recording of Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s first meeting with residents and survivors, where he is heard telling those present, “I can’t do more than assure you that I know what it is to be impartial” (BBC, 2017). A controversial housing ruling by Sir Martin Moore-Bick came to the forefront quickly after his appointment. Sue Caro (local resident, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021) describes how Sir Moore-Bick “ruled in favour of a terrible Westminster Council Housing [ruling] which basically meant you could be rehoused hundreds of miles away from where you lived and worked and away from your family”, and how this contributed to the belief at the time that “he’s completely the wrong person to be doing this”. This case, she believed, gave them “an insight into his mind-set”. Emma Dent Coad called for Sir Martin Moore-Bick to stand down just five days after his appointment. Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, she questioned “how anybody like him could have empathy for what these people have been through”. She continues by arguing that “a technocrat is maybe not really what we need right now. Yes, we need somebody who can do the detail, but we need somebody who can actually understand human beings and what they have been through” (cited in Weaver and Bowcott, 2017). I discuss the Inquiry in depth in Chapter Seven; here, my aim is to show how the survivors and community responded to its announcement in the immediate aftermath.

On 16<sup>th</sup> June, two days after the fire, Theresa May announced further measures to “support the victims of the Grenfell Tower disaster”. Notably, she made an unattainable housing promise that all Grenfell Tower victims would be rehoused in three weeks. Reflecting on the rehousing pledge, Jenny (charity volunteer, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021) tells me how “Theresa

May saying that everybody was going to be rehoused in three weeks [...] was just ridiculous. That was never going to happen, and it should never have been promised”. This came to be a big failure, as a year later, only 82 of the 203 households were in permanent new homes (Booth and Bowcott, 2018). I argue that this pledge, despite being unattainable, was announced as what Joe (Lancaster West resident, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021) may call a PR stunt, so that the government could quieten criticism from the public and the press amid reports the victims had been abandoned by the state. The promise actually had a negative effect on many of the survivors, as it contributed to anxiety for some who felt pressured into accepting their first housing offers (Beer, 2022). Besides the housing promise, the government also announced a £5 million emergency fund for the Grenfell survivors. This included £500 cash and a £5,500 down payment to the bank accounts of the survivors. The support package was arguably announced as a way of ‘paying off’ the victims, “for reasons of social cohesion”, with the “compensated (insured) value of life being ultimately determined by cost-benefit analysis” (Preston, 2019: 10–11).

This is supported by the observation made by Emma Dent-Coad (Labour Councillor and former Kensington MP, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021) who tells me how “at all levels [the government has] been incompetent, and all they will tell you when you challenge it is how much money they spent on it”. Adding to this, Emma tells me:

They still think that what they’re doing is some kind of charity, and I’ve actually heard them using that kind of language: “Why won’t they accept what they’re being given? Look what we’ve given them” [...] They see it as charity, and I’ve actually heard that kind of language: that everything they’re doing is a charity, and these people should be grateful.

It is significant that the government references what it has “given” the Grenfell survivors and families amid criticism, supporting the idea that its support for survivors was determined by a cost-benefit analysis. It also has parallels to the social-housing stigma that the Grenfell residents were treated with before the fire. As I discuss in Chapter Four, complaints concerning the tower’s refurbishment were responded to with the attitude that they should be “grateful” for their housing and the refurbishment that they were getting for “free”.

## **5.5. Securitisation**

Securitisation can be understood as the process whereby an issue or group is defined as a security threat so that governmental and societal resources are mobilised to counter it

(Hussain and Bagguley, 2012: 716). Section 5.4 gives an insight into how RBKC framed the Grenfell community as a security threat to deflect blame and deny responsibility for the chaotic and slow humanitarian response. This section develops the argument to argue that the security state drew upon Islamophobic, territorial, and racial stigma to construct the Grenfell community as a “suspect community” and thus a security issue, so it could mobilise aggressive policing and increased surveillance. The term “suspect community” was coined by Hillyard (1993) to describe the process where a community comes to be constructed as a threat and a sign of abnormality and how this is legitimated through state-enforced politics of exception (Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, and Nickels, 2011; Acik and Pilkington, 2018). In the global West, the racialised “Muslim Other” has become the main instance of this in recent times (Morgan and Poynting, 2012; Poynting et al., 2004), and Islamophobia has only intensified in the aftermath of several terrorist attacks associated with ISIS that have taken place across Europe. In fact, on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2017, less than a month before the fire, there was a terrorist attack at a concert in Manchester that killed 22 innocent people, and the perpetrator was identified as a British Muslim. This incident was found to intensify Islamophobic attacks by 505% in Greater Manchester in the month after the attack (Halliday, 2017). Within the context of increased Islamophobia, securitisation in contemporary British society largely manifests itself through the “continual framing of Muslim communities as ‘Other’ and dangerous” (Brown, 2010: 172).

The framing of the Grenfell community as a “suspect community” and the subsequent securitisation of the aftermath are strongly evidenced by the Metropolitan Police Service’s (MPS) community impact assessment dated 18<sup>th</sup> June, which “attributed imminent threats of an outbreak of crime and disorder to the Muslim background of the victims” (Monroe, 2022: 14). The entry by the RBKC police branch read that it “expected [...] outbreaks of crime and/or disorder within hours” based upon the rationale that “the final death toll from the fire could rise substantially and with the cause still unknown, any subsequent disclosure could have an impact on community tensions. Especially when the majority of those affected are believed to come from a Muslim cultural background, combined with the incident occurring during the [holy] month of Ramadan” (ibid.). This, I argue, is evidence of how Islamophobia was mobilised in the aftermath to justify increased security measures and disproportionate policing amidst a political crisis. The fire was a humanitarian disaster that saw innocent people killed and displaced, yet the state relied on the “suspect community” frame to mobilise disproportionate security resources to contain the issue.



Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) argues that the infrastructure for securitisation already existed in North Kensington before the fire, through Prevent policies that were targeting the area's Muslim community:

You also can't forget the fact that, not only did you have the campaign on the riots, which saw the biggest sentences handed out to youth from Ladbroke Grove in 2011, but what you also saw following that was Syria, and you know, many have covered at great length the 14 or 15 young men from around the Westway, West London, Maida Vale, Ladbroke Grove that went to Syria, right. So, Prevent and a sort of quiet securitisation through public institutions, youth clubs, the mosques had taken place. It had taken place to maintain social order.

The Prevent strategy is said to address "radicalisation" in the face of the "greatest risk to our security": terrorism and the "extremist ideas" that "terrorist ideologies" draw upon (Home Office 2011: 59 *in* Heath-Kelly, 2013). Prevent is a "principle domestic counter-terrorism initiative, which has embedded police officers gathering intelligence in the delivery of local community services", consequently becoming a crucial way that the government constructs British Muslims as a suspect community (Kundnani, 2009 :8; Hussain and Bagguley, 2012: 717). At a local level, the strategy constructs Muslims as a suspect community by engaging front-line professionals, such as teachers, community leaders, healthcare practitioners, and social workers, to identify and report anyone they think is found to represent a security threat (GOV.UK, 2023).

The Prevent strategy is a clear example of how securitisation works. By framing Islam as a security threat to society and Muslims as a "suspect community", securitisation sets out to develop "a degree of public support" in enforcing "exceptional state actions", "new legislation" (Hussain and Bagguley, 2012: 716), and "extraordinary defensive moves" against them (Buzan et al., 1998: 204). In this case, Lowkey argues that the men from West London who went to Syria and the fear of terrorism were used to justify the increased covert and overt surveillance of the area. This form of surveillance, Lowkey suggests, existed before the fire and was drawn upon after the fire.

I now turn to consider securitisation during the fire. On the night of the fire, Daniel (videographer, writer, and campaigner, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021) tells me that surveillance of the North Kensington community began almost immediately. He refers to the Phase 1 Inquiry report, which confirms that the first police helicopter arrived at the scene at 01.45 a.m., but the fire service didn't get the feed until 03:06 a.m. (Moore-Bick, 2019: 413). Daniel is therefore cynical about the state's surveillance and policing of the disaster:

What were the police doing? Why were the police filming North Kensington and the fire and not giving that directly to the fire service? They were watching us. They knew there was going to be loss of life, and their immediate thought was there's going to be a riot. There were armed police walking up and down Bramley Road the day after the fire with their machine guns out. Now, why were they doing that? Why were there armed police with machine guns out in a community that just lost 72 people, other than the fact the police were trying to show armed force? There was riot vans parked up post-fire, and they stayed around the area for a very long time. Why?

Daniel maintains that the police presence was used as a form of surveillance to contain any unrest that may have arisen in the community. Daniel argues that the surveillance of the community started once the state realised that the fire would cause a large loss of life and became concerned that it could consequently disrupt the social order. The presence of armed police is striking, as it is a wholly illogical and inappropriate response to a tower-block fire, unless security is the aim. Daniel tells me he was told by Lucy Easthope, an expert adviser on disaster recovery, that “the response of the security state was that this couldn't be another Duggan moment”, referring to the 2011 riots, which were triggered by the murder of Mark Duggan by the police in Tottenham, North London. This is an astonishing illustration of the state's priorities in the face of a major emergency.

Once Eddie (survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021) escaped the fire, as I discussed earlier in the chapter, he recalls the complete absence of any government officials. By vast contrast, riot police were one of the first and some of the only signs of authority that he saw at the scene. He explains how:

Standing outside Notting Dale House, the first thing I saw was like the riot police running past us with their shields and truncheons [...] I was told to fuck off by the police, and you know, we were very traumatised already, and then this was like a very traumatic response. The lack of response [by the local and national government] was very traumatic. (Eddie, survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021)

The significance of this quote is twofold. Firstly, the hostility of the police towards the survivor of a fire is striking, and it shows how they were immediately perceived as aggressors rather than victims. Significantly, Eddie told the Public Inquiry that he “approached officers on about three occasions to ask for help but was told to go away. Their priority seemed to be moving the crowd back. It felt like ‘public order’ superseded caring for the victims” (Daffarn, 2020: 118). Secondly, it is insightful that Eddie indirectly contrasts the “lack of response” by the government with the immediate and aggressive presence of the riot police. In doing so, he separates the government and the police as two separate entities. Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February

2021), in contrast, makes the point that the security state, in the form of the police or the intelligence services, is a part of the national government, suggesting that securitisation worked together with abandonment. Lowkey tells me, “There’s many that say, ‘Oh, well, the government were nowhere to be found’. The government *were* here. The government were here. The intelligence services were here immediately after the fire, and they did everything they could to control what they looked at as a potentially volatile community”.

Securitisation was also prevalent in the organisation of the Westway centre, which was supposed to be opened as an official rest centre to be run by the local authority. However, Rupinder Hardy from Ealing Council described it as more of “a crime scene than somewhere you would actually want bereaved, survivors and residents to come in to seek help” (Hardy, 2022a: 10). Philip (Ealing Council, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021) similarly tells me that when he arrived at the Westway Centre, it was police cordoned, and he was told to ask for proof that people were residents before they could gain entry to get assistance. This, he argues, shows “the level of contempt and the level of disrespect and lack of compassion there was for the survivors”, particularly since most of the survivors did not escape with identification or proof of address and were therefore refused access. To a greater extent, it makes it clear that, instead of being perceived as victims, the survivors were immediately approached as suspects. Philip told me that the police presence and the lack of communication from the authorities meant that “people thought that if you went in the front door, there was a visa van in the back to take you off to deport you”.

A bereaved family member, Karim Mussilhy, told the Inquiry about how the police were “heavily guarding” the Westway Centre (Mussilhy, 2022a). Karim explains how he was looking for his uncle, who was missing at the time, but he was denied access to the Westway Centre, where they wouldn’t let him in, nor would they let him find out whether his uncle had made it in there. After telling the Inquiry about his experience at the Westway Centre, Karim describes “the sinking feeling that we’d been abandoned, but not only been abandoned, but we’d almost sort of been like kicked aside, ‘Move along, you know, there’s nothing here for you’, and that’s what it felt like” (Mussilhy, 2022a: 34). It is a clear illustration of the simultaneous experience of abandonment and securitisation, the two poles of the state’s response. The point is put starkly in Karim’s comment in his witness statement over a year prior: “On 14 June I was in the area the whole day and evening, going to many, many different centres, and not once did I see a person in authority, other than police officers” (Mussilhy 2020: 17).

Emma Dent Coad makes a point about covert securitisation in the fire's aftermath, though in this case she points, shockingly, to the presence of MI5 within the local community:

Somebody said that [the national government] thought Grenfell might be more dangerous to the government than Brexit. So, they came in, we had MI5 agents out there in the community, trying to pick up what was going on. I was followed, fact. They were trying to work out what I was up to, and MI5 agents were following me [...] They were following all my social media and everything, which you kind of expect (Emma Dent Coad, Councillor and former MP, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021).

As I show in Chapter Five, the causes of the fire laid bare criticism of the government, and Emma therefore suggests it was the state's immediate concern to contain any outbreak or riots and maintain social order to protect the state. The state's response to the fire therefore indicates how the state "wishes to protect itself and Capital above the population" (Preston, 2019: 28). To do so, the State's immediate response to the fire involved the surveillance and securitisation of the North Kensington community to prevent riots and disruptions and maintain the political status quo.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the role of the state in the humanitarian response to the fire. Using the qualitative findings from my interviews and the findings from the Public Inquiry, I critically assessed the role of the local, national and security state in the immediate aftermath of the fire. I argued that, while, on the one hand, the Grenfell families felt abandoned by the state, on the other hand, the state *was* present in the form of securitisation, which existed to maintain social order. This chapter argued that the state addressed the Grenfell Tower fire as a political disaster, rather than a humanitarian emergency.

To summarise the chapter in more detail, Section 5.1 described how the Grenfell survivors and families were abandoned by the local authority in the aftermath of the fire. I described how the local community, volunteers, and charities were at the forefront of the relief effort, with little support or coordination being offered by the council. I critically examined the council's role in providing emergency accommodation and rest centres for the victims of the fire. As the category 1 responder to the disaster, the RBKC was legally required to

provide these spaces for the victims, yet, as I argued, the council's allocation of emergency accommodation was inhumane, apathetic, and neglectful.

Section 5.2 examined the organisation of the Westway Centre, the only official rest centre opened by the council, which was eventually taken over by Ealing Council. Here, I argued that, because of outsourcing and reliance on "abandonment of responsibility" (Bhandar, 2018: n.p.), the council no longer felt responsible for or accountable to its social housing constituents. The council not only outsourced the management of its council housing to the KCTMO in 1997, but it also outsourced its humanity.

Drawing on my participants' accounts and analysis, Section 5.3 described the fire's aftermath as a continuation of the marginalisation that the North Kensington residents were treated with before the fire, resembling what Eddie describes as a "tragedy of three acts". My participants argue that they would not have suffered from such institutional neglect or abandonment if they were a wealthier or predominantly white community. I outlined evidence that reaffirms the argument that race, ethnicity, and religion were decisive in the council's abandonment. In fact, I suggested that the council deliberately mobilised racial and territorial stigma (Wacquant, 2007, 2008) as a government technology (Tyler, 2020) to justify its response to the fire and inflict blame on the residents.

In Section 5.4, I analysed the fire as a political disaster for the local and national governments. I argued that the government aimed to mitigate the reputational, legal, and political consequences for itself. Firstly, I discussed how the council declined additional help in its humanitarian response because of concerns about its reputation and party-politics. Secondly, I showed how the central government has refused to hold the council accountable for its failures in the aftermath. My participants argue that this is because RBKC is a Conservative Council, and the central government wishes to protect them. Thirdly, I critically examined some of the central government's public responses to the fire, including its announcement of a Public Inquiry, the rehousing pledge, and the emergency fund. I argued that the announcement of the Public Inquiry did not reflect the demands or needs of those on the ground, while the rehousing pledge was an unattainable and unnecessary promise, and the emergency fund was announced as a means of temporarily "paying off" the victims. I suggested that all these public announcements of support were used to quieten criticism of the government and prevent social disorder.

The final key argument of the chapter, in Section 5.5, contrasted the absence of the government with the immediate and excessive police presence. I argued that the government *was* present in the aftermath of the fire, but it was in the form of securitisation. I considered the government's surveillance of the community, using police helicopters, undercover intelligence, and existing infrastructure that pre-existed the fire through the Prevent programme. The priority of the state was to maintain social order, and this was prioritised over the humanitarian response. This is clearly exemplified by the management of the Westway Centre, which was supposed to be a key rest centre but was surrounded by police vans and armed guards. I argued that the perceived ethnic, racial, and religious markers of the Grenfell community were used to frame them as a "suspect community" to insert the political issue of security into the aftermath. The aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire is evidence of the real consequences that racist and territorial stigmatisation can have on those living in tainted places. It allows the authorities to implement "special measures, deviating from both law and custom" - in this case, the abandonment and securitisation of racialised and working-class disaster victims - regardless of "whether or not these areas are in fact dilapidated and dangerous" (Wacquant, 2008: 240; 239).

## Chapter Six

### Community Campaign Groups and the Struggle to be Heard

The previous chapter described the abandonment, stigmatisation, and securitisation of the Grenfell survivors, families, and local community in the immediate aftermath of the fire. In this chapter, I extend the analysis of the aftermath to consider how the North Kensington community has responded to the fire and organised itself politically since. In Section 6.1, I introduce the media's provocative portrayal of the Grenfell community as the foremost obstacle to being heard. I show how Islamophobia, racism, and class-based stigma were mobilised to scapegoat the victims; during which period many of the first campaigns were formed. I later suggest that Grenfell United's emphasis on dignity is a way of challenging this discourse and defying stereotypes.

In Section 6.2, I introduce the three leading Grenfell campaign groups. This section primarily focuses on Grenfell United because it is the only group that represents the majority of the survivors and bereaved families of the Grenfell Tower fire. However, I also engage with two other prominent campaign groups: Justice 4 Grenfell and the Grenfell Community Campaigners. Here, I compare some of the tactics used by Grenfell United, Justice 4 Grenfell, and the Grenfell Community Campaigners. I consider the lobbying by Grenfell United, the political positioning of Justice 4 Grenfell, and the protests by the Grenfell Community Campaigners.

In Section 6.3, I develop the argument that the council and government have deliberately implemented a "divide and rule" approach to the various groups and communities in North Kensington, in order to weaken the unity and power between them. My participants argue that the council has produced a "hierarchy of grief" between North Kensington residents, which works to prioritise some voices over others, allowing tension and anger to arise between different groups and individuals. Here, I consider claims of covert government intelligence being planted in the community to cause divisions and tension.

Finally, Section 6.4 critically assesses the silent walk as one of the most recognisable forms of mobilisation associated with the fire. For most of the bereaved and survivors, silence is an essential feature of the walk. On the other hand, some of my participants oppose the effectiveness of the silent walk in demanding justice or change. Some argue that riots would have been more effective, while others point to the benefits of using other civil

disobedience tactics. Alternatively, some suggest that a variety of tactics could be used, which would allow the silent walk to exist in its current form but give space for others to mobilise more disruptive techniques to attain justice and change.

### **6.1. Speaking Into a Biased Listening**

While Chapter One introduced some of the provocative discourse surrounding the Grenfell community, thus far I have not thoroughly interrogated the role of the mainstream media in reproducing this discourse and the consequences it has had. However, this is an important development of the thesis to understand both the aftermath of the fire and the struggle to be heard. Eddie (survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021), who is a Grenfell United committee member, tells me that “one of the most distressing things” for him about the aftermath of the fire was “the portrayal of our community by certain elements of the press”. Consequently, as Rags Martel (ITV News Journalist, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021) tells me, it meant there was initially “quite a lot of hostility towards the media” in North Kensington after the fire, and “understandably, a bit of fear and scepticism about the type of coverage” the fire would get. He tells me how “it felt like you had to earn your trust with the residents and survivors in a time which was quite, you know, traumatic”.

Racism and Islamophobia were found to be rife in the mainstream media’s coverage of the fire. Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021), for example, describes how “there seemed to be a push to promote this idea that the tower was full of immigrants and people sleeping on floors, and it seemed to be a pushing of blame on these types of people”. Graham (Bishop of Kensington, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021) similarly explains how “there were some caricatures in the media at the time, and you know, stories going around about, you know, the Tower full of benefit scroungers and unregistered immigrants, and those kinds of stories, which actually were found to be unfounded”. Significantly, Graham puts it down to racialised social housing stigma:

There was that usual sort of, you know, social housing stigma. This is an area full of poor people who are just hooking up benefits from the state, not paying their rent. And, you know, tapping into the kind of large immigrant nature of the community or multi-ethnic nature of the community.

A myth that is still prominent in public discourse today is the claim that the “real” death toll has been covered up. Interestingly, this is one of the most recurring claims that I hear while speaking to people casually about the fire. This rumour started on the ground immediately after the fire, as members of the public and celebrities, such as Lily Allen, told



the media that there were hundreds of body bags at the base of the tower. It was then reproduced on social media and in the mainstream media. As Natasha (survivor and chair of Grenfell United, 7<sup>th</sup> October 2021) tells me:

I remember someone saying, “Oh, there was 700/800 people that lived in that building”, and I literally tapped the person on the shoulder and went, “Did you live there?”. And they were like, “No, but I know there was”. Well, you didn’t live there, and I’m telling you for free, there weren’t 700 or 800 people living in that building.

Still today, people argue that there are more people dead than have been publicly disclosed. Yet Natasha explains how the people who lived in Grenfell Tower were the ones who were responsible for producing the “missing list” in the immediate aftermath of the fire, and they know more than anyone who lived there:

We knew who was missing. We knew who our neighbours were. As a collective of people, we knew what those numbers were. So, the number that exists is the truth because, you know, that’s how we pieced together who was not around. You know, we’ve all done witness statements, we’ve all given statements to the police, we’ve all said who lived on our floor. We’ve all done that.

The idea that there are fatalities unaccounted for is itself rooted in prejudice relating to stereotypes about the living conditions of racialised communities in social housing. It also works to reproduce the narrative that Grenfell Tower was home to subletters and illegal immigrants and undermine the bereaved and survivors, as it dismisses the fact that they knew who their neighbours were.

The prominence of this rumour over six years after the fire shows how the public believes sensationalised and provocative discourse. Aside from rumours about the death toll, this has other concerning consequences. As Philip (Ealing Council, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021) argues, “people believed the narrative, the public believed it” and yet the media wanted to spin this narrative “to dehumanise sympathy because if you make someone look as if they deserve something, then you can’t feel sympathy for them”. By portraying the Grenfell families as illegal immigrants, subletters, and scroungers, the media framed them as the “undeserving poor”, who are not deserving of social housing and welfare “handouts”. It is on this basis that the media can “dehumanise sympathy”, as according to this discourse, the residents shouldn’t have been living in Grenfell Tower in the first place, and thus their lives are “ungrievable” (Butler, 2016: 24). As Lizzie (local resident, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2021) powerfully put it, there is an “insane implication that even if somebody was an immigrant or subletting from somebody that they were somehow evil and wrong, and that meant it was okay for them to die in a horrible, terrible, protracted death”.

Denise (local resident, 25<sup>th</sup> October 2020)) makes a direct connection between “what was written in the papers or on the news” and public support for the Grenfell community. Significantly, she tells me that “after a few weeks [...] the sympathy started to go from the public, they started saying ‘oh it was all illegals anyway’, when they weren’t”. The argument that the public “believed the narrative”, as Philip put it, is also supported by the racist and Islamophobic abuse the Grenfell victims have been subjected to since. This is not only shown by the Grenfell Tower effigy that I discussed in Chapter One, but Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) also tells me about a family that has been targeted on the street with racist abuse:

People that I know have been targeted in the streets because they've been seen on telly talking about their uncle that's died, they've been racially abused and told it's “kebabs tower”, “falafel tower” and “your uncle was a terrorist”, you know, their children have been bullied in school with the allegation that his uncle was a terrorist and had to move school and even had to move areas because people locally in Feltham were targeting them and bullying them because they've been identified as someone that lost a family member in Grenfell.

Aside from the repulsive abuse that the Grenfell victims have been subjected to, this discourse is also damaging for the overall campaign. As Gill (former Grenfell Tower resident, 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021) put it, the Grenfell campaigners are speaking into “biased listening”:

They have a lot of prejudice, so the notion of othering. So, you know in the immediate days after Grenfell, even the months, if you look at tweets and stuff and the absolute racist rhetoric that they are speaking. That really opened my eyes, like God, how messed up we are and how much bias there is out there. So, I think they're speaking into a biased listening.

By othering the victims in this way, this discourse operates to diminish public support for the victims and contain public disorder in the face of social injustice. In a similar vein, Lowkey argues that the media discourse has meant that the fire has been “very conveniently ghettoized very, very quickly”:

The thing that you have to remember about Grenfell is it's a national scandal that's been disguised as a local scandal, meaning that they very quickly cordoned it off as something that only affected, you know, Muslims in social housing, whereas the truth, as we've seen, is there are millions of leaseholders across the country who are being told they have to pay 40-50 grand to get the stuff removed from buildings that they didn't even decide what was going to be put on it, so now you're affecting what at least the British public understands to be a different social demographic.

By framing Grenfell Tower as home to illegal immigrants and scroungers, it frames the fire and the circumstances around it as exceptional. This subsequently disguises the extent of

the building safety crisis, which has been found to affect thousands of buildings across the country. Again, this has the consequence of containing public anger and social disorder.

It is against this backdrop of abandonment, which I describe in Chapter Five, and stigmatisation, by the state, the mainstream media, and the public (through social media), that many of the first Grenfell campaign groups were formulated. This, I argue, is an important point to note while considering the tactics of the campaign groups and specifically Grenfell United's emphasis on dignity and respect, which may be understood as a way of challenging stereotypes and myths. In the next section, I map out three of the key Grenfell campaign groups operating in North Kensington while comparing their tactics and political positioning.

## **6.2. Mapping the Campaign Groups and Their Tactics**

Grenfell United was formulated in the days and weeks after the fire, when, in the absence of the RBKC and the KCTMO, the survivors used the Rugby Portobello Trust to shelter and later formulate a list of the missing and survivors. The group initially organised itself as a collective on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2017, and it now represents the majority of the 305 survivors and the hundreds of bereaved relatives (Booth, 2019). Grenfell United came together amid the abandonment by the authorities that I describe in Chapter Five. At the heart of Grenfell United has been that the group presents itself in what Eddie (survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021) calls a “dignified and respectful manner”.

Grenfell United is at the forefront of the campaign for justice and change. This is predominantly due to the exclusivity of the group and their collective proximity to the fire. By exclusivity, I refer to how the group's membership only includes the bereaved and survivors, and the group is therefore self-representative. This feature serves to be “a lot more powerful” for Grenfell United, as Rikeiya (survivor, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2020) tells me: “It is literally coming from the people; there's no third party; there's no intervention; we don't need a representative. We can represent ourselves”. Grenfell United represents the interests of the bereaved and survivors to the public through social media outlets and the news media, but also within politics by engaging with local councillors and members of parliament. The exclusivity of the group also ensures there is a clear and direct collective message from those directly affected by the fire, which is beneficial for the campaign and the broader solidarity of those impacted by the fire.

Since 2017, Grenfell United have consistently lobbied the government for truth, justice, and change. It is “a role they have played, from *necessity*, which shames this government” (Renwick, 2018: 23, *emphasis added*). It is a role played out of necessity because it is evident, as I show in Chapter Seven, that the government will resist meeting the needs of the bereaved and the survivors, unless they are demanded and fought for. From 2017 to date, Natasha (Chair of Grenfell United, 7<sup>th</sup> October 2021) tells me, she has “probably met every minister there is to meet”, and Grenfell United has hosted multiple parliamentary events to raise awareness. In terms of the council, she explains how the bereaved and survivors have had “no choice but to work with them and to hold them to account”, as the bereaved and survivors have had to sort out housing, support plans, recovery, health, and wellbeing, among a catalogue of other issues. They learned early on that they had to maintain a level of relationship with the local and national government; as Natasha puts it, “If you didn’t work with them, how was we ever going to get stuff done?”

Another well-known campaign group is Justice 4 Grenfell, which officially launched as a group on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2017. On its website, Justice 4 Grenfell describes itself as a “community-led organisation, focused on the long-term goal of obtaining justice” who, with “many other local groups and individuals [...] stepped into the void left by the authorities” (Justice4Grenfell.org, n.d.). Over the years, there has been a turnover of Justice 4 Grenfell members; however, most members have been local residents of North Kensington. Justice 4 Grenfell campaign to “hold all responsible authorities and individuals to account (including prosecutions)”, to ensure the fire “stays in the public consciousness”, and to “build broad alliances with a range of campaigning organisations and social justice movements” (ibid.). Some of my participants point to the political differences between Grenfell United and Justice 4 Grenfell as a key distinguishing feature. As Sue (local resident, Grenfell Community Campaigner, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021) puts it, Justice 4 Grenfell “were more the political one”, who would “be the one that would be out there campaigning and keeping it out on social media”, while Grenfell United would “meet the Government, and meet the Prime Minister, and talk about things”.

Justice 4 Grenfell often aligns itself with the political Left, and this has been used against them by the media on numerous occasions (Kennedy, 2017; The Times, 2017; Martin and Hargreaves, 2017). Moyra (local resident, Grenfell Community Campaigners, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021) was previously a member of Justice 4 Grenfell and tells me how the group was “demonized” as being “terrible lefties” and “antisemites” by the *Daily Mail*:

[They] did this big double page spread that said the Left were parasitic on the grief of the survivors and bereaved. There was a kind of picture of me [...] they also called out somebody else who worked in the parliamentary office so had connections to Corbyn and McDonnell and then a Muslim woman, who they claimed was antisemitic. So, you can sort of see the whole thing, the way they were making the connections.

The article Moyra describes here was published by the *Daily Mail* on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2017 and was titled, “Far-left activists in bid to hijack Grenfell: Fire victims hit out at rabble-rousers to exploit deaths of 71” (Martin and Hargreaves, 2017). Interestingly, it positions Justice 4 Grenfell in opposition to the bereaved and survivors, writing that Justice 4 Grenfell are “self-appointed activists [who] have no connection with those who are still grieving” (Martin and Hargreaves, 2017). Describing multiple Justice 4 Grenfell members, it refers to: “The Antisemite”; “The Trade Unionist”; and Moyra as a “long-serving activist with affiliation to the far-left Socialist Worker Party”, while another member is described as having “protested [...] with the Revolutionary Communist Group”.

Grenfell United, on the other hand, are non-partisan, an approach that they understand as beneficial for both gaining governmental access and reducing the loss of access that could come with association with a party. Summing up the broad approach, Grenfell United committee member Edward (survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021) comments that the decision to be non-partisan has been “helpful, not in working with the government, but in holding the government to account”. Natasha explains how being non-partisan prevented the government from overlooking them or accusing them of political point-scoring:

A lot of people wanted us to be [party] political. If we'd gone down the route of being political and, you know, had the whole Labour Party behind us, the Tories would have just brushed us aside. Us not being political helped in the sense where, we don't care who you are if you can help get the situation sorted, and I think that helped us get to where we've got to because they couldn't say. “Oh, it's because you're Labour”.

In any case, both the Labour and Conservative governments are implicated in the context that led to Grenfell, particularly in relation to the disinvestment in social housing and council-estate stigmatisation and privatisation. And Natasha expresses scepticism towards politicians in general, regardless of political party, explaining that “politicians are politicians, you've just got to see them for what they are, you know, and they will give you all the lip service under the sun and say we care, and Grenfell's a priority but I'm not sure if it is”. In terms of local politics, Natasha tells me that “the Labour Party in RBKC is very much about scoring points”. I witnessed this first-hand at the Grenfell silent walk in June

2023, marking the six-year anniversary of the fire, where the new Labour leader of RBKC, Kasim Ali, failed to recognise Natasha and asked for her name. This is shocking considering he has been a Labour councillor since 2019, and Natasha has been the Chair of Grenfell United since before that time.

A third prominent group, though less well known than the previous two, is the Grenfell Community Campaigners. Recently, Rags Martel (ITV News Journalist, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021) tells me that the Grenfell Community Campaigners have become familiar because of their “protest outside the inquiry”. As Sue Duggins (6<sup>th</sup> January 2021), a member of the group, tells me, “We literally just chant; we put all our banners up; you know, we've got ‘RBKC, you have blood on your hands’ and ‘end the cladding scandal’. Loads of banners, just put them out, and we just stand and chant for two hours, and then we pack up and leave”. The Grenfell Community Campaigners have also protested elsewhere. On 14<sup>th</sup> December 2021 they protested outside Celotex, with one of the protestors telling the *Big Issue*, “We wanted something where we could make some noise and stop business for a couple of hours, which we managed to do. And then come back and join in the peaceful action tonight” (Geraghty, 2021). Sue speaks about attending the silent walk later during the same day, demonstrating how a combination of tactics, both peaceful and more disruptive, are sometimes used by some of the groups.

Although I have only discussed the three most prominent campaign groups, Cornish (2021) records 74 active community groups. While some participants pointed to the advantages of having different campaign groups and different methods for gaining attention from the media and government, others were critical. Daniel (videographer, writer, and campaigner, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021) works closely with Grenfell United and argues that they have been “exceptional” but “unfortunately they haven't had the support [from other campaign groups] that they should have got and there's been political divides [between the campaign groups]”. He identifies a cause of this in money and funding:

Grenfell, Grenfell, Grenfell, Grenfell, Grenfell. Names, money, funding. Outcomes? Changes? Work for young people? Articles? Films? [...] I don't understand what these campaign groups are. There shouldn't be groups, there should be a unified thing. I've never understood the segmentation and the need... I do now, because if you go on Company House, you see why. You see why. These are limited companies.

As Daniel develops the point, he suggests that the number of Grenfell campaign groups and the amount of funding given to them are not proportionate to the outcomes and

changes that follow. He is sceptical of some of the groups using the Grenfell name, suggesting that they are using it to advance their own personal and economic interests rather than the needs of the survivors and bereaved.

### **6.3. Divide and Rule**

Thus far, this chapter has discussed the leading campaign groups that arose in the immediate aftermath of the fire and the differences between them. My participants agree that the fire brought together a sense of unity within North Kensington; however, within the unity, there have also been political divides. Strikingly, the MP Emma Dent-Coad (2022: n.p.) asserts that division strategies have been deliberately employed by the government: “Divide and conquer is the guiding mantra of our governing elite”, as shown by how “they have divided so successfully the various Grenfell communities”.

Sue Caro (local resident and former Justice for Grenfell campaigner, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021) argues that the divisions and conflict within North Kensington have been “deliberately fostered by the government”. She tells me that “the community has been blown apart by what happened, and unfortunately, there’s a lot of different camps of people all fighting each other, and that’s exactly what they wanted to happen because there’s no unity, there’s no strength in that”. According to Sue, by dividing the community, the government was able to avoid “taking responsibility for what they’ve done”. Sue tells me that the “absolute number one priority” was “covering their arses”, as it was the Conservative government, through measures like austerity and the red tape initiative, and the Conservative council, who caused the fire.

It may not be possible to reveal an explicit governmental intent to divide and rule this way, but we can identify the process in governmental practice. The government ensured the North Kensington residents were fragmented by dividing them into different categories and giving them differential treatment accordingly. Joe (19<sup>th</sup> November 2021), a resident of Lancaster West Estate, describes how this began very early on in the council’s recovery plan, with the division between Category A and Category B residents:

The community got fragmented. You know, the council came up with their recovery plan, and they categorised people in different categories, so the people who lived in the tower Category A, people who lived on the walkways where I lived were Category B, and that was it. No one else was willing to be helped, and I was saying to everyone at the time, I was like, “Don’t agree to this. Don’t agree, if you all boycott it, they’ll have no choice other than to change it”, but that was the beginning

of the end when they started to split people like that, and people bought into the splits. Once they were able to divide, they conquered.

According to the first Independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce Report (2017), Category A and B referred to the residents prioritised for permanent rehousing. As Joe explains, Category A predominantly included those who lived in Grenfell Tower or those whose homes were damaged by the fire, while Category B referred to those who lived in the areas surrounding the tower.

The current RBKC Rehousing Policy explains these priority bands in more depth. Category A for rehousing includes “all former residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk” who hold “the highest priority for rehousing” (RBKC, 2019: 7). Within Category A, there are multiple priority bands to distinguish between the residents. The first band priority is given to bereaved households, and the second band priority is given to households with a member with serious mental or physical disabilities. The third band prioritises households with dependent children, and the fourth band includes former residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk. The length of residence is used to distinguish between households that have the same priority band. The priority bands are therefore examples of how the local community and the survivors have been divided across multiple lines. It also produces a hierarchy of suffering, which can be demeaning for those involved.

Several of my participants report that the government gives preferential treatment to select groups and communities, producing further fragmentation. April (local resident, 11 May 2021) tells me that the government implemented a “divide and rule approach in North Kensington” by providing for some groups while allowing “different groups [to] end up struggling, not being supported [...] not being listened to by the government”. While she does not specifically name any groups, other informants point out the differential treatment between the bereaved and survivors, as well as between these groups and the wider community.

Eddie (4<sup>th</sup> February 2021), a committee member of Grenfell United, recognises that a “level of disenfranchisement” is being caused by the fact that not all the community groups are being listened to equally:

So, look, Grenfell United, the bereaved and survivors, we are listened to. I don't think that every group in North Kensington is listened to, or feels that they're listened to, so that's really painful because, you know, one thing that should happen,



or one consequence of Grenfell, is that communities that weren't listened to previously should be listened to now.... Grenfell happened, and they feel that the same things are happening subsequently.

This is something that is also felt by David (8<sup>th</sup> October 2021), a resident of Lancaster West Estate, who argues that “the government response has been very specific, and it's been to empower one set of people, and that's the people they talk to, and the problem is there is no one voice that can speak for all of North Kensington”. David argues that the local and national governments' responses to the fire have been calculated and self-interested:

The council and the government have drawn a line around people who were within the tower, making sure they're very well compensated because obviously they're trying to mitigate any future actions, and insurance claims, and all the rest of it. So, they've given them as much as they could. Everyone else, they've ignored pretty much, and I think that's fundamentally been the driving principle behind it. It's not “how can we fix the problem?”; it's “how can we solve the problem for us?”

David's point is a significant, critical appraisal of the local and national government's approach, attempting to mitigate the risk of legal action by the survivors instead of improving the lives of the North Kensington residents. The fact that local voices continued to be ignored suggests that there had not been a cultural change within the government, as the conditions that led to the fire persist. Instead, as David argues, it appears that the government is attempting to mitigate the consequences for themselves by only providing for and listening to those directly affected by the fire.

Similarly, Lowkey commented on the government's divide and rule approach publicly on multiple occasions. In a memorial YouTube video marking the four-year anniversary since the fire, Lowkey argued that “the clear motive from the beginning for the state has been to split apart and almost form a hierarchy of suffering and divide the communities concerned” (Grenfell United, 2021). According to Lowkey, in situations of “state crime or corporate crime”, the government's “main aim” is “to split those most affected from those slightly less affected but still affected. This community has to come together, identify clearly who our enemies are, clearly who the companies are that we have to target” (ibid.). Lowkey reinforced the point at the end of the five-year anniversary silent walk, where he performed a spoken-word poem and again pointed to the government's interest in dividing the community. The poem includes the lines that “those that wish to divide us are standing beside us” and “[central government] want us fighting each other so we don't focus on them” (Grenfell United, 2022). The problem is significant enough that on the five-year

anniversary silent walk, the chair of Grenfell United, Natasha, directly raised it in her address to the crowd:

Grenfell United was formed in the days after the fire when no one who was in charge came to our aid, and we've been here ever since. Despite the attacks, the malicious rumours, the smears, the divisive people that have been placed in this community to divide us. There's many people amongst us that have come and embedded themselves in this community to create careers for themselves (Grenfell United, 2022).

There have been suspicions about undercover officials in the community since the weeks immediately after the fire. An early incident that gave fuel to these suspicions is described by Grenfell United member Shahin Sadafi in the *Guardian* (Booth, 2019). Shahin explains how, eleven days after the fire, Grenfell United were urged by the central government to join or merge with another organisation, the Grenfell Bereaved and Survivors' Trust, that was supposedly founded by a bereaved local Sudanese community leader. When Grenfell United declined this offer, government officials repeatedly persisted with this suggestion. On one occasion, an official proposed a private meeting with Shahin Sadafi and Ibrahim El-Nour, the individual who supposedly organised the other group. This offer was declined by Shahin Sadafi, but the fact that the invite was only extended to those two individuals raised suspicions of an attempt to divide and rule (ibid.). The government then arranged a meeting about the group with Grenfell survivors and bereaved families at the Westway, where it emerged that Ibrahim El-Nour was not a bereaved family member at all but rather he claimed to know someone in the tower who he referred to as "auntie" as a sign of respect. This solidified suspicions among Grenfell United (Davies, 2017; Henry, 2017), leading some to believe Ibrahim El-Nour was working on behalf of the police and government (Booth, 2019).

#### **6.4. Walk, Riot, or Disruption?**

The fragmentation between the North Kensington residents is further entrenched by disagreements over direct action strategies. However, regarding such strategies, disagreement must be viewed as a necessary or at least likely outcome of discussion and deliberation on the vital question of how the campaign for justice can be most effective. In this section, I consider the central tactic of the silent march, the arguments advanced in its favour, disagreements surrounding it, and views about alternative and more disruptive tactics.

The monthly silent walks are one of the most widely recognised campaign activities associated with the Grenfell cause. During the walks, attendees carry banners, placards, and green sashes, which symbolise Grenfell and contribute to one of the walk's roles, as an act of remembrance. All the while, in contrast to conventional demonstrations, participants walk in near-absolute silence. The silence is striking and has been central from the start and up to the most recent walk taking place on the sixth-year anniversary. The silence brings a strong quality of remembrance to the walk, deliberately so. It is also intended as a means of challenging the negative stereotyping of the community in the press and by government, as I have discussed in Section 6.1, by presenting an image of a dignified and respectful community (Tekin and Drury, 2021). Since September 2017, I have attended most of the silent walks. On one occasion, there was a separate silent walk in Manchester on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2018, which I also attended.

The usual route begins at the Notting Hill Methodist Church, which is at the base of Grenfell Tower, and travels along Ladbroke Grove and Latimer Road, where it eventually concludes at the Grenfell Tower Memorial Wall beneath the Westway. At the Memorial Wall, there are announcements, speeches, and words of remembrance. On some occasions, the route is significantly longer and travels to the Kensington Town Hall. The first-year anniversary walk was attended by around 5,000 people (BBC, 2018), while 18,000 people attended the fifth-year anniversary walk (Grenfell United, 2022a). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the silent walk came to a halt due to social distancing requirements; however, Grenfell United continued to organise monthly virtual silent walks on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. In November 2021, Grenfell United made the formal decision to reduce the monthly silent walks to twice a year, taking place annually on 14<sup>th</sup> December and 14<sup>th</sup> June.

The first official walk was organised by Zeyad Cred, a local resident, one month after the fire on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2017 (Fox, 2018). The idea of the walk originated as Zeyad Cred “became increasingly aware that the local community was in need of a safe and peaceful form of protest” (ACAVA, n.d.). Zeyad has been the organiser of the walks ever since. Zeyad explains that the importance of peacefulness was something that he learned from the 2011 riots (Fox, 2018). As I mention in Chapter Five, the 2011 riots started in London following the murder of Mark Duggan at the hands of the police, and it led to civil unrest across several major cities across England. The riots went on for five nights and led to more than 2,000 people being traced, charged, and convicted (Bell, 2021). Zeyad argues that “when

people talk about the [2011] riots now, they only talk about the looting, not about *why* London rioted that day, which was because police had shot a man dead. I wanted to make sure that we didn't follow suit, that this community didn't get targeted as the aggressor" (in Fox, 2018). This point can be contested. It is arguable that the murder of Mark Duggan stayed in the public eye for as long as it did because of the riots. The same can be said for the murder of George Floyd.

Following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in May 2020, there were mass demonstrations and riots against police violence throughout the United States, under the broad banner of Black Lives Matter (Christián, Erdős, and Háló, 2022). Through protest, disruption, and social media, a local demonstration in Minneapolis concerning police brutality became an issue that was protested throughout the United States and globally in at least 50 countries (Smith, Wu, and Murphy, 2020). While many of the protests were peaceful, some of them resulted in widespread rioting, looting, inner-city occupations, and the burning down of a police station (Betz, 2020). The Black Lives Matter protests saw the issue of state racism and police brutality elevated into global consciousness, while the police officer involved, Derek Chauvin, was later charged and found guilty of murder and sentenced to 21 years in prison, an extremely rare occurrence of successful prosecution in the long history of police killing of black people (Arango, 2021; Cooper and Fiegel, 2021).

Yet, Zeyad is correct in arguing that the issues of criminality and looting dominated the political and mediated framing of the 2011 riots, which served as evidence of "broken Britain" (Solomos, 2011), an "underclass" (Tyler, 2013), and later, "sink estates" (Slater, 2018), subsequently allowing the causes of the riots to be dismissed as "apolitical" (Wacquant, 2008: 24). The riots therefore had real consequences for those labelled by the media and within politics as the "underclass", a population "defined by its 'antisocial behaviours'" (ibid.). As Solomos (2011: 2) put it, "the idea of the riots as a product of a 'Broken Britain' became a strong undercurrent in the commentaries on the riots almost as soon as the riots started". The violence and criminality of the riots led to the reproduction of the belief or assertion that inequality is a product of group internal socio-psychological characteristics, leading to increased stigmatisation of those groups labelled as the underclass (Tyler, 2013: 7).

Regarding issues of homes and housing in particular, Slater (2018) shows how the 2011 riots were identified with so-called “sink estates” by the Policy Exchange thinktank and how this informed marginalising and harmful social policy for those living in social-housing estates. In 2014, for example, Policy Exchange published a report titled *The Estate We’re In: Lessons from the Front Line*, which states in its introduction:

Let us state the obvious: the riots did not start in a street of Georgian houses with spacious sash windows and manicured lawns. The riots started on a social housing estate – Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham, to be exact. [...] Despite brave attempts to revive the community spirit, *it suffered the same fate as many other large housing estates in the UK: few if any social amenities, high unemployment, poor police relations, low educational attainment, and a feeling of hopelessness amongst its residents* (Knight and McLeod, 2014: 13–14, *emphasis added*).

Even though the riots did not start on the Broadwater Farm Estate as the report claims, the 2011 riots were used to support the discourse that “social housing estates [...] create poverty, family breakdown, worklessness, welfare dependency, antisocial behaviour and personal irresponsibility” (Slater, 2018: 877). The sink estate narrative fuelled the territorial stigmatisation of council estates, of which social-housing tower blocks often feature in the social imaginary as the archetypical form. This is important to consider in the context of the territorial stigmatisation that the Grenfell residents were subjected to both prior to and in the aftermath of the fire.

Zeyad comments on the negative press coverage that Grenfell campaigners received when disruptive tactics were used at the Kensington Town Hall, two days after the fire. In an interview with Going Underground on RT (2018), Zeyad refers to the news images of angry protestors forcing themselves into the Town Hall and storming past the police. This coverage was shown across all major news platforms, and Zeyad argues that this exemplifies “how quick bad news travels” (Going Underground on RT, 2018).

The silent walks are a powerful way to disrupt negative stereotypes. Gill (former Grenfell Tower resident, 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021) tells me that “Grenfell United have been brilliant because they haven’t responded as they were expected to”. She argues that “if they [members of the local community] just rioted, that would have just fed the existing narrative and justified them not being heard. So, I think taking a different approach was really good”. According to April (former local resident, 11 May 2021), refraining from rioting is “one of the best things” that the Grenfell families have done:

After they went to the town hall, they were expected to cause so much trouble [...] The government expected it to be riots and all troublemakers but that has never, ever happened. So, I think that is one of the best ways they have proven that they are people, that something horrific has happened to, and all they want is to be heard and to get some sense out of what has happened, and for it to never happen again.

Most of the local community members I spoke to agreed that the silent walks were important in constructing a positive – and hence effective – image of the bereaved and survivors, which challenged stigmatisation and prevented the public and the government from dismissing or undermining their cause. However, some of my participants call for more direct action against the government, highlighting that historically, civil disobedience has often successfully led to social change. This direct action may involve riots, but it can also include broader strategies that challenge the government or the companies involved, such as picketing or occupying offices. Some of my participants argue that the government needs to feel threatened to respond efficiently and effectively to the demands being made.

Some suggest that there has been too much emphasis placed on dignity, and this has impeded the progress of the campaign. Joe (Lancaster West resident, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021) passionately conveys his frustration with the lack of change, arguing that he “bitterly regret[s]” that they didn’t riot in the aftermath of the fire. In terms of the silent walk, he tells me that “silence might be dignified, but silence is also easy to ignore”:

We look dignified and everything, but you know what? Dignity in an empty sack is worth a sack, and it got us fuck all. It’s the squeaky hinge that gets the oil. There’s never been any point in history where, you know, rights or privileges have been granted to the many by the few without them being fought for, and fundamentally, we forgot that. We tried to act reasonably with people who are fundamentally unwilling to reason.

According to Joe, the dignified approach has not achieved anything other than being perceived as dignified. Joe argues that historical social movements have proven that change needs to be demanded and fought for.

Although Joe’s position sees the positive impact that can come from riots, he puts forward other disruptive and direct-action strategies that are not limited to such. Prior to the Phase 2 of the Inquiry, Joe proposed that the local community should refuse to participate in or engage with the inquiry, considering that the Phase 1 recommendations had not been implemented. He argues that it is “pointless” to come up with more recommendations when the existing recommendations have been “ignored”. By participating in the Inquiry, he argues, we are “lending it credibility”. Phase 2 began at the end of January 2020, but it

was then delayed shortly after, as corporate witnesses put in an immunity bid to prevent inquiry evidence being used against them in criminal proceedings. The Attorney General eventually guaranteed that anything disclosed by the witnesses cannot be used against them in criminal prosecutions, and according to Joe, this decision made a stronger case to object the Public Inquiry. The hearings were planned to resume on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2020, and minutes after it did, he tells me that “three people objected that day, I was one of them”:

The other two got dragged out and arrested for public order, they didn't arrest me. But that was it, and then someone from Grenfell United was sitting there apologising for our behaviour and I was shouting, I was like, “What the fuck you apologising for me for? I'm not fucking sorry. It's just a fucking joke”, and Moore-Bick got up and adjourned for the day, so I managed to get it stopped for a day, but it rolled on. You know, and it [non-disruptive participation] gave it [the inquiry] legitimacy. That's why they're screwed, basically.

The disruption in the Inquiry received a vast amount of media attention, confirming, as Zeyad was seen to nod to above, that bad news does travel quickly. News reports showed coverage of the hearings being disrupted as you can hear people shouting, “What's the point if they (the witness statements) can't be used in a court of law?” and “it's a disgrace” (Sky News, 2020). You can also hear a member of Grenfell United trying to contain the disruption.

Daniel (author, videographer, and campaigner, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021) also argues that the campaign would benefit from more demanding and forceful methods. He echoes abolitionist Fredrick Douglass who famously wrote that “power concedes nothing without a demand” (1857: 22), as he tells me:

My view of the British state is that it concedes nothing without force. You have to demand, but you have to take, and if they're scared of what you're gonna take, they'll give. That's politics in this country [...] The Suffragettes didn't achieve suffrage by being dignified, they did it by throwing themselves under horses. You gotta be willing to die for this.

According to Daniel, the government and the companies involved should be “scared of us [...] after what they did” and it's this fear that's important: “I'm not saying we should *actually* do anything, but it's their fear. They should be scared of us. They should be bloody scared”. He emphasises that “remarkable things have been achieved by the bereaved and survivors”; however, he tells me that they should not be “expected to do everything”. Just like the Suffragists and the Suffragettes, this points to the potential to continue to broaden the techniques and approaches used by the various groups, again suggesting the possibility of a non-dichotomous relationship between the different

strategies. He also infers that it is a misplaced expectation to expect the victims of the fire to be at the forefront of each movement or strategy. On a national scale, “Grenfell exposed everything wrong with this country; you could have built a politics around it. [...] This whole country could have burned down on the basis of Grenfell”. For Daniel, the fire was a missed opportunity to object to and struggle against the political system that caused the fire. It is not just a missed opportunity locally but also a missed opportunity nationally to challenge the social order.

Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) similarly points to the importance of civil disobedience and the role this has played in successful social movements: “In any lesson from history, from the way that people that don’t own property got the rights to vote in this country, from the Suffragettes, the civil rights movement, to collective bargaining, all of them have involved an element of civil disobedience”. In conversation about civil disobedience, Lowkey argues that history shows that “people’s rights are won through a myriad of tactics”, and in terms of the Grenfell campaign, this does not necessarily have to take the form of rioting. When prompted on what this looks like in practice, Lowkey explains:

If it was down to me, there would be more direct action on the companies’ offices and factories. It doesn’t mean hurting anyone; it means occupation. You know, and I think that should happen. I think that should have happened. You know, but those kinds of arguments were carefully kept away from the, you know, people were convinced that the Inquiry was the only game in town, and I don’t think that inquiries and police investigations need to be left to their own devices; there should be public pressure applied.

According to Lowkey, direct action was quickly disregarded in favour of the Inquiry and police investigation. The response to the fire was immediately contained and managed, and this was possible because, as a nation, “we’ve been actively depoliticised and demobilised” and “decontextualised as political actors”. For Lowkey, there has been too much reliance on ready-made solutions provided by the state, which will not challenge the state but instead provide piecemeal solutions to systemic problems.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, there have been some cases of direct action in the company’s factories. Specifically, Grenfell Community Campaigners protested outside of Celotex’s factories in December 2021. Indeed, Grenfell United itself has used other means to disrupt investment in some of the key companies implicated. Grenfell United has



successfully lobbied several companies to disinvest in companies, including Arconic and Celotex, both privately and through the public domain, including social media.

During the fifth-year anniversary silent walk, Zeyad acknowledged that “the silence might not be for everybody”, but he asked people to “please remember why we are walking in silence” (Grenfell United, 2022), and in doing so, he drew attention to an additional and important feature of the “dignified” approach: its counter-action to the forces of fragmentation. Zeyad explained that the silent walks have taken place since the early days after the fire, and ever since they have brought “unity”, “warmth”, and “dignity”, and they have regularly brought together the North Kensington community, or communities, for six years (*ibid.*). This point is similarly made by Cornish (2021) in her study of Grenfell activism. Cornish highlights that the silent walk provides a space of unity and togetherness for the groups and individuals who are affected by and passionate about the fire but have “differences and disagreements” over “strategies [and] demands” (2021: 8). This unity is particularly important in objecting to the divide and rule strategy, which has attempted to stratify the community groups.

While Zeyad emphasises the importance of the silent walk, he also welcomes the idea of starting a secondary movement, if not agreeing with the important position laid out by Joe above, perhaps lessening the distance between the two approaches. As Zayed put it at the walk:

We ask people to make the noise that you would like to make. We will be there, making the noise with you. Let’s create a secondary movement, that the voices can then be heard. But what I ask is, when we come together to walk in silence, please respect that silence [...] Nobody is suggesting that we cannot make noise on other days of the year (Grenfell United, 2022).

Despite this announcement at the fifth-year anniversary walk, it is important to note that, to my knowledge, there have not been any significant moves from other groups to organise a secondary movement that would draw on disruptive tactics and civil disobedience.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how the community of North Kensington has organised itself in the long-term struggle for justice and change. In Section 6.1, I began by examining some of the stigmatising labels and myths that were immediately attached to the Grenfell community by the mainstream media and social media in the aftermath of the fire. Here, I

introduce the media's scapegoating and othering of the community as one of the first obstacles to the community being heard.

In Section 6.2, I compared three of the most prominent campaign groups and their associated tactics. Grenfell United is widely considered to be the main campaign group and has consistently lobbied the government and private companies since the fire, yet it has positioned itself as non-partisan. In contrast, Justice 4 Grenfell, another notable campaign group, associates themselves with the political Left, and is seen to be more "political" than Grenfell United, while Grenfell Community Campaigners have links with the Socialist Workers Party.

In Section 6.3, I considered the argument that the local and national governments have imposed divisions between the groups and individuals in North Kensington as a "divide and conquer" technique to contain and manage the repercussions for the state. By producing a hierarchy of suffering and giving preferential treatment to different groups, the state has encouraged division to form between groups and communities, thus turning them against each other.

In the final part of this chapter, Section 6.4, I critically examined the silent walk as a campaign strategy. I considered arguments for and against the silence that characterises the march. On the one hand, Zeyad Cred, the organiser of the march, emphasises that the silence is significant for defying stereotypes, preventing the community from being scapegoated, as those who engaged in the 2011 riots were, and ensuring togetherness and solidarity between the community. On the other hand, some of my participants point to the historical success of riots and disruption in being heard and listened to by the government. I closed the chapter with Zeyad's proposition that there could be a secondary movement that uses these disruptive tactics, which draws the two poles of the arguments closer together. This is a crucial observation, and it is significant that it was made by the primary organiser of the silent march. Since then, there have yet to be any significant moves by any community groups to organise a more disruptive Grenfell movement.

## Chapter Seven

### **Truth, Justice, Change: Assessing the Long-Term Consequences of the Fire**

The three aims of Grenfell United are captured by the expression “truth, justice, and change”. This chapter considers the long-term consequences of the Grenfell Tower fire, with a focus on these three aims. I unpack the meaning of these terms through the ways that they are framed, understood, and mobilised by Grenfell campaigners. Starting with a discussion about the Public Inquiry findings, Section 7.1 considers the Inquiry as a tool for uncovering the truth about the fire. The campaign for truth is largely framed in opposition to suspicions of a “cover-up”, as I describe in Chapter Six. Most participants agree that the Inquiry has provided a thorough and rigorous investigation of the causes of the fire; however, some of my participants are critical of the terms of reference, while others argue the Inquiry has been detrimental to attaining criminal justice. I consider some of the key findings to emphasise the important role that the Inquiry has played in uncovering the truth about Grenfell while also pointing out some limitations of the Inquiry process.

Justice is largely understood here in terms of criminal prosecutions for those considered responsible for the fire. While a minority of my participants would “settle” for corporate manslaughter charges, which would result in financial penalties rather than individual jail sentences, most participants want to see individuals go to prison. According to this framing of justice, Section 7.2 argues that there has not been any justice for the survivors. While there have been prosecutions since Grenfell, these have predominantly targeted financially and racially marginalised individuals who committed fraud in the aftermath of the fire. At the time of writing (March 2024), no company or individual has been charged for the causes of the fire. In fact, most of the companies implicated in the causes of the fire are economically thriving, while Arconic, Kingspan, and Saint-Gobain have still not contributed a penny to fixing buildings that their products have made unsafe (Gove, 2023).

Section 7.3 turns to consider the change that has resulted from the fire. I begin by looking at the changes that have followed the Inquiry, focusing specifically on the implementation of the Phase 1 recommendations. Following this, I consider changes in

social housing and building safety. I conclude this section by arguing that there have been some important examples of piecemeal change, although they have taken far too long to implement. There has not, however, been any systemic change or evidence of efforts to prompt cultural change.

## **7.1. Truth: The Public Inquiry**

The Public Inquiry has been the most significant mechanism for uncovering the truth about the causes of the fire. It has provided a thorough investigation into the fire and the circumstances that led up to it. It has confirmed that the fire was not an accident, and it has proven that in extensive detail. While it has been necessary for uncovering the truth about the fire, as I discussed in the previous chapter, it has not always had the confidence of the Grenfell bereaved, survivors, and campaigners. Still today, some of my participants maintain that the Inquiry has only uncovered only a partial truth.

### **7.1.1. Phase 1: The London Fire Brigade**

As the remit of Phase 1 of the Inquiry focused on the details of 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017, the initial findings in the report were predominantly critical of the London Fire Brigade (LFB). The report provided a detailed minute-by-minute account tracing the development of the fire, the movement of the people inside the building, and the organisation of the LFB. The Phase 1 report identified a catalogue of issues with the LFB at the incident ground, in the control room, and within its overall training and planning. At each level, there were mistakes that could have been prevented if the LFB learned from the lessons of the Lakanal House fire. Sir Martin Moore-Bick condemned the LFB for “serious shortcomings” and “systemic and operational” failures in its response (Moore-Bick, 2019: 7; 596).

A key failure identified in the report was the LFB’s reluctance to abandon the “stay put advice”, once compartmentation had been breached. The report suggests that the stay put advice should have been revoked between 01:30 a.m. and 01:50 a.m., as the fire was travelling on the outside of the building, thus breaching compartmentation. Despite this, residents were being told to stay put even when the smoke and fire had entered the flats, and it was only at 2:47 a.m. that the stay put advice was finally revoked. Sir Martin Moore-Bick concluded that “it is likely that [...] prompt evacuation would have resulted

in the saving of many more lives” (Moore-Bick, 2019: 596). Moore-Bick also condemned the LFB’s preparation and planning as “gravely inadequate”, as commanders and senior officers had not received training on the dangers of combustible cladding, nor on how to recognise the need for an evacuation or how to organise one, and they had missing or contained incorrect details about Grenfell Tower that were needed for the response (Moore-Bick, 2019: 13).

The Fire Brigade Union (FBU) has criticised the order of the Inquiry by describing it as “back to front” (Wrack, 2019). Robbins (2019: 26) summarises this position by arguing, “It’s perverse to ask, ‘who didn’t stop the fire?’ before asking ‘who started it?’”. As Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) argues, “the fire service didn’t put the cladding on the outside of the building, the fire service didn’t allow that cladding to be put on, the fire service didn’t make these materials that are not meant for the outside of a high-rise building”. The LFB was subject to the most criticism within the Phase 1 report and in the media coverage of its findings, despite not being responsible for causing the fire. Although the Inquiry played an important role in undertaking a minute-by-minute investigation into the night of the fire, it is a significant point that the structure of the Inquiry itself can shift the overall framing of responsibility, blame, and, to some extent, the “truth”.

In addition to this, Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) criticises the depoliticised and decontextualised nature of the Phase 1 report and its analysis of the LFB:

The Inquiry talked about what we did on the night but didn’t take into consideration so many other things. The dissemination of the fire brigade, the massive cuts that Boris Johnson oversaw when he was Mayor of London, like 25% of the London Fire Brigade were cut in terms of numbers, a dozen fire stations were closed in the years before Grenfell. The watering down of fire legislation (Dave, firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

While the Phase 1 report contextualised the failings of the LFB in relation to the Lakanal House fire, it failed to account for the political context of austerity and deregulation that preceded the fire. A similar argument was made during the Phase 2 hearings by the lawyer for the FBU, Martin Seaward, where he emphasised the “importance of assessing the performance of the fire and rescue service in the wider political and economic context” and “apportioning blame where it’s due, particularly in relation to those who created and enabled this truly horrifying disaster” (Seaward, 2022:

168). In relation to government policy, Seaward argues that the government cannot “deregulate, privatise, and cut away, whilst at the same time increasing the duties of the fire and rescue service, e.g., regarding community fire safety, but nevertheless expect the fire and rescue service to perform as if nothing has changed. It’s bound to lead to deficiencies and mistakes” (Seaward, 2022: 169).

Some of my participants suggest the LFB has been scapegoated by the Inquiry. Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) tells me that the LFB have “definitely been scapegoated to an extent” and “putting them first in the Inquiry [was] a way to do that”. The Inquiry has “gone on so long now [...] people are forgetting about the fire now, and they’ve seen the results of the Phase 1 report, and they’ve seen that the fire service has been blamed”. This viewpoint is shared by Emma (6<sup>th</sup> August 2020), a survivor I spoke to, who tells me that “the order of [the Inquiry] was a bit unfair” because Phase 1 was “really, really heavy on blaming the fire service, but definitely the government needs to be blamed for the cladding scandal and stuff”. While long-term local resident, Lizzie (2<sup>nd</sup> February 2021), also expresses concern that “the firefighters will get scapegoated and everybody else will just get fined”.

While the structure of the Inquiry may be “back to front”, this does not negate the mistakes that were made by the LFB. As Eddie (Survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021) argues, it is unfortunate that the Inquiry interrogated the LFB first, but there were “wrong decisions made, and all of this needs to be owned so that it doesn’t happen again”:

It's not helpful to look at Grenfell through a prism of heroes and villains. It's like, it needs to be a learning process for people. So, the FBU would like every firefighter in the fire service to be kind of [...] put on a pedestal and not a bad word said about them. But you're not gonna learn anything, and that's part of the reason why the fire brigade got into the position that they did do because they wouldn't accept that they needed to change.

Firefighters are held in high regard by the public, who consider them to be heroes who risk their lives for others. Consequentially, this means that the public has an “instinctive response” to “defend” the firefighters amid criticism (Kernick, 2019: n.p.). However, this can have damaging consequences, as, in these circumstances, it detracts from the lessons that need to be learned. Even though the LFB did not cause the fire and the firefighters showed honourable bravery, the institution needs to be held accountable for the mistakes that were made so that they are not repeated, particularly as it is likely that

more lives could have been saved if the LFB had learned the lessons from previous fires. The Lakanal House fire, for example, should have at the very least raised awareness in the LFB about cladding fires and the limitations of the “stay put advice”. In addition to this, Sir Martin Moore-Bick has warned that the “LFB is an institution at risk of not learning the lessons of the Grenfell Tower fire” (Moore-Bick, 2019: 607). LFB Commissioner Dany Cotton’s evidence reinforced this at the Inquiry, where she argued that, with hindsight, she would have changed nothing about the response on the night of the fire. She argued the fire was as unexpected as “a *space shuttle* landing on the *Shard*” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 50, 2018), despite evidence that the LFB was aware of the risks of combustible materials being used on residential materials.

It is important to emphasise here that the LFB accepted all the recommendations addressed to them in the Phase 1 report, and as I discuss further in Section 7.3.1, there has been significant progress in implementing them. In conversation with me, Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) also accepts and acknowledges the systemic and institutional failures that were highlighted by the Phase 1 report:

The fire brigade management have got to accept that some of these warnings were not properly looked into. You look at Lakanal House, and you look at what the coroner advised, and the things like the Stay Put policy and so many other fires [...] there was never any Plan B. So, when it came to the Grenfell Tower, the incident commanders never had training on what to do when they knew the Stay Put policy was no longer relevant [...] there was no training to spot what a cladding fire was, even though there have been lots of cladding fires previously. There was no training on what to do and how to evacuate a building. I mean, there had been training on how to evacuate an office block, there’s guidance on that, but guidance and training on how to evacuate a building with one central staircase with no means of communication.

Here, Dave reflects on the mistakes that were revealed by the Inquiry, including the LFB’s failure to learn from Lakanal House, its lack of training in mass evacuation, and its failure to spot a cladding fire or prepare for cladding fires.

### **7.1.2. Phase 2: The Decisions That Led to the Fire**

The Phase 1 report concluded that the cladding system used on Grenfell “failed to comply with Requirement B4(1) of Schedule 1 to the Building Regulations 2010, in that they did not adequately resist the spread of fire having regard to the height, use and position of the building” (Moore-Bick, 2019: 584). It was the role of Phase 2 to examine

“why those who were responsible for the design of the refurbishment considered that the tower would meet that essential requirement” (Moore-Bick, 2019: 5). In doing so, Phase 2 uncovered the extent of deception and corruption that infiltrate the building industry and the governing bodies. It also brought to light the systemic culture of disregard for fire safety and human life that can be traced from decisions made within national government and corporate business, down to those made locally by the KCTMO, thus confirming the significant role that organised state abandonment played in the causes of the fire.

The Inquiry revealed a culture of deceit among some of the key manufacturers involved in the refurbishment. Here, manufacturers deliberately concealed the dangers associated with their products so that they could gain profit. As Peter Apps summarises, “senior figures at Celotex and Saint Gobain were acutely aware of the risk. But [...] they instructed their salespeople to target jobs on high rise buildings to boost their profits” (Siddle, 2023: n.p.). For example, messages from Kingspan employees write, “All we do is lie in here”, and “[K15 insulation] doesnt actually get class 0 when we test the whole product tho LOL!” (Heath, 2020). One Celotex employee, Jonathan Ruper, accepted at the Inquiry that Celotex’s actions were “deliberately and dishonestly misleading” and a “fraud on the market” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 71, 2020: 208; 119). He told the inquiry that it was “common practice” in Celotex to “lie for commercial gain” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 71, 2020: 200). Grenfell Tower was one of the first high-rise buildings that Celotex’s RS500 insulation had been installed on, after offering contractors Harley Facades a 47.5% discount for the use of the insulation on Grenfell Tower and later asking to use it as a case study.

The Inquiry established that cladding manufacturer Arconic was aware of the dangers of the Reynobond PE cladding panels used on Grenfell Tower as early as 2004. During its testing in 2004, the cassette panels that were attached to Grenfell Tower years later, burned so aggressively that the test had to be stopped before it could even obtain a Euroclass classification. Despite this, Arconic continued to falsely market the cassette panels as Euroclass B grade. In 2011, the panels once again drastically failed another before it could even obtain a grade classification, and it was only in 2013 that, after



further tests, it finally got a Euroclass E grading<sup>11</sup>. Following this, Arconic’s sales teams were instructed to no longer use the Euroclass B grading from 2014 onwards (Apps, 2021b). Yet, Arconic’s UK salesperson, Debbie French, failed to inform the team refurbishing Grenfell Tower of this change (ibid.), and it was in 2015 that Grenfell’s cladding system began to be installed.

In 2007, Arconic’s marketing manager Gerard Sonntag attended an industry conference, where his notes show a speaker warned about the risk of PE ACM and its potential to cause the death of 60 to 70 people (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 104, 2021). This is a chilling finding, as it closely foreshadows what happened at Grenfell Tower. In addition to this, emails show Arconic’s technical manager, Claude Wehrle, was aware of the dangers of PE as early as 2011, when he emailed the president of Arconic Architectural Products, Claude Schmidt, “pictures to show [him] how dangerous ‘PE’ can be when it comes to architecture” (Barker, 2020). In another email sent in 2015, Claude Wehrle warned Reynobond PE was “dangerous on facades and everything should be transferred to (FR) fire-resistant as a matter of urgency”. Yet, Arconic continued to actively mislead clients about the fire performance of the cassette panels. In other emails, Claude Wehrle described the cassette panel performance as “VERY CONFIDENTIAL!!!!”, commenting that “we are not ‘clean’” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 67, 2020) and that “we are in the ‘know’” about the risk of ACM fires (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 104, 2021). Despite this, Claude Wehrle and two other Arconic witnesses refused to attend the Inquiry to give evidence by citing a rarely used French law. The fact that key witnesses did not give evidence hinders the legitimacy of the Public Inquiry as a medium for obtaining the truth.

Chapter Four draws on key Inquiry findings to show that the government was aware of the dangers of combustible cladding from as early as 1991. It is therefore not necessary to cover this again. Instead, I turn my attention to the government’s attendees at the Public Inquiry. Notably, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, and David Cameron did not give evidence at the Inquiry, despite calls for them to attend. This caused frustration for some of my participants, as Theresa May was the Prime Minister at the time of the fire, while Boris Johnson and David Cameron are said to be partly responsible for the deregulation

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<sup>11</sup> It needed to achieve a Euroclass B rating to comply with UK building regulations. Euroclass E is a significantly lower rating than Euroclass B, therefore making it non-compliant.

and austerity drive that was detrimental to building standards and the operations of the LFB (FBU, 2022). This once again brings the legitimacy of the Inquiry into question, leading some participants to argue that it is being used as a government “cover up”, an argument I consider further in Section 7.1.3. There were, however, crucial findings revealed by Inquiry hearings with eleven witnesses from the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG), including Stephen Williams, Gavin Barwell, Eric Pickles, and Brian Martin.

Gavin Barwell was the housing and planning minister at the time of the Lakanal House fire, while Stephen Williams was the minister responsible for building regulations in DCLG. The Fire Safety and Rescue All-Party Parliamentary Group wrote to ministers 21 times, calling for the implementation of the Lakanal House review findings, but they were ignored or dismissed by both Stephen Williams and Gavin Barwell (Apps, 2019a). In 2015, Stephen Williams responded to calls to amend the Approved Document B sooner than the 2016-2017 review by writing, “I have neither seen nor heard anything that would suggest consideration of these specific changes is urgent” (ibid.). Both ministers had some responsibility for implementing the Lakanal House inquest recommendations, however, they admitted to the Inquiry that they did not read the coroner’s letter. In addition to this, Stephen Williams said that he had never heard of the Class 0 standard before being questioned about it at the Inquiry.

Eric Pickles was the minister responsible for responding to the Lakanal House Fire inquest recommendations, and in his response to the coroner, he undermined the necessity for sprinklers or premise information boxes and pointed to the already scheduled review of Approved Document B in 2016/17. The review had barely begun at the time of the Grenfell Tower fire, eight years later. Despite having such a critical opportunity to prevent the fire, the Inquiry hearings were eye-opening in revealing the extent of contempt shown by Eric Pickles towards Grenfell. When he gave evidence to the Inquiry, he told the barrister questioning him to hurry up, as he had an “extremely busy day meeting people”, and he later incorrectly referred to the “nameless [...] 96 people who were killed” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 262, 2022). 72 people died because of the fire, and all of them were named. Despite this, both Eric Pickles and Gavin Barwell have been made Conservative peers since the fire. Gavin Barwell also sits on the board of Clarion Housing, the country’s largest social housing provider. Once

again, this brings into question the legitimacy or value of the Public Inquiry. While it can be significant for scrutinising the responsible parties, there do not seem to be any significant consequences for the individuals or parties subject to such damning findings. This is a point that I will build upon in Section 7.2.

Brian Martin was the civil servant responsible for fire safety in buildings for nearly 17 years before the fire and, strikingly, showed a similar “disregard for the value of human life” (Bhandar, 2018: n.p.). Sam Webb, an architect who had consistently campaigned for tighter regulations on fire safety in tower blocks, told the Inquiry that he had warned Brian Martin that another fire like the Lakanal House fire was “inevitable” if Approved Document B was not renewed (Webb, 2022). Sam Webb recalls telling Brian Martin that the fatalities would likely be 10 to 12 times greater than the Lakanal House fire if a fire happened in the middle of the night (ibid.). In response to this, Sam Webb recalls that Brian Martin responded, saying, “Where’s the evidence? Show me the bodies”, a chilling phrase that Peter Apps used as the title for his book about the fire.

Disregard for fire safety, which I argue is a product of organised state abandonment (Bhandar, 2018), has been shown to be a systemic issue that can be traced from the corporate companies to the local and national governments to the building managers. The RBKC and the KCTMO were subject to several fire safety warnings, which they ignored or dismissed. In April 2017, just two weeks before the fire, the LFB warned the council about dangerous cladding that could cause fire to spread from flat to flat, yet the RBKC refrained from investigating this (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 114, 2021). The council was also warned about the issue of self-closers in 2015, after there was a fire in another nearby social housing tower block owned by RBKC. Despite pressure from the LFB, the council refused to fit self-closers to flat entrance doors across the borough’s social housing stock because of budget concerns (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 127, 2021).

In another case, there was a fire in Grenfell Tower in 2010, which revealed issues with the smoke control system. Leaseholder Shah Ahmed brought attention to the fact that the fire was on the sixth floor, yet the smoke had travelled to the fifteenth floor. It took six years for the KCTMO to fix this issue, even after the LFB issued a deficiency notice in March 2014. The KCTMO showed a “fingers crossed attitude” toward fire safety, as

one email by the head of health and safety wrote: “Let’s hope our luck holds and there’s no fires in the meantime” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 121, 2021: 177; 176).

Significantly, around the time that LFB issued a deficiency notice in 2014, the Inquiry revealed that there was a backlog of 1,400 outstanding actions relating to fire risk in the borough, and the KCTMO withheld this information from the LFB because of fears it “would result in more scrutiny from the LFB and also possible enforcement action” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 122, 2021:190). Hundreds of outstanding actions persisted at the time of the fire (Apps, 2021e).

The Inquiry findings also confirmed what many of the Grenfell survivors already knew about the culture of “calculated indifference” (Bhandar, 2018: n.p.) within the KCTMO. Eddie (Survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021) describes it to me as a “historical culture” that was identified as far back as 2009 by the Memoli report, where “people with power [were] able to disempower people like [himself], like Francis O’Connor, like the leaseholder group, people making legitimate knowledge-based concerns but minimising us, sidelining us”. Internal emails within the KCTMO show evidence of this. In 2013, the KCTMO refused to recognise the ‘Grenfell Community Unite’ group set up by Eddie Daffarn and David Collins, describing it internally as a “showcase for Mr Daffarn” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 124, 2021: 41). Emails also show Peter Maddison enquiring whether any of Eddie’s comments had become “libellous” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 124, 2021:29). While it was also revealed that the KCTMO had blocked the Grenfell Action Group blog on its server from 2013, so that staff working on the project could not see the blog (ibid.). This culture of silencing and marginalising the residents subsequently meant that they were excluded from important decisions concerning the refurbishment, including the switch to ACM cladding. As we know, one of the most fatal decisions in the build-up to the Grenfell Tower fire was made in 2014 when the KCTMO opted to change the fire-retardant zinc cladding to ACM cladding with value for money in mind (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 49, 2020). Although the residents were consulted about the former zinc cladding, they were not informed about the decision to switch materials. This is significant, as it prevented the Grenfell residents from researching the cladding and potentially questioning its fire safety. As Apps (2022) points out, it is fair to assume that the Grenfell residents would have researched ACM cladding and come across the cladding fires happening worldwide, given the previous collective action by Eddie Daffarn, David Collins, and others.

Overall, the Phase 2 Inquiry findings were significant in reaffirming the fact that the Grenfell Tower fire was not an accident, but it was an economic state crime (Radiven and Prideaux, 2021) and an act of state-corporate violence (Tombs, 2020). It found that the manufacturers deliberately concealed the dangers caused by their products, while the government abandoned its responsibilities to protect the citizens who are put at risk by these corporate bodies (Bhandar, 2018; 2022). It also revealed the calculated indifference shown towards the Grenfell Tower residents, which meant that they were silenced throughout the refurbishment process. In the next section, I go further to critically assess some limitations of the Public Inquiry process.

### **7.1.3. Limitations of the Inquiry Process**

The scope of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry has been criticised for its exclusion of issues around institutional discrimination. Institutional discrimination refers to the unequal or unfair treatment of certain groups by institutions and their regulations and operations, both overtly and covertly. When the terms of reference for the Inquiry were published, they did not include any consideration of the impact of race, religion, or social class on the causes of the fire. This led Imran Khan, who formerly represented Stephen Lawrence’s family, to raise the issue of institutional discrimination in his opening submission for Phase 1, but as Jenny (charity volunteer, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021) suggests, “it all kind of just seemed to go away again, and no one really mentioned it again until the murder of George Floyd”. However, Jenny explains, in Phase 2, Leslie Thomas KC “stood up, and this time he didn’t ask”, but he “basically said that the Inquiry has a duty under current legislation to consider the impact of race, social class, other discrimination when it comes to the evidence that they’re hearing”. Jenny describes this as having been “really important”:

What he was saying is you don’t need to have it in your terms of reference, you need to have regard to it anyway because of the law in this country, because considering the Human Rights Act, considering the Public Sector Equality Duty, you need to consider the impact of the fire on not only those residents who were disabled, but those from ethnic minority groups as well, and those who are older, as well as younger.

Jenny argues that this led to a “really interesting shift”, as there were subsequently several submissions to the Inquiry that addressed issues of institutional discrimination, including those by the Mayor of London. In Module 3, for example, institutional

discrimination was addressed by both groups of the BSRs in their opening submissions and by that of the Mayor of London.

Graham (Bishop of Kensington, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021) differs from most of the participants, insofar as he argues that, while questions of race and class are important to take into consideration, he's "not sure [it's] the place of the Inquiry primarily to deal with it". While "there are wider questions in society to be dealt with around race and class", he fears that "if the Inquiry tried to handle all those social issues and tried to address issues of race and class in North Kensington, it would be still meeting in 20 years' time". It is more important that the remit of the Inquiry is specific because it is "going on long enough anyway, we need it to come to a conclusion to bring some form of resolution and [...] the more it tries to address wider social issues, the less able it will be to reach those conclusions that we need". Graham's perspective is powerful in summing up the different perspectives on the importance of institutional discrimination in the remit of the Public Inquiry. However, while Graham understands institutional discrimination as part of "wider social issues", many of the Grenfell BSRs and their representatives understand institutional discrimination as fundamental to the causes of the fire. As lawyers representing BSRs Team 2 put it to the Inquiry, "No analysis of cause in relation to this disaster can be accomplished without recognition of the unspoken discrimination and open hostility towards communities living in social housing particularly at a local level" (BSRs Team 2, 2022: 4). The findings revealed in this thesis are evidence of this.

Graham points to another crucial limitation of the Inquiry process; the length of time it takes (Elliott and McGuinness, 2002). Many years can pass between the commissioning of a Public Inquiry and the publication of its final recommendations. The Phase 1 report, for instance, was published in October 2019, over two years after the fire. While the hearings for Phase 2 concluded on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2022, at the time of writing (March 2024), it is expected that the report will not be published until mid-2024. Although the length of time can be considered indicative of how thorough the investigations are, the process is still limited by the fact that there is no requirement to implement the recommendations or act on the findings.

According to Gill (former Grenfell Tower resident, 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021), the Grenfell Tower Inquiry is doing a “good job” in revealing the truth about the fire, however, it is flawed insofar as “there’s no accountability mechanism for Inquiry recommendations to be implemented, or their effectiveness assessed, and we’re really seeing that with the degradation of some of the Phase 1 recommendations”. Despite thousands of recommendations regularly being made by public inquiries and inquests, mistakes are being repeated as recommendations are either ignored, watered down, or not effectively implemented. The Lakanal House inquest is a key example of how mistakes are repeated, and recommendations are ignored. For example, in 2013, the coroner recommended requirements for building providers to provide premises information boxes. Eric Pickles responded to this recommendation by dismissing it as “unnecessary and disproportionate” (Pickles, 2013). After the fire, this recommendation was once again repeated by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, and it has since been implemented by the government. It took an additional 72 deaths before this recommendation was listened to. In addition to this, the Lakanal House coroner recommended that social landlords retrofit sprinklers into tower blocks. Yet, 14 years after the Lakanal House fire, *Inside Housing* gathered data from 37 large social housing landlords and found that just 18.9% of buildings had been fitted with sprinklers (Apps, 2023).

There are also concerns about the underlying aims of the Public Inquiry (Elliott and McGuinness, 2002). As I touch on in Chapter Five, some argue that the Inquiry was set up as a political tool to deter criminal justice. Grenfell United member Karim Mussilhy strongly argues that public inquiries are used to “slow down justice” or “deny change”, as shown by the “history of inquiries in this country” (Mussilhy, 2022:1):

This is a pattern – a system built to prevent justice and protect those in power. While this system exists, we face the same insurmountable challenge as the many before us. From Aberfan to Hillsborough, justice has been denied and Grenfell is no different (ibid.).

The fire has often been compared to the disasters of Hillsborough in 1989, where there were 97 fatalities resulting from a human crush at a football match, and Aberfan in 1966, a collapse of a colliery spoil tip, that killed 116 children and 28 adults. Interestingly, even Eric Pickles arguably mixed up the Hillsborough and the Grenfell disasters while giving evidence to the Inquiry and mistakenly commenting on the “nameless [...] 96” victims. In all three of the cases, innocent people were killed in

preventable disasters at the hands of powerful institutions, who have still not been brought to justice.

The Aberfan disaster was a corporate crime at the hands of the National Coal Board. The Inquiry clearly identified the authorities as liable, but it did not lead to any prosecutions, nor were any staff demoted or sacked. In a study of Aberfan and Grenfell, Radiven and Prideaux (2022: 9) point to the “lack of prosecutions or attributable blame” that results from corporate or state crime. Like Grenfell, the health and safety issues had been raised with the authorities responsible, but they were “ignored as the victim’s interests were not considered to be as expedient as the dominant corporate interest” (ibid.). Demonstrating again how the state prioritises profit and the prosperity of private business over the safety and security of its citizens.

It took over 27 years and a long campaign by the bereaved families before the truth about Hillsborough was uncovered. After the disaster, there was a large police cover-up, which saw the football fans blamed for causing and contributing to the disaster. In 2016, after a second inquest into the Hillsborough disaster, the jury concluded that the victims were unlawfully killed and that the Police Chief Superintendent *was* “responsible for manslaughter by gross negligence”. Despite the negligence of the police on the day of the disaster and the subsequent cover-up, there were never any convictions for the disaster.

Like Aberfan and Hillsborough, my participants suspect that the government announced the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry to prevent justice and postpone scrutiny on the government’s role in the fire. By announcing a lengthy Inquiry, the government can prepare its defence, while public demands for justice and change diminish and public attention slowly fades. As Dave (firefighter, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021) puts it to me:

I think they’ve delayed it a lot, and now people have forgotten quite a bit about it, and there’s more scope for the national government to brush a lot of the things under the carpet, and there’s not as much outrage because the fire is a bit of a distant memory for people who haven’t been directly affected.

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, Dave makes a related point: that the order of the Inquiry, along with time it is taking, has worked to scapegoat the LFB.



The suspicion that the Inquiry was intended to postpone or prevent criminal justice was validated by the Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS) announcement that it would not make any criminal charges until the Inquiry concludes. This led to frustration and suspicion among the Grenfell families. For David (8<sup>th</sup> October 2021), a Lancaster West Estate resident, holding the Inquiry before the criminal trial was a calculated decision made to prevent prosecutions:

I don't think anyone feels that the inquiry is going to achieve any kind of outcome [...] why is the criminal trial not taking place first? Everyone knows why, so we have enough time to forget about it all before we get round to trying to prosecute people. That's what people want really [...] the important thing that people want is for the people who did this to, who signed it off, to go to prison but the chances of that look more and more remote every day that goes by.

Most of my participants accept that the Inquiry has been significant for uncovering important findings and revealing the causes of the fire. Yet, some are doubtful of its capacity for criminal justice or change. Instead, it is seen as a government tool to prevent such. As Karim Mussilhy powerfully asserted on stage at the end of the Grenfell five-year anniversary silent walk, "the system is not broken, it was built this way" (Grenfell United, 2022b).

Over a year before the Inquiry hearings concluded, Natasha (survivor and chair of Grenfell United, 7<sup>th</sup> October 2021) told me that she had heard enough from the Inquiry and simply wants to proceed onto criminal investigation:

We need to be at that point where people are saying we're four and a half years on, we've heard enough [from the Inquiry] right, we've heard from everybody now. At what point do arrests start happening or at what point does it go through the criminal proceedings? [...] Why are these people not in prison? Because if we don't, we potentially have another Hillsborough on our hands.

For Natasha, what's important now is the "justice piece" as "there are people out there that are culpable for this". This is evidence that, for Natasha, justice involves criminal prosecutions.

## **7.2. Justice**

Criminal charges are the most important form of justice for most participants. Yet, over six years later, there have not been any charges relating to the causes of the fire. As the

years have passed, the hope for criminal convictions has started to diminish. As I described in the previous section, the postponement of criminal convictions until the end of the Public Inquiry has increased suspicion that justice would be denied, and that the Inquiry was a way of enabling it to be. In contrast to this, Roper (2019: 1) suggests that “the fact that the investigation is taking so long suggests that police are prioritising the investigation, and that they are contemplating the more serious charges campaigners have called for”. She emphasises that the police will want to ensure they secure as much evidence as possible, as “hasty prosecutions could lead to those at fault being found not guilty and escaping punishment”, particularly as Grenfell is such a complex case, with “31 million documents, 2,500 pieces of evidence, and 2,332 witness statements” (ibid.).

Following the fire, the MPS announced it had reasonable grounds to suspect that the RBKC and the KCTMO may have committed corporate manslaughter, under the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide (CMCH) Act 2007 (Tombs, 2019; Dodd and Sherwood, 2017). There has been some dissatisfaction regarding such charges because, as Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) points out, “corporate manslaughter doesn’t mean anyone goes to prison; it means the company pay a fine to government”. In addition to this, corporate manslaughter is often a difficult conviction to secure, with less than 30 convictions since it was introduced in 2008 (Mansfield, 2022). Campaigners have not explicitly opposed the corporate manslaughter charges but insist that there should be additional charges that will see individuals sent to prison (Justice 4 Grenfell, 2017).

Gill (former Grenfell Tower resident, 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021) problematises the idea of criminal justice following disasters, as she explains that “justice post-catastrophic events is terribly complex”. She points out that “criminal or civil justice in a traditional sense” “doesn’t lead to systemic change [...] it just removes one person from the context and punishes them”. She emphasises that she does believe these outcomes are important; however, they shouldn’t be equated with systemic change. “Justice”, she explains, “doesn’t lead to change, and truth doesn’t lead to justice”.

Although there have not been any criminal prosecutions for the causes of the fire, to suggest that there have not been any criminal charges since the fire is incorrect. During a webinar in May 2021, Steve Tombs pointed out that there have been 23 convictions

for 22 different defendants since the fire. Two of the convictions were of Reis Morris, whom I return to later, but most others were of so-called “Grenfell fraudsters”. Tombs (2021) shows that almost all those convicted were black or brown and often did not have a fixed abode. One exception to this is Jenny McDonagh, the Deputy Financial Officer at RBKC, who was convicted of defrauding around £60,000 out of a fund meant for survivors of the fire. She was also found to have defrauded the NHS of more than £35,000. McDonagh aside, Tombs (2021) argues that the demographic of those who have been prosecuted since Grenfell shows how “the criminal justice system has managed to work very, very quickly to clear up relatively marginalised black and brown suspects in the wake of the fire”. While those implicated in the causes of fire could roam free, submit their own evidence, and in some cases, destroy evidence<sup>12</sup> (Tombs, 2021), the racially minoritised suspects were quickly imprisoned for crimes of poverty.

Lowkey (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) points to the media’s significantly different treatment between the companies liable for the fire and the “Grenfell fraudsters”. Discussing the term “Grenfell fraudsters”, Lowkey argues that the term has been “bandied about massively to demonize people for crimes of poverty”. He highlights how the media are “yet to seriously launch a campaign of doorstep-ing the officials in the companies that had major roles in the situation. Yet, they have doorstep-ed local community people because of, you know, exaggerated scandals, but also particularly this issue of supposedly fraudulent claiming”. He understands the treatment of the “Grenfell fraudsters” to be reflective of “the sort of punch down harassment of people that the mainstream media decide are cheating the benefit system”.

Reis Morris is a campaigner and bereaved local resident who was jailed for 8 weeks following two cases of threatening behaviour towards a member of the LFB and later a member of the Council. Locally, a petition started calling for Reis to be released from prison, and was signed by over 2,000 people. Emma Dent-Coad, the Kensington MP at the time, also condemned the imprisonment of Reis in parliament and called for his release. Jess (local resident, 27 November 2020) argues that Reis imprisonment is indicative of “institutional racism”. She contends that his actions would have been

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<sup>12</sup> Project manager for the Grenfell Tower refurbishment on behalf of the KCTMO, Clare Williams, admitted to destroying evidence (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 55, 2020).

responded to with more empathy if he were “a white, Conservative boy from Notting Hill who has lost family and is very hurt and devastated, and takes his anger out on a member of government”. Instead, Reis, who has “the same feelings as this white person”, was “put in prison”. She argues Reis was treated as a criminal instead of a victim of a severely traumatic incident. Significantly, Jess’ comparison between Reis and a wealthier, white resident echoes the arguments made in Chapter Five that the council would have handled the immediate aftermath of the fire more effectively if it had happened in South Kensington.

While the meaning of justice has some variations, almost all the participants agree that there should be criminal prosecutions for those found liable for the fire. At the very least, it is expected that there would have been interim disciplinary or economic consequences for the individuals and companies involved in the refurbishment. Despite this, over the past five years since the fire, there have been no criminal charges, and some companies involved in the fire, such as Kingspan and Saint-Gobain, are thriving economically. Saint-Gobain, the corporation that owns Celotex, has reported record profits of £5.8 billion since Grenfell (Ungoed-Thomas, 2023). While Kingspan reported a 50% pre-tax profit increase by ‘strong’ sales of insulation products in the year 2021 (Brown, 2022). Kingspan has reportedly earned £2 billion in profits since the fire (Ungoed-Thomas, 2023).

In terms of reputational damage, it is questionable how detrimental the Inquiry findings have been to Kingspan’s reputation. For example, despite Kingspan being a key focus of the Public Inquiry, Mercedes made a F1 sponsorship deal with them in 2021. It was only after public lobbying by Grenfell United that this partnership was eventually terminated a week later. Still, lobbying by Grenfell United has not always been successful. For over three years, Ulster Rugby refused to end its sponsorship deal with Kingspan, despite consistent public and private lobbying by Grenfell United. In fact, Ulster Rugby extended their contract with Kingspan for the 2023/2024 season. It was only in early 2024, despite consistent lobbying by Grenfell United since 2020, that Ulster Rugby announced that they would end their sponsorship with Kingspan. This is a move that Grenfell United (2024) described on X, formerly Twitter, as a “calculated, strategic move centred around money”, as Ulster Rugby “think they can walk away with their

hands clean” by terminating their sponsorship just before the Phase 2 report is published.

Even RBKC continued to use Kingspan’s products after the Inquiry uncovered how implicated they were. This was revealed by North Kensington residents, who found Kingspan packaging for flooring insulation outside of a local school. The local authority responded by assuring that all unused Kingspan products would be removed from the site, and a “new policy” was introduced “to not use products from several companies involved in the Grenfell Inquiry” (RBKC, 2021a).

### **7.3. Change**

Gill (former Grenfell resident, 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021) distinguishes between two types of change: piecemeal change and systemic change. Piecemeal change, Gill explains, “is changes to parts of the systems. So, changes to some regulations, you know, some practices”. While systemic change involves “altering or shifting the conditions holding things in place”. Gill authored a book on the subject, *Catastrophes and Systemic Change*, where she argues that piecemeal change alone is not sufficient to prevent catastrophes from happening again, and “while regulations are important and regulatory reform in the wake of catastrophes is appropriate, it is a myth that regulations guarantee safe outcomes” (Kernick, 2021: 89). As I have shown throughout this thesis, regulations did little to protect the residents of Grenfell Tower and the thousands of people living in dangerous buildings today. This section examines both the extent of piecemeal and systemic change that has resulted from the fire.

#### **7.3.1. The Public Inquiry Recommendations**

The implementation of the Public Inquiry recommendations has been slow and, in some cases, inadequate. As I mentioned earlier, the Phase 1 report was published in October 2019, and it made a total of 46 recommendations. During the period I was gathering data from my participants, the only significant changes that followed were those implemented by the LFB and other emergency services. The Phase 1 report directed 29 recommendations at the LFB, 15 of which were to be addressed in conjunction with other emergency service organisations. By October 2021, 23 out of the 29

recommendations directed at the LFB had been implemented. In March 2024, the LFB finally completed all the 29 recommendations given to them (LFB, 2024).

The government, in stark contrast, did not implement a single recommendation until January 2023, when the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 was brought into force. With this legislation, the government finally completed ten of the recommendations aimed at it. At the time of writing (March 2024), there are 4 recommendations that have not been completed, nor are there any plans for their implementation. Instead, the government has consulted on alternative proposals” (GLA, 2024: 15), or, as my participants understand it, looking for a way to water down the remaining recommendations.

Two of the recommendation yet to be implemented concern life-saving legislation for disabled tenants. This is despite the Inquiry revealing that 41% of the disabled residents in Grenfell Tower were killed by the fire, in what Danny Fieldman KC calls a “landmark act of discrimination against disabled and vulnerable people” (Grenfell Tower Inquiry Day 114, 2021: 52). One recommendation the government is still “consulting on” is legislating to require building owners to provide information about reduced mobility residents in the premises information box. This is a key recommendation, as it would enable the fire service to have readily available information about disabled and elderly residents. In addition to this, the government is also attempting to water down the recommendation to legislate to require building owners to provide Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) for those unable to self-evacuate. The government has shown reluctance in implementing PEEPs following lobbying from the fire and housing sectors, which claimed PEEPs were “totally impracticable” (Apps, 2020a). Despite facing legal pressure from the bereaved family of Sakina Afrasehabi, a disabled woman killed in the fire, the government maintained in May 2022 that it would not bring in new legislation on PEEPs. Instead, it launched a new consultation on “emergency evacuation information sharing” (EEIS). This is a watered-down version of PEEPs, which proposes sharing the location of disabled residents with the fire services, but only in buildings known to have serious fire safety issues (Delahunty, 2023).

### 7.3.2. Social Housing

In the first six years after the fire and during the period I was conducting interviews, there had been little or no change in social housing regulation or the living conditions of social-housing residents. The government published the long-awaited *Social Housing Green Paper: A New Deal for Social Housing* in 2018, over a year after the fire, which set out its initial plans for how social housing regulation would be improved, followed by the Social Housing White Paper on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2020. Most of my interviews took place after the Social Housing White Paper had been published; however, at the time, change still seemed a long way off.

The extent of social housing disrepair and the marginalisation of tenant voices were brought into the spotlight in 2017 after the fire, and this issue has repeatedly resurfaced in the national media ever since. It is clear that very little has changed for social-housing residents since the fire. In December 2020, two-year-old Awaab Ishak died after exposure to mould in his house that his parents rented from Rochdale Borough Housing (RBH), a housing association. The inquest revealed that Awaab's parents had reported the mould as early as 2017, and they continued to contact RBH multiple times up until his death. In March 2021, Daniel Hewitt and ITV revealed the “unliveable” social housing conditions that many people were living in during lockdown (Hewitt, 2021). In the twelve months that followed, thousands of tenants got in touch with ITV News to share their living conditions (Hewitt, 2022). The ITV News investigation into social housing disrepair also launched an MP-led inquiry into the sector, which found the deterioration of social housing has left some unfit for human habitation (Hewitt, 2022a). Around the same time, Kwajo Tweneboa came to public prominence through social media, which he used to shame his social housing provider, Clarion Housing, about his living conditions. Kwajo's South London housing association flat was infested with cockroaches, mice, and flies, while it also suffered from damp and a caved in ceiling. Ever since going viral because of his own circumstances, Kwajo has shamed various social housing providers online and through the national press, revealing innumerable issues of disrepair, infestation, damp, mould, and neglect.

Almost five and a half years after the fire, Eddie Daffarn told the BBC News that residents of social housing are not seeing any changes:

People that live in social housing have not noticed a change in the way they are treated by their landlords, the way that their complaints are addressed, the way that social housing is regulated and how inspections are carried out, the way that we don't have professionalization inside the sector, and the way that tenants still don't have a voice either on a local level or on a national level (BBC News, 2022)

On the six-year anniversary of the fire, Natasha Elcock similarly told LBC that there are members of the bereaved and survivors living in similar conditions of disrepair and neglect that proved to be fatal for Awaab Ishak (LBC, 2023). These are issues that the Social Housing White Paper set out to tackle, however, it was only in July 2023 that the Social Housing (Regulation) Act became law. Although the Act has now been implemented as a direct response to Grenfell, I have already shown how it has taken far too long.

The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 brings forward several key changes that set out to achieve three core objectives: to facilitate a new, proactive consumer regulation regime; to refine the existing economic regulation regime; and to strengthen the Regulator of Social Housing's powers to enforce the consumer and economic regimes (Cromarty, 2023). With the new law, the Regulator of Social Housing is strengthened in carrying out regulator inspections of the largest housing providers, issuing unlimited fines, entering properties with only 48 hours' notice, and making emergency repairs when there is a serious risk to tenants (DLUHC, 2023a). It requires the Regulator to plan regulator "Ofsted-like" inspections of social landlords to deter bad practice and protect tenants, and it also introduces new consumer standards that require all social housing managers to have a professional qualification. A clause named 'Awaab's Law' also requires social landlords to respond to repairs within a certain timescale.

For the most part, the changes within the Act reflect what Grenfell United have lobbied for, including demands for proactive inspections and a requirement for senior managers in social housing to have professional qualifications (Bhakta, 2022). For all the positive measures included in the Act, however, whether real change follows will depend on how robustly the Act is implemented, and it is expected that most changes won't take effect until April 2024 (NHAS, 2023). While the Act provides a strong legal



framework, it is too early to judge whether these changes have, or will, be *felt* by social housing residents.

### **7.3.3. Building Safety**

The Grenfell Tower fire uncovered what first emerged as a cladding scandal and quickly developed into a much wider crisis of unsafe buildings with systemic fire safety failures. In the aftermath of the fire, the dangers of ACM cladding were quickly brought to light, but as time passed, the list of unsafe cladding materials increased, as did the range of non-cladding fire safety defects within buildings. Non-cladding fire safety issues include combustible insulation, a lack of cavity barriers, missing or inadequate fire breaks, non-compliant fire doors, and unsafe balconies. Despite this, cladding is the only area that has received significant public funding, with around £9 billion committed to various forms of cladding removal (Apps, 2022b).

In the days after the fire, the government began to assess how many towers in Britain were at risk of combustible cladding by ordering tests of cladding samples on high-rises across the country. As the number of blocks with the combustible cladding rose, so did questions about the building regulations. In August 2017, the government commissioned an independent review of building regulations and fire safety. The review, led by Dame Judith Hackitt, concluded in its report published in May 2018 that the “regulatory system covering high-rise and complex buildings was not fit for purpose” (Hackitt, 2018: 5). The review outlined 53 recommendations to establish a new regulatory framework and to produce a culture change to create and maintain safe buildings (*ibid.*). The government pledged to implement all the recommendations that were included in the Hackitt report. The government’s response to the Hackitt review has largely taken the form of the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Act 2022.

While Dame Judith Hackitt did not include the ban on combustible materials within her recommendations, she said that she would support the government if it decided to implement it. The ban on the use of combustible materials on new blocks of flats, hospitals, residential care premises, and student accommodation over 18 metres in height was implemented in December 2018. The Class 0 standard was also removed from government guidance in December 2018, 18 months after the fire. While this was

a move in the right direction, it did little for the thousands of buildings that were already clad with combustible materials or for its use on buildings below 18 metres.

In the immediate years after the fire, the government had a limited focus on the remediation of high-rise buildings above 18 metres with ACM cladding. At first, the government tried to refrain from using public money to address the issue, instead maintaining that developers and building owners should “do the right thing” and pay for remediation costs (Simpson, 2022). It took a year for the government to provide funding to remove ACM cladding from high-rise social blocks, and another 12 months for the removal of ACM cladding from high-rise private buildings (ibid.). Within a year after the fire, only 15 buildings with ACM cladding had completed remediation (MHCLG, 2018), and by June 2020, still only 158 (35%) out of the 445 buildings identified with ACM cladding had (MHCLG, 2020).

There has been some improvement since then; however, the focus on ACM means that the remediation process has been disproportionate for buildings above 18 metres with ACM cladding compared to those with other dangerous materials and of lower heights. By September 2022, 95% of all identified high-rise residential and publicly owned buildings in England had either completed or started remediation work to remove and replace unsafe ACM cladding (DLUHC, 2022). This includes 100% of those within the social sector, and 91% of private sector buildings (ibid.). It is important to note, however, that the government missed two pledges to complete this work. The government initially pledged to have it completed by June 2020, and after missing this, it pledged to have the work completed by the end of 2021, which it also missed.

The progress of identifying and remediating unsafe residential buildings with non-ACM cladding or with non-cladding safety defects has been very slow. It was only in March 2020 that the government announced it would introduce a new Building Safety Fund to fund the remediation of unsafe non-ACM cladding on private and social residential buildings above 18 metres (DLUHC, 2020). The fund was initially set at £1bn, however, this was extended to £3.5bn in February 2021. As of September 2023, there are 3,494 blocks above 18 metres with combustible non-ACM cladding that have registered for the Building Safety Fund, while only 425 buildings have started remediation work, of

which 171 have been completed (DLUHC, 2023). While, as it stands, government grant funding still does not cover non-cladding fire safety defects.

At the centre of this are thousands of people across the country who have been stuck with unsellable and unsafe homes, and some residents have faced large fees to amend the safety defects that they did not cause. Alongside the costly remedial work, leaseholders have often faced excessive insurance costs and, for some, the price of waking-watches who patrol the buildings to check for fires. The building safety crisis has been accompanied by debates about who should fund the remediation. As I mentioned earlier, the government has tried to refrain from using public money to tackle the crisis and instead insists that building owners and managers should pay for the remediations. Yet, the building owners and managers have often attempted to pass down the charges for remedial work to the leaseholders.

Secretary of State for the Department of Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities (DLUHC), Michael Gove, has attempted to tackle this issue by developing plans to ensure developers and construction product manufacturers pay for remediating defective buildings through a £4 billion levy (Wilmore, 2022). Furthermore, through the Building Safety Act 2022, it became illegal for building owners to charge qualifying leaseholders for any costs for cladding removal or remediation, and it also has protections against the costs associated with non-cladding defects (DLUHC, 2022). Until the Mid-Rise scheme was piloted in November 2022, all the government funding for cladding remediation was specific to buildings above 18 metres. This piloted scheme was officially launched as the Cladding Safety Scheme in 2023, and would use the Building Safety Levy to provide funding for unsafe cladding in buildings between 11 and 18 metres tall, where the responsible developer cannot be identified or held responsible.

In 2023, the government released a building safety remediation contract that requires major housebuilders and developers to commit £2 billion or more for repairs to buildings (above 11 metres tall) that they developed or refurbished in the last 30 years (Lago, 2023). It also requires them to reimburse taxpayers for funding spent on the remediation of their buildings. Significantly, Rydon Homes withheld from signing the building safety remediation contract for six months after the deadline set for 13<sup>th</sup> March 2023 (ibid.). The remediation contract has since been watered down, allowing

developers to leave dangerous cladding on buildings and only fix “life-critical” safety defects (Brown, 2023). As member of the End Our Cladding Scandal campaign group Lucy Brown argues, this leaves a dangerous loophole, as developers are allowed to appoint their own “independent” fire experts who have the power to define what defects are “life-critical” (ibid.).

One development that I found particularly surprising during my fieldwork was that the *Daily Mail* began a campaign in support of the building safety crisis, and it made a huge contribution to producing change. I say it was a surprise because the *Daily Mail* is not only a right-wing tabloid, but also one that has played a steady role over time in reproducing the social-housing stigma that enables social tenants to be silenced by their landlords; hence, it is not the ally one would expect for a Grenfell-related cause. But the cladding and building safety crisis is one that predominantly affects middle-class leaseholders, and therein lies an explanation. In Lowkey’s (local resident, rapper, and social commentator, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021) words, “If all of the places in private buildings had been removed and only social housing were still waiting to be done, I think you’d see the *Daily Mail* and the *Times* less enthusiastic to take up the cause”.

Although it may sound like much has been done to tackle the building safety crisis, only 10% of unsafe homes have been remediated over 6 years after the fire (Lees, 2023). A survey by End Our Cladding Scandal (EOCS) found that only 21.8% of leaseholders in dangerous blocks have seen remediation work start, while the majority of them have no timescale for when it will be complete, and only around 10% are expected to be within the next 12 months (EOCS *in Apps*, 2023a). The government has also refused to give a timeline of how long it will take to fix all unsafe buildings (Brown, 2023). As I have discussed, there have been some significant changes for new builds and high-rise buildings with ACM cladding, but other than that, “every step forward has been partial and incomplete” (Cornish, 2021: 297). One of the most important outcomes of the fire is increased public awareness of building and fire safety defects; however, this is of no purpose if the dangers are not addressed. Over 6 years since the Grenfell, it is still entirely possible that a similar high-rise fire could occur.

Still today, many of the companies involved in the refurbishment of Grenfell have refused or resisted financially contributing to fixing the building safety crisis. At the

time of writing (March 2023), Arconic, Kingspan, and Saint-Gobain have not contributed a penny to fixing buildings that their products have made unsafe (Gove, 2023). As Michael Gove has put it, these firms have “no intention of doing what’s right and addressing their moral and financial obligations to innocent residents” (ibid.). Gove has written to each of the firms individually and has most recently resorted to urging shareholders “to use their influence to encourage these companies to come forward immediately with a comprehensive financial package for remediation work” (ibid.). Since Gove approached the shareholders of the companies, Arconic has agreed to a \$74 million settlement with its *shareholders* for “false and misleading statements” about the safety of its product (Apps, 2023b). Arconic, Kingspan, and Saint-Gobain, along with 19 other parties, have also agreed to a £150 million settlement for a group of 900 claimants impacted by the fire, including bereaved, survivors and nearby residents (ibid.). Yet, the companies are still yet to contribute anything to the building safety disaster that their products have contributed to.

It is intriguing that Arconic, Kingspan, and Saint-Gobain do not feel morally or legally inclined to address the building safety crisis, as thousands of unsafe buildings are still covered in materials produced by these companies. It brings into question why they do not fear the possibility of another fatal fire and the legal or criminal consequences that this could have for them, particularly given the scrutiny that they have been subject to since Grenfell and the subsequent calls for criminal and corporate prosecutions. It seems to be indicative of the “lack of prosecutions or attributable blame” that comes from corporate crimes (Radiven and Prideaux, 2022: 9).

#### **7.3.4. Systemic Change**

The political, social, and economic processes that created the conditions that led to the Grenfell Tower fire still exist and are even championed today. As Daniel (author, videographer, and campaigner, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021) puts it, “organised state abandonment, deregulation [and] neoliberalism in its most violent form is here, and it’s here to stay unless we fight it, and I don’t think we’re awake for that as a country, at all”. Since Grenfell, thousands more innocent victims have died through state negligence and organised state abandonment, from individual cases like that of Awaab Ishak to many of the victims of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Policies of deregulation and privatisation are the immediate causes of combustible materials being used on the exterior of residential buildings. Despite this, the fire has not significantly challenged these political and economic processes. Deregulation, or as often referred to as cutting “red tape”, is still spoken about politically in positive terms. For example, early in 2022, then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced plans to legislate to make it easier to remove EU regulations and protections, following criticism from Conservative MPs that the government had not taken advantage of Brexit (Elgot, 2022). The new law – Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023, also known as the “Brexit freedoms bill” - claimed to cut £1 billion in red tape expenses for business (ibid.). Similarly, very early on into her short-lived tenure as Prime Minister, Liz Truss promised to slash all EU red-tape within the next year, axing up to 2,4000 laws on British statute books (O’Carroll, 2022). This political discourse against red tape applies across the board of governance and the economy; hence, it is inconceivable that it would not impact the housing and construction industries.

In response to Grenfell, systemic change would involve repositioning fire safety and human life as the focal points of political, economic, and corporate decisions. This thesis has shown how the government, the Council, the KCTMO, and all the contractors, sub-contractors, and manufacturers either ignored, overlooked, or deliberately concealed the issue of fire safety in the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower and the context leading up to it. Yet, within six weeks, Kingspan had hired lobbyists to convince government ministers that combustible materials are no more dangerous than non-combustible materials and therefore should not be banned (Hopkirk, 2020). Today, the thousands of remaining residential buildings with fire safety defects are clear evidence that there has not been systemic change, while, as I mentioned earlier, many of the manufacturers involved in the Grenfell refurbishment, including Saint Gobain, Arconic, and Kingspan, have withheld from contributing to the remediation of unsafe buildings, and Rydon also refrained from doing so. This is even though there have been several cladding fires since Grenfell. In addition to this, the Public Inquiry has heard what the counsel to the Inquiry, Richard Millett KC, described as a “merry-go-round of buck-passing” amongst the various public and corporate bodies involved, as no one has taken responsibility for their role in the disaster but rather insists it is somebody else’s fault. The refusal to take accountability and thus learn from the mistakes made is indicative of a lack of systemic change.

Section 7.4.2 explores some of the legislation that has been designed to improve social housing conditions. While this may lead to some piecemeal change, it does little to address the systemic causes that caused social housing to resume such a state. Since the fire, there has not been a significant drive to build more social housing, nor has social housing stigma been sufficiently challenged. Stigma was the most consistent issue raised during the Green Paper engagement events, yet nothing substantial has followed to tackle it. As I argue in Chapters Two and Four, a key cause of social housing stigma is the residualisation of social housing, which has allowed it to be perceived as a space where only the “mad, bad, and sad” reside. Building more social housing and making it accessible to a wider demographic is a way to tackle this. Despite this, the Social Housing White Paper dedicated an entire chapter to home ownership, which once again reinforces the discourse that home ownership is a tenure of choice and thus further marginalises social housing tenants. The government’s failure to address social housing stigma, despite its weight in the Green Paper, shows that social housing residents are still not being heard or listened to.

Gill Kernick (2021), a participant of this study and author of *Catastrophes and Systemic*, identifies four key conditions that prevent systemic change and maintain the status quo. These four conditions are significant in unpacking why there has not been systemic change the fire. Firstly, Kernick (2021) argues there is an unclear chain of accountability in government, subsequently meaning that there is a lack of clarity about who is responsible for what, and there are few consequences for good or bad performances. This is not least exemplified by the fact that there have been four Prime Ministers, six Secretaries of State for DLUHC, and eleven housing ministers since the fire. Secondly, Kernick argues there is an obsession with blame and blame avoidance, often driven by the need to maintain power, which subsequently means no one takes accountability for their mistakes or strives for change. This is apparent in the “merry-go-round of buck-passing” that has characterised the Inquiry hearings. Thirdly, there is a failure to engage with frontline or diverse knowledge, which, in the case of Grenfell, may refer to the knowledge of social housing residents, and finally, Kernick concludes that there is a general lack of political intent and will to provoke systemic change.

This final point, I argue, is particularly important in understanding why systemic change has not occurred since the fire. The lack of political intent to provoke systemic change can be explained by the fact that the status quo benefits those in positions of political and commercial power. So, while almost 20% of Conservative MPs are themselves profiteering from being landlords (McGregor, 2023), it is unsurprising that there have not been any significant attempts to tackle inflating housing prices or to problematise the commodification of housing. Meanwhile, there are also compromised relationships between the government and those in the private sector, particularly due to party donations and the “revolving door” between the private sector and government. For example, Transparency International found that 20% of all donations taken by the Conservative Party between 2010 and 2020 were from property tycoons (Williams, 2021). More specifically to Grenfell, it emerged that a major shareholder in Arconic donated £25,000 to the Conservative Party in 2017 (Booth, 2020). It is therefore a misplaced expectation that systemic change will be prompted by the government, which benefits from the status quo and has an interest in maintaining it.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the long-term consequences of the fire by focusing on the demands for truth, justice, and change. Section 7.1 assessed the Public Inquiry as a medium for attaining the truth. I argued that the Inquiry has been a significant tool for uncovering vital information about the causes of the fire and the companies and government departments that are implicated in them. Despite this, I suggested that the truth has taken a very long time to be uncovered, and the Public Inquiry has only revealed the partial truth, insofar that the terms of reference and the order of the Inquiry did not reflect the demands of my participants. In addition to this, the structure of the Inquiry and the length of time it has taken have diluted the impact of the findings, as not all responsible parties have received the same or adequate amount of condemnation by the public and the media. Arconic, Rydon, Kingspan, and Celotex should be household names when discussing the Grenfell Tower fire. Yet, there is no indication that the main contractors or manufacturers have suffered reputational damage; instead, many are thriving economically.

This chapter found that for most of my participants, justice consists of criminal prosecutions and imprisonment for the guilty parties involved in the refurbishment. At



the very least, there should be disciplinary or economic consequences for the individuals and companies involved in the refurbishment. According to this definition of justice, justice has not been served. No one has been imprisoned for charges relating to the causes of the fire and the companies involved in the fire seem to be thriving economically. Despite this, there have been 23 criminal convictions relating to crimes that occurred in the fire's aftermath, predominantly concerning the "Grenfell frausters". While those implicated in the causes have been left to roam free, the racially minoritised and economically marginalised were quickly imprisoned for, what Lowkey calls, "crimes of poverty".

The final section of the chapter, Section 7.3, examined the change that has followed the fire, in terms of the Inquiry recommendations, building safety, social housing policy, and systemic change. I argued that the pace of change has been slow, and the extent of change has been insufficient. While most of the Inquiry recommendations have now been implemented, the government is still trying to water-down some key recommendations concerning the evacuation of disabled or low-mobility tenants. At the time of writing (March 2024), over six years after the fire, there are still thousands of unsafe residential buildings across the country, and as shown by Kwajo Tweneboa's social media content, many social homes remain in poor and inhabitable conditions. While the Social Housing Regulation Act has recently been implemented, it is too soon to assess whether this will positively impact the living conditions of residents. Over the years, there have been several moves to address the building safety crisis, however, these have been too slow and narrow, focused on ACM cladding and buildings above 18 metres. While there is some evidence of piecemeal change, largely in the form of regulatory reforms, I argued that there has not been any systemic change. I argued that "cutting red tape" is still spoken about positively in politics, while there has not a significant move to tackle the crisis of social housing shortages. Drawing on the work of Kernick (2021), I considered four reasons why the fire has not produced systemic change: namely, because there is a lack of political intent, an obsession with blame, unclear lines of responsibilities, and a failure to engage with frontline knowledge.

## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine the causes, experiences, and effects of the Grenfell Tower fire from the perspectives of those who experienced it. In Chapter One, I argued that, considering the shortage of sociological research involving participants with experiences of the fire and the historical and ongoing marginalisation that the residents of North Kensington have been subjected to, it is crucial to put those most directly affected by the fire at the centre of knowledge production. Taking that into account, I used qualitative interview data to examine how the participants understand the socio-political causes and consequences of the Grenfell Tower fire. As I draw on the philosophical underpinnings of critical realism, I maintain that “context and individual agency is intrinsically involved in causal processes” (Parr, 2015: 196), and I therefore use qualitative interview data in combination with analysis of a range of policy documents, Public Inquiry findings, and media reports.

Although the fire has been thoroughly investigated both academically and formally through the Public Inquiry, I collate the extensive existing data to account for the wide-ranging causes rooted in intersecting oppressive structures of class, race, and Islamophobia. In this thesis, I built upon existing analyses of the “actual” events of the fire by combining secondary data sources with primary interview data uncovering the “empirical” experience of the fire. The analysis of “empirical” experience is important for shedding light on the way that the “real” institutions, such as the government, RBKC and KCTMO, produce “actual” events, such as the fire and its aftermath.

In a broad sense, the thesis argues that the Grenfell Tower fire represents a refusal by the state to protect its citizens before, during, and in the aftermath of a major emergency. I present evidence that the state is governed by self-interest, which prioritises “itself and the continuity of Capital above humanity” (Preston, 2019: 28). This broad observation emerges from, and is developed by, four empirical chapters, each of which develops arguments about, in turn, the fire’s causes, its immediate aftermath, and the campaign for truth, justice, and change, all from the perspective of those involved. In these empirical chapters, four main research questions have been investigated. The first original contribution of this thesis is the extensive first-hand engagement with residents’ and survivors’ understandings

of the causes, consequences, and effects of the fire. The second original contribution of this thesis is the observation that the state was absent in its caring function in the aftermath of the fire, but was immediately present as a force of policing and surveillance. I show how the state framed the Grenfell community as a “suspect community” in a process of securitisation in order to mobilise disproportionate security measures. The third original contribution of this thesis is the argument that the council and the national government operated a “divide and conquer” approach towards the various North Kensington groups to destabilise to destabilise their collective power and capacity to hold government and industry accountable for the fire.

### **8.1. Research Question 1: The Causes of the Fire**

Whilst there is a vast array of existing research on the material and political causes of the fire, I have contributed to this knowledge by collating the existing secondary data with my empirical findings to map out the wide-ranging causes of the fire that are rooted in intersecting oppressive structures of class, race, and Islamophobia. In Chapter One and Chapter Three, I also put forward a historical reading of the fire showing how “real” structures (such as colonialism and global capital) and “actual” events (such as housing discrimination in North Kensington) produced the “empirical” and “actual” experiences of marginalisation that caused the fire. Unlike existing research, I have rigorously traced the causes of the fire from the historical and global structures to the national and local causes of the fire, while also accounting for the three segmented domains of reality.

In Chapter Four, I answered two sub-questions addressing the long-term causes of the fire. The first sub-question examined how and why combustible materials were attached to tall residential buildings across the country. This analytical stage of the argument concerned the arguably unexceptional or generalisable causes of the fire that can apply to many other tall residential buildings across the country. Through an analysis of government policy and Public Inquiry findings, I argued that the fire was the result of political and economic decisions that were informed by neoliberalism and centred around profit accumulation. I showed how “real” structures and institutions, like the government and corporate business, interact to produce events like the fire, thus concluding that the fire was both an economic state crime (Radiven and Prideaux, 2021) and an act of state-corporate violence (Tombs, 2020). Although neoliberalism may be understood as a cause of the fire that is unexceptional to Grenfell, as it has subjected thousands of other tall residential buildings across the country to danger, I use Bhandar’s concept of organised state abandonment to

how it is predominantly “working class and racialised people” (Bhandar, 2022: n.p.) who are “marked for disposability” (Nadj, 2019:1) by the government. Although there has been a rapid increase in luxury high-rise buildings, local authorities or housing associations still own the majority of high-rise flats (EHS, 2018), while Dorling (2011) found that most children living above the fourth floor in tower blocks in England are black or Asian, even though the English population is 82% white.

The second sub-question investigated the local decisions around why the materials were attached to Grenfell Tower and why the resident voices of those who interrogated the work of the KCTMO, RBKC, and Rydon were silenced and ignored. I examined why Grenfell Tower itself, as a structurally safe building, was refurbished with combustible materials and why the residents were marginalised and ignored during the regeneration programme. Here, I primarily used empirical data to examine the causes of the fire that are exceptional to Grenfell Tower. Drawing on the experiences of my participants, I argued that the council (“real”) has become increasingly involved in the operations of housing financialisation (“actual”), whereby they have a vested interest in the gentrification of North Kensington and the privatisation of its community assets (“actual” and “empirical”). This meant, my participants argued, that the council had an interest in demolishing and regenerating its social housing stock with private developers and subsequently displacing its working-class and racialised residents. Thus, social housing residents in the borough were treated with contempt and institutional indifference by the council, which saw them as standing in the way of capital. To a greater extent, it meant that Grenfell Tower was over-clad with dangerous materials to beautify the aesthetic of the building in alignment with the ongoing gentrification of North Kensington. I argued that the cladding was used to conceal the “ugly” building and to hide the “undesirable” working-class and racialised residents. The importance placed on cost-cutting during the tendering for the refurbishment and the switch from non-combustible zinc cladding to ACM cladding are evidence of how the appearance of the building was prioritised over the safety and functionality of the building (Rozena, 2022). I argued that organised state abandonment operated at a local level, and I trace how the KCTMO, the RBKC, and even the contractors in the refurbishment demonstrated “callous disregard for the value of human life” and “calculated indifference towards working class and racialised people” (Bhandar, 2022: n.p.). Meanwhile, resident voices were marginalised by those involved in the refurbishment, who employed social housing, racial, and class-based stigma as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1987, 1990; Link and Phelan, 2014; Tyler, 2022) to silence and ignore them.

While mapping out the multiple overlapping causes of the fire, I addressed the tension concerning whether the fire can be understood as an exceptional or generalisable disaster. On the one hand, Chapter Four shows how there have been several fires that share many of the key material causes as the Grenfell Tower fire. The widespread use of combustible materials on tall residential buildings across the UK to some extent suggests that the fire is not exceptional to Grenfell, and rather, it could have happened in thousands of other similarly clad buildings. However, while the dangers caused by neoliberalism, deregulation and the collaboration between government and corporate business is not exceptional to Grenfell, the inseparability of the wide-reaching, historical, and intersectional causes of the fire *is* exceptional to the fire.

## **8.2. Research Question 2: The Immediate Aftermath of the Fire and the State Response**

One of the most significant contributions of this thesis concerns the state's response to the fire, and its simultaneous abandonment, stigmatisation, and securitisation of the North Kensington community. On the one hand, Chapter Five captured the stark absence of any government authorities at the scene of the fire, which left survivors who had escaped on the street, and families and friends with no support in finding information about their loved. The absence of the government was recalled not just by the survivors and local residents, but also by community institutions, charity volunteers, Ealing Council workers, and even a local primary school. Amidst the absence of the authorities, voluntary community institutions fulfilled the humanitarian response to the fire by immediately opening several unofficial rest centres, which played a key role in allowing the survivors and the families to collate information about who was missing and who had survived. This was particularly important because neither the RBKC nor the KCTMO had an up-to-date list of Grenfell Tower residents, which meant the survivors and families were forced to produce one themselves. The Westway Centre, which was eventually opened as an official rest centre by the council, was so disorganised and chaotic that volunteers from Ealing Council took over the centre, and had officers from RBKC removed from it. While the RBKC ensured to fulfil its minimal statutory duty as a Category 1 responder to provide rest centres and emergency accommodation, I found that these services were offered inadequately and inhumanely, with no attention being paid to the trauma or individual needs of the displaced residents.

On the other hand, I showed how the priority of the state was to maintain social order, and this was prioritised over the humanitarian response. This was achieved through the government's securitisation and surveillance of the North Kensington community, using police helicopters, undercover intelligence, and existing infrastructure that pre-existed the fire through the Prevent programme. I showed how the perceived ethnic, racial, and religious markers of the Grenfell community were used to frame them as a "suspect community" to induce the fear of security breaches into the aftermath. In addition to this, I outlined evidence that reaffirms the argument that race, ethnicity, and religion was decisive in the council's abandonment. In fact, I argued that the council deliberately mobilised racial and territorial stigma (Wacquant, 2007, 2008) as a government technology (Tyler, 2020) to justify its response to the fire and to inflict blame on the victims.

### **8.3. Research Question 3: The Political Organisation of the Bereaved, Survivors and Local Residents**

In Chapter Six, I discussed the organisation of three key campaign groups (Grenfell United, Justice 4 Grenfell, and Grenfell Community Campaigners) against the backdrop of abandonment and stigmatisation that I have described throughout the thesis. A key finding here concerned the state's "divide and rule" strategy in the medium-term aftermath. The state, in its recovery programme and its approach to rehousing, constructed a hierarchy of grief between the survivors, bereaved, and local residents, which prioritises some individuals over others, allowing tension and anger to arise between them. The council and the government have been calculated in what groups they respond to and what groups they ignore, working to empower some and isolate others. In doing so, it limits the impact and transformative potential of the various campaign groups. Several participants also argue that there has been undercover government intelligence planted in the community to enforce these divisive tactics and to smear, attack, and divide the community.

Another significant contribution concerns the disputes over tactics between groups and individuals. Grenfell United, who are at the forefront of the campaign, emphasise the importance of approaching the campaign in a "dignified, respectful manner" (Eddie, survivor, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021). This is reflected in the fact that one of the most recognisable campaign tactics associated with the Grenfell cause is the silent walk. The silence, organiser Zeyad Cred has explained (Going Underground on RT, 2018), was partly inspired by the outcome of the 2011 riots, which were triggered by the murder of Mark Duggan, but

was felt to have lost its political power with the violence and looting. Not all my participants agreed with the emphasis placed on silence, however. Some participants called for more direct action against the government, highlighting that civil disobedience has historically often led to social change. Reflecting on points made by the organisers of the silent walk, Zeyad Cred, in his speech at the end of the fifth-year anniversary walk, the thesis points to the potential of using a myriad of tactics alongside the silent walk.

#### **8.4. Research Question 4: The Longer-Term Consequences of the Fire**

Chapter Seven critically assessed the long-term consequences of the Grenfell Tower fire, with a focus on the three aims of Grenfell United: truth, justice, and change. In this chapter, I draw on the “empirical” reactions of my participants to the “actual” political and social changes that have resulted from the fire. The first key aspect of my answer to this research question concerns whether the truth about the fire has been uncovered by the Public Inquiry. While the Inquiry has been significant in revealing the circumstances and decisions that led to the fire and followed in the seven days after; however, I express some cynicism about the purpose of the Inquiry and the order of the Public Inquiry. I drew attention to several limitations of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry, including its exclusion of questions of race, religion, and class from its remit; the length of time it is taking; and its interference with criminal justice. To such an extent that some participants argue that the Inquiry was deliberately organised by the government to prevent justice and postpone change.

The second key aspect of my answer to this research question concerned justice. According to my participants definition of justice, the Grenfell survivors and families are yet to receive justice for the fire. For most of my participants, justice means criminal charges for those who are deemed responsible for the fire. At the very least, it means disciplinary or economic consequences for the individuals and companies involved in the refurbishment. The only criminal prosecutions that have followed the fire concern crimes that were committed in the aftermath of the fire, disproportionately imprisoning the “relatively marginalised black and brown suspects in the wake of the fire”, while those implicated in the causes of the fire have been allowed to roam free, submit, and destroy their own evidence (Tombs, 2021: n.p.). In terms of disciplinary or economic consequences, most of the companies that manufactured the fatal materials used on Grenfell Tower seem to be thriving economically, and it is disputable how much reputational damage the Public Inquiry has caused.

The final answer to this research question is that, while there have been some cases of piecemeal change since the fire, the necessary systemic change that challenges the deregulation agenda and the decline of social housing that led to the fire is entirely missing. The implementation of the Public Inquiry recommendations has been slow and, in some cases, inadequate. At the time of writing (February 2024), the LFB has completed 28 out of 29 recommendations given to them, and the final recommendation is due to be completed on or before 24 March 2024 (Home Office, 2024). The government, in stark contrast, did not implement a single recommendation until January 2023, when the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 were brought into force. At the time of writing (February 2024), there are 5 recommendations that have not been completed, nor are there any plans for their implementation. Instead, the government is “consulting on alternative proposals” (GLA, 2023: 15), or, as my participants understand it, attempting to water down the remaining recommendations. Two of the recommendations yet to be implemented concern life-saving legislation for disabled tenants. One of which is the implementation of Personal Emergency Evacuation plans (PEEPs), which the government has been reluctant to implement following lobbying from the fire and housing sectors, which claimed PEEPs were “totally impracticable” (Apps, 2020a).

Since the fire, there have not been any noticeable changes in the living conditions or management of social housing. The issue of poor and unsafe housing conditions has come to the forefront of the media and UK politics multiple times since 2017, following the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak, the Daniel Hewitt ITV investigation into social housing, and the work by activist Kwajo Tweneboa, all of which uncovered the extreme problems that persist in social housing. On the six-year anniversary of the fire, Natasha, the chair of Grenfell United, told LBC that there are members of the bereaved and survivors living in similar conditions of disrepair and neglect that proved to be fatal for Awaab Ishak (LBC, 2023). In July 2023, the Social Housing (Regulation) Act became law. It brings forward several key changes that set out to achieve three core objectives: to facilitate a new, proactive consumer regulation regime; to refine the existing economic regulation regime; and to strengthen the Regulator of Social Housing’s powers to enforce the consumer and economic regimes (Cromarty, 2023). Although the Act provides a strong legal framework, it is too early to judge whether these changes will be felt by social housing tenants.



The Grenfell Tower fire brought to light a national building-safety crisis that is still rife today. Thousands of buildings across the country have been made unsafe by a catalogue of unsafe cladding materials and a range of non-cladding fire-safety defects, including combustible insulation, a lack of cavity barriers, missing or inadequate fire breaks, non-compliant fire doors, and unsafe balconies. By September 2022, 95% of all identified high-rise residential and publicly owned buildings in England had either completed or started remediation work to remove and replace unsafe ACM cladding (DLUHC, 2022). This includes 100% of those within the social sector, and 91% of private sector buildings (ibid.). As of September 2023, there are 3,494 blocks above 18 metres with combustible non-ACM cladding that have registered for the Building Safety Fund, while only 425 buildings have started remediation work, of which 171 have been completed (DLUHC, 2023). While, as it stands, government grant funding still does not cover non-cladding fire safety defects. Although it may sound like much has been done to tackle the building safety crisis, only 10% of unsafe homes had been remediated over six years after the fire (Lees, 2023). A survey by End Our Cladding Scandal (EOCS) found that only 21.8% of leaseholders in dangerous blocks have seen remediation work start, and the majority of them have no timescale for when it will be complete (EOCS *in Apps*, 2023a). The government has also refused to give a timeline of how long it will take to fix all unsafe buildings (Brown, 2023). Over six years since the Grenfell Tower fire, it is still possible that a similar high-rise fire could occur.

At the time of writing, Arconic, Kingspan, and Saint-Gobain have not contributed a penny to fixing buildings that their products have made unsafe (Gove, 2023). It is striking that they do not feel morally or legally inclined to address the building safety crisis, as thousands of unsafe buildings are still covered in the unsafe materials that they have manufactured. It is telling that they do not fear the possibility of another fatal fire and the legal or criminal consequences that this could have for them, particularly given the scrutiny that they have been subject to in the Inquiry and the subsequent calls for criminal and corporate prosecutions. It is indicative of the “lack of prosecutions or attributable blame” that comes from corporate crimes (Radiven and Prideaux, 2022: 9).

In terms of systemic change, thousands more innocent victims have died through state negligence and organised state abandonment since the Grenfell Tower fire, from individual cases like that of Awaab Ishak to many of the victims of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the fire, there has not been a significant drive to build more social housing, nor has social

housing stigma been sufficiently challenged, and the fire has done little to challenge neoliberal governance and its policies of deregulation and privatisation as political and economic processes. Drawing on the work of participant and author Gill Kernick (2021), I suggest that the lack of political intent to provoke systemic change can be explained by the fact that the status quo benefits those in positions of political and commercial power. So, while almost 20% of Conservative MPs are landlords (McGregor, 2023) and 20% of all donations taken by the Conservative Party are from property tycoons (Williams, 2021), it is unsurprising that there have not been any significant attempts to tackle inflating housing prices or to problematise the commodification of housing. As Preston (2019: 28) argues, “the state is self-interested although it hides this with concern”. It is therefore a flawed assumption that systemic change can be prompted by the government, because, as bereaved relative Karim Mussilhy powerfully argues, “the system is not broken, it was built this way” (Grenfell United, 2022b).

## **8.5. Limitations**

While this thesis has successfully developed an understanding of the causes, experiences, and consequences of the Grenfell Tower fire, there are several limitations to the study. The first limitation concerns the number of participants. Twenty-four participants were interviewed for the research, which is a considerably larger number than any other sociological research on the fire. The empirical insight, depth, and richness of these interviews from twenty-four people closely associated with the experience of the fire is one of the three original contributions of this thesis. That said, the number is not large enough to be representative of the individuals and communities who experienced the fire or were involved in the aftermath. There are clear lessons to be drawn from my participants’ experiences and my analysis for the consideration of similar cases of state-corporate violence, but, again, twenty-four participants is not enough from which to extrapolate to consider experiences elsewhere. Although I did intend to recruit more than 24 participants, this study has never set out to be representative of the communities associated with Grenfell Tower. Rather, I attempted to recruit a diverse sample to present multiple, sometimes contesting, understandings of the fire. It is also important to emphasise that, regardless of the sample size, there is not one single or overarching standpoint in North Kensington, as most people have different views and arguments about the fire, and I have attempted to reflect that.

In addition to this, the research study was initially designed to involve both face-to-face interviews and a focus group. A focus group method would have allowed the participants to query and respond to each other, allowing for a comparison of experiences and opinions (Morgan, 1996). As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, I had to change the methodology of the research, moving all interviews from in-person to online or over the telephone. With this move online, and the additional interruption in the research process the pandemic created, it proved unworkable to also undertake an online focus group. The online interviews led to several practical issues, that I discuss in Chapter Three, including delays and cancellations in organising interviews.

Finally, because of the sensitivity of the topic and the risk of severe emotional distress, my priority was navigating the interview to prevent harm for my participants. This meant that I sometimes did not ask certain follow-up questions, which may have contributed further to the research findings. For example, I asked about the local and national governments response to the fire, but I did not ask specific questions about the immediate aftermath, concerning issues with hotel accommodation, missing people, and general support, so as not to trigger distress. I have fortunately been able to make up for some of these issues using the Public Inquiry hearings and media reports.

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## Appendix 1: Introductory Letter



The University of Manchester

**Date**

Dear

### **A Sociological Investigation into Grenfell Tower**

I am writing to request your help with a research study I am conducting on the Grenfell Tower fire. I grew up in Ladbroke Grove and I am a PhD student in social sciences at the University of Manchester. I am researching the fire in the context of the housing crisis and urban inequality. My study will consider the immediate and long-term causes of the fire, and the responses to the fire and residents' campaigns by local and national government.

I appreciate that there will be many demands on your time, especially with the ongoing inquiry, but your insight would be tremendously valuable for my project and I would be delighted if you would allow me to interview you. The interview would last approximately 45 minutes to one hour. It would focus on your understanding of the causes and consequences of the fire and your involvement in the campaign for justice for the victims of the fire, as well as your involvement in Grenfell community organisations.

I do hope you are interested in taking part in the study. You can find out more about the project in the Participation Information Sheet attached here. If you choose to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form and will have the choice to take part using your real name or with a pseudonym assigned to you.

Do please ask me any questions you may wish answered before deciding whether to take part.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes  
Jamie Stevenson

## Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

### Participant Information Sheet



## Research Participant Information Sheet

### In the Shadow of Grenfell: Residents' Understanding and Policy Impacts of the Grenfell Tower Fire

#### Participant Information Sheet (PIS)

You are being invited to take part in a research study that aims to examine how the residents of Kensington and Chelsea and those involved in the campaign for justice understand the relationship between the housing crisis, urban inequality and the Grenfell Tower fire. This will be part of a Sociology PhD thesis at the University of Manchester. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully before deciding whether to take part and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

#### About the research

➤ **Who will conduct the research?**

Jamie Stevenson at the School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester.

➤ **What is the purpose of the research?**

This research will be looking at how the residents of Kensington and Chelsea and those involved in the campaign for justice understand the relationship between the housing crisis, urban inequality and the Grenfell Tower fire. The thesis will also consider in what ways the Grenfell Tower fire can be found to be informing housing and social policy and what may be impairing suitable policy changes.

You were chosen to take part in this research study because you were identified as a Kensington and Chelsea resident or as someone who has extensive knowledge of the North Kensington community and the Grenfell movement. Alongside yourself, I will be recruiting a number of local residents to take part in face-to-face, Zoom, or phone interviews, with the aim of developing a dialogue related to their understandings of the causes of the Grenfell Tower and issues in the housing crisis and urban inequality.



➤ **Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

The research will be submitted as part of a student PhD thesis. The research may also be published in a range of public outputs, including academic books, reports, or journals. On completion of the thesis, participants will be informed of the findings and the thesis made available to them. Participants will also be notified of any resulting publications.

➤ **Who has reviewed the research project?**

The project has been reviewed by The University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee.

➤ **Who is funding the research project?**

This research project is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of The North West Social Science Doctoral Training Partnership (NWSSDTP).

## **What would my involvement be?**

➤ **What would I be asked to do if I took part?**

If you agree to take part in this research project after reading the information sheet and agree to provide me with your contact details, I will proceed to contact you to arrange an interview. This will take place either face-to-face, via Zoom or over the phone, in accordance with government guidelines about social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic. If we are able to conduct a face-to-face interview, this will take place in a public place of your choice. The interview will last around one hour and will be audio-recorded if you agree (if you do not agree, I will take notes throughout the interview).

There are no anticipated risks to you as a research participant. In terms of benefits, on completion of the thesis, participants will be informed of the findings and the thesis made available to them, providing data on how the Grenfell Tower fire is understood by residents of Kensington and Chelsea and those involved in the campaign for justice, and how the fire is impacting upon housing and social policy.

➤ **Will I be compensated for taking part?**

You will be compensated for any expenses incurred in taking part in the interview.

➤ **What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do choose to take part, please inform Jamie Stevenson via the contact details at the end of this letter. You will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself. However, if you choose to have your interview anonymised, it will not be possible to remove your data from the project after the interview as it will not be possible to identify your specific data. This does not

affect your data protection rights. If you decide not to take part you do not need to do anything further.

You are free to decline the request to audio record the interview. Participants should be comfortable with the recording process at all times and you are, therefore, free to stop recording at any time.

## **Data Protection and Confidentiality**

### **➤ What information will you collect about me?**

In order to participate in this research project, I will need to collect information that could identify you, called “personal identifiable information”. Specifically, we will need to collect:

- Your name
- Telephone number and/or Email Address
- Which Ward of the Kensington and Chelsea Borough you live or have lived in.

Audio recordings of the interview will only consist of your voice.

### **➤ Under what legal basis are you collecting this information?**

I am collecting and storing this personal identifiable information in accordance with data protection law which protect your rights. These state that I must have a legal basis (specific reason) for collecting your data. For this study, the specific reason is that it is “a public interest task” and “a process necessary for research purposes”.

### **➤ What are my rights in relation to the information you will collect about me?**

You have a number of rights under data protection law regarding your personal information. For example, you can request a copy of the information we hold about you, including audio recordings.

If you would like to know more about your different rights or the way we use your personal information to ensure we follow the law, please consult our [Privacy Notice for Research](http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=37095) (<http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=37095>)

### **➤ Will my participation in the study be confidential and my personal identifiable information be protected?**

In accordance with data protection law, The University of Manchester is the Data Controller for this project. This means that I am responsible for making sure your personal information is kept secure, confidential and used only in the way you have been told it will be used. All participants will be able to choose whether they want to be anonymous, or if they want to share their real name in the study. You are given the option to choose between confidentiality or using your real name because I have identified you as a significant contributor to this study and believe that your identification may add value to the data.

If you choose for your participation in the study to be confidential; all researchers are trained with this in mind, and your data will be looked after in the following way:

- To ensure confidentiality, participants can be provided with an assigned ID number only known to the research team.
- Only the study team at The University of Manchester will have access to your personal information, but they will anonymise it as soon as possible. Your name and any other identifying information will be removed and replaced with a random ID number.
- The standard retention period for data once anonymised is 5 years unless funders or regulators have specified longer retention requirements.
- Data will be stored both on a University Network (P Drive) and Dropbox for Business.
- If your data is shared with any other organisation and you have asked to be anonymised in the consent form – data shared will also be anonymised and personal details will be replaced with pseudonyms. Contact details will not be shared with any other organisation. Your anonymised data may be kept to use in future studies.
- If you agree to be audio recorded, a member of the research time will be performing the transcription. If you have asked to be anonymous, your personal identifiable information will be removed from the final transcript.
- Only members of the research team will have access to audio recordings.

Please also note that individuals from The University of Manchester or regulatory authorities may need to look at the data collected for this study to make sure the project is being carried out as planned. This may involve looking at identifiable data. All individuals involved in auditing and monitoring the study will have a strict duty of confidentiality to you as a research participant.

## **What if I have a complaint?**

### **➤ Contact details for complaints**

If you have a complaint that you wish to direct to members of the research team, please contact:

Jamie Stevenson, at the email address given at the end of this PIS.

If you prefer, you can contact the researcher's supervisor:

Dr Nick Thoburn. Email: [N.Thoburn@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:N.Thoburn@manchester.ac.uk)

**If you wish to make a formal complaint to someone independent of the research team or if you are not satisfied with the response you have gained from the researchers in the first instance then please contact**

The Research Ethics Manager, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, by emailing: [research.complaints@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:research.complaints@manchester.ac.uk) or by telephoning 0161 275 2674.

If you wish to contact us about your data protection rights, please email [dataprotection@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@manchester.ac.uk) or write to The Information Governance Office, Christie

Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, M13 9PL at the University and we will guide you through the process of exercising your rights.

You also have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office about complaints relating to your personal identifiable information Tel 0303 123 1113 Website:

<https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/>

### **Contact Details**

If you have any queries about the study or if you are interested in taking part then please contact Jamie Stevenson at the following address:

Email: **Jamie.Stevenson-3@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk**

## Appendix 3: Consent Form



### Participant Consent Form

#### In the Shadow of Grenfell: Residents' Understandings and Policy Impacts of the Grenfell Tower Fire

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

	Activities	Initials
1	I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet ( <b>Version 1, Date 10/06/2020</b> ) for the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.	
2	I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to myself. I understand that it will not be possible to remove my data from the project if I have chosen for my interview to be anonymised.  I agree to take part on this basis.	
3	I agree to the interviews being audio recorded.	
4	I agree that any data collected may be published in academic books, reports or journals.	
5	I understand that data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from The University of Manchester or regulatory authorities, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data.	
6	I agree that the researcher <b>will not</b> be able to identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.	
7	I agree that the researcher <b>will</b> be able to identify me by name in reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my real name will be used in the study.	
8	I agree that any personal or anonymised data collected may be shared with researchers at the University of Manchester.	
9	I agree that the researchers may retain my contact details in order to provide me with a summary of the findings for this study.	

10	I understand that there may be instances where during the course of the interview, information is revealed which means that the researchers will be obliged to break confidentiality and this has been explained in more detail in the information sheet.	
11	I agree to take part in this study.	

**Data Protection**

**The personal information we collect and use to conduct this research will be processed in accordance with data protection law as explained in the Participant Information Sheet and the Privacy Notice for Research Participants.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of the person taking consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The consent form will have two copies. The original copy of the consent form will be maintained by the research team. A copy of the consent form will also be provided to the respondent.

## Appendix 4: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

### Rough Interview Guide

#### North Kensington

- How would you describe North Kensington and how do you think it has changed since you have lived there? (Population, physical area, buildings)
  - How would you describe the community? Do you think it has changed since you have lived there or since Grenfell?
- What would you say are the main issues with housing in Kensington?
  - Based on your experience with the local authorities, do you think these issues are being addressed?
- How relevant do you think gentrification is to understand the context of the fire?
- How would you describe the relationship between the local council and the North Kensington community? Do you think it has changed over time?
  - Do you think this is shaped by class or race?
  - Do you think there have been any noticeable differences in how the council responds to the community?
  - Do you think Grenfell survivors and bereaved have been at the heart of the response effort by RBKC and central government?
- How would you describe your personal experience with the council?
  - Why do you think this is?
  - Do you feel listened to?
- Why do you think warnings were ignored by the KCTMO or council?
  - Do you think stigma is relevant to why warnings were ignored? (Based on race or class or both?)
- How would you describe the immediate response to the fire by the local and national government?
  - Why do you think they were absent in the immediate days and weeks after the fire?
  - Do you think there's been any improvements by the local and national government over the years, in response to the fire?

#### The Campaign

- How would you describe your role in the Grenfell response and campaign?
- What techniques do you think have been most effective in making sure that the campaign heard by the government and media?
  - What campaigns do you think have been most successful?
  - How has your approach changed over time?
  - Do you think there have been any barriers to being heard? Has anything got in the way of you/ Grenfell campaigners getting their message across?
  - What impact do you think conspiracy theories or the spread of misinformation has had upon the Grenfell campaign?

- Do you think there has been any rebalancing of power between Grenfell campaigners and the local or nation government?
  - What is the engagement like now between survivors and the local or national government? Are they treated differently?
- Do you think the community has been represented fairly by the media?
  - Can you give me any examples of how the community has been incorrectly represented?
  - *Can you give me any examples of how you have been incorrectly represented?*
- What do you think about the media coverage around Grenfell at present?
  - Why do you think that is?
  - Are there any noticeable patterns in what issues are taken seriously by the media or government and what issues are not?
- Do you think anyone has been scapegoated or unfairly blamed by the media, government, or inquiry since the fire?
  - Do you think anyone has received too little scrutiny by the media? Why do you think this is?

#### Systemic Issues and Lessons

- In your understanding of the fire, what would you say are some of the most significant long term causes of the fire?
- Do you think Grenfell survivors and bereaved have been at the heart of the public inquiry?
  - How important do you think it is that the inquiry includes **institutional discrimination** in the terms of reference?
  - Can you give me any examples of how Grenfell survivors or bereaved have been treated unfavourably because they are not white?
  - Do you think discrimination based on class is important to understanding the lead up and aftermath to Grenfell?
- Do you think Grenfell survivors and bereaved have been at the heart of the response effort by central government?
- Do you think so far, any lessons have been learnt from Grenfell and if so, by who?
  - What lessons do you think are most important?
- Do you think there are any issues related to Grenfell that haven't received enough attention by the media or government?