

Austerity is a killer. And that is wholly unnecessary

Published: January 13, 2026, 6:19 am

The Grenfell Tower fire has claimed twelve lives at the time of writing but no one thinks that will be the final total. And, I stress, that no one knows the cause of the fire or why it spread so rapidly at this moment. I am not suggesting for a moment that I do: I have no expertise in the field. All I can have is sympathy for all those who have suffered, and will suffer for a long time to come, and a concern that this should not happen again.

No one can, of course, guarantee against fires. But let's not pretend that the systemic risk of their occurrence cannot be reduced.

Requiring two stairwells in high rise buildings makes sense. But we do not do that.

Requiring sprinkler systems makes sense too. But we don't require them either.

Refurbishment that is more about putting in a cladding to make a tower block visually acceptable to Notth Kensington makes a lot less sense than making it safe. If the cladding is flammable (and according to those interviewed on Radio 4 last night the requirements are lax) then the prettification is wholly unacceptable.

Cutting fire inspections by 25% over seven years will increase risk.

As do serious cuts in fire service personnel do the same thing.

And not undertaking reviews of regulations when risk has been identified is inexcusable.

But these systemic risks were allowed to develop and exist. I would strongly suggest that this was not a person's fault unless those people George Osborne and Dvid Cameron. That is because these systemic risks increased during the era of austerity that they created.

I heard the people of Grenfell Tower and its neighbourhood saying last night that these risks would not have been taken if this was not social housing. I fear they are right. Their lives may well have been deemed not to matter.

Well, I don't buy that idea. Rather, I do not buy that belief, for that is what it is. I think each person matters. And each deserves to be safe. And I think this country may have failed the people of Grenfell Tower by adopting austerity that put their lives and those of millions of others at risk.

And yes, I do mean millions of others.

We know there were 30,000 excess deaths in the NHS because of cuts in 2016.

We know there have been benefits suicides.

We now know the police cannot cope.

We know that Grenfell Tower is not alone.

We know the fire service is 25% slower in its response rate now.

And that ambulances are not as efficient either.

And we know that all this was supposedly needed to balance books that never needed balancing, meaning that this was really just an excuse to put lives at risk to cut the size of the state with the aim of increasing the private wealth of a few.

And even if it turns out this was not the reason why people died at Grenfell Estate it is still the reason for the ongoing excess deaths in the NHS. And it is the reason for the fire safety cuts.

Austerity is a killer.

And that is wholly unnecessary.