

**Chris Andrew & Mustafa Zaidi
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27th June, 2017

Dear Chris and Mustafa,

In the 21st century of a developed nation, the horrifying fire at Grenfell Tower in west London scandalised people around the world. The depressing question is how could it happen, and why was not it addressed in advance. I have a particular visceral shock about Grenfell partly because I live near by but mostly because it was allowed to happen by people I know. I have campaigned for over a decade about just this sort of risk and been rebuffed by minister after minister.

Why were our cautions ignored? The answer is simple...it was not worth the investment, given that fire deaths were declining for many years. The balance between higher cost and lower risk was in the favour of inaction. While many fire chiefs agreed with us, others were half-hearted. As a result, successive governments failed to update building regulations to check on new materials and failed to fit sprinklers even on new properties let alone retro-fit them to vulnerable ones like Grenfell.

It has always been thus. It took 11 dead in a blaze at the Rose & Crown in Saffron Walden in Essex to pave the way for building regulations in the Fire Precautions Act; it took 56 dead at the Bradford Football Club fire in 1985 for a raft of safety features at stadiums; it took 31 dead in the King's Cross fire in 1987 before we invested in safety on the London tube that had been under tight budget constraints for years.

And we always want someone to blame someone. Everyone wants scapegoats for Grenfell just as they did for the banking crash. Then it was the 'greedy' Fred Goodwin; now it's the 'uncaring' Kensington council. No matter that we voted for deregulating governments like those of Mrs Thatcher or that we benefitted from the boom that preceded the financial crisis. No matter that lots of other councils fitted the same flammable cladding as did Kensington and have no better plans for crisis management. Political hotheads throw insults, the prime minister joins in and schadenfreude takes the edge of our frustration. A banker was cast out and now a council chief executive resigns.

Sadly finding blame is not the same as finding a solution. If it was the world would have far fewer problems than it does.

We now need to put right all the things that were allowed to slide. Every citizen can help by pressing the case for sprinklers, especially in social housing where there is often multi-occupation and where people tend not to afford the most up to date electrical equipment. Most of the 300 individuals or so who die from fire each year do so in low-rise buildings; no one has ever died in a home protected by a sprinkler. Sprinklers are a cost efficient prevention at around £1,200 to £2,000 per dwelling, around the same as fitted carpets. In around 95% of cases they control the fire before the fire brigade arrives. Only one sprinkler head triggers at a time causing far less water damage. At Grenfell they would have put the fire out before it spread, even if the flames went unnoticed; sprinklers would have stopped it gaining a foothold and would have washed the smoke from stairways, keeping the temperature down.

Business leaders know the phrase: never waste a good crisis. We should certainly never waste a bad one.

All good wishes.

Nick