

Neoliberalism was the underlying cause of the Grenfell ...

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Musing on what to say about the Grenfell inquiry has been quite hard. Nothing anyone can say can take away the trauma of what happened seven years ago, or its aftermath for so many people. I will not try in that case: this was a tragedy that the inquiry has decided need not have happened. I can only hope those who lost so much are compensated now.

What I do note is that the summaries of the report that I have read and heard suggest that there are many parties to whom blame can be apportioned. I see little benefit in reiterating just who those parties might be.

I do, however, note that there is a very strong political dimension to this disaster that can be discussed now without in any way prejudicing whether or not prosecutions might take place because I am not interested in personalities. I am instead interested in the systemic failure that occurred.

My overwhelming impression, having read quite a lot, is that throughout all the organisations that dealt with fire regulations and fire safety in the run-up to this disaster, there was, without apparent exception, an indifference to the obligations that those laws and regulations created.

We know the coalition government from 2010 onwards was contemptuous of regulation. Their attitude was commonplace throughout right-wing politics, in particular in this era, although Labour was not exempt. This attitude created the culture that permitted Grenfell to happen.

In addition, anyone who has engaged with the business community throughout the last 40 years will be familiar with the contempt that many so-called business leaders, including the directors of many companies on whose actions lives depended, have shown for the role of the state and the need for regulation to ensure that markets operate in the public interest.

And as anyone with the power to observe knows, regulation has too often been little

more than a facade during much of the neoliberal era, becoming a lucrative game for those appointed to senior roles in organisations regulating sectors about which they had little or no knowledge, and who were unskilled in the significance of regulation itself.

Underpinning all of this is, of course, one political philosophy, which is that of neoliberalism. Neoliberal thinkers, whether they be philosophers, economists or politicians, have argued that minimal government and regulation is what enables society to prosper. Of all those who are likely to face prosecution once the Metropolitan police close what will end up seeming like a never-ending investigation in the aftermath of this report, the proponents of neoliberalism are the least likely to face any risk of being brought to account and yet in my opinion they are easily the most culpable for their actions.

The falsehoods that they have promulgated have ultimately led to the deaths of the victims of Grenfell.

Their claim that small government is good for society is wrong. The evidence to the contrary is overwhelming.

Likewise, their claim that limited regulation is necessary for competition to thrive is false. You can no more have fair competition and honest markets without high quality, properly imposed regulation than you can have a game of soccer without the rules of football being followed.

In addition, the idea that low cost when it comes to government is necessarily best is very obviously false, as has been proven so many times, not least at Grenfell.

And finally, the tacitly implied idea within neoliberalism that tokenistic regulation is all that is necessary is very obviously false. If society is to be protected from abuse, which abuse is apparent throughout much of the activity that led to this disaster, then proper regulation led by those who are dedicated to the task, who are trained in it and who are committed to upholding standards for the benefit of society as a whole is essential. Anything else is disastrous.

The faults that I note have permeated the thinking of too many of the UK's political parties, and most especially that of both the Tories and Labour: there is little point differentiating them. They have embraced these corrupt ideas to deliver government that is not fit for purpose and which has failed us.

The unfortunate fact is that this is not the message that has been delivered about why the Grenfell disaster happened. Appointing a judge-led inquiry, overseen by a person who is himself a member of the establishment, was never likely to result in an outcome where the systemic failings that resulted in this tragedy were going to be mentioned, let alone be discussed. It seems that they have not been.

Instead, the focus is on the detail and the personalities, but not on the real underlying cause of the failure.

That real cause is the neoliberal thinking that is corrupting our society in so many ways. Only by ridding our politics of that thinking will we eliminate the risk of another Grenfell happening, but what is the likelihood of that happening when most of our politicians are corrupted by this thinking?