

Boris Johnson and the Grenfell Tower inferno

By Julie Hyland
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When the list is drawn up of those criminally responsible for the Grenfell Tower fire in London, Boris Johnson's name should be at the top.

The former mayor of London (2008-2016) recently condemned what he described as “political game-playing” over the inferno in west London that claimed the lives of at least 79 people. Suggestions that “this tragedy was somehow caused by fire service cuts” were “unbelievable,” he declared.

Johnson spoke as a video clip from 2013 became widely viewed on YouTube. In it he is seen telling a Labour Party London Assembly member to “get stuffed” when he accuses Johnson of lying over the scale and consequences of cuts to the London Fire Brigade (LFB).

Now foreign secretary, Johnson styles himself as the enfant-terrible of the Conservative Party. His famed outbursts, however, have nothing to do with unorthodoxy or “plain speaking.”

Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, as he is more properly known, epitomises the class arrogance and social privilege of Britain's upper-middle class. This is a man whose experience with the “lower classes” extends only to giving orders.

If Johnson is reacting so defensively, it is because in his capacity as mayor he forced through massive cuts in the LFB budget despite repeated warnings they would cost lives.

The London fire service is the fifth largest in the world and covers a metropolitan area of nearly 14 million people—the most populous in the European Union. In addition to firefighting, it responds to emergency situations, including traffic accidents and terror incidents, of which there have been three in the capital in the last four months.

Johnson took a sledgehammer to this vital provision. In 2012, he brought forward proposed cuts of £65 million, amounting to a 15 percent reduction in the LFB's £448 million annual budget. In words that should be branded on his forehead, he justified this on the grounds of “the declining number of fire deaths.”

Due to opposition on the London Assembly, Johnson ordered the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority

(LFEPA), which consists of 17 mayoral appointees, to begin consultations on the plan. Ninety-four percent of those consulted opposed the cuts, but their views were rejected as supposedly unrepresentative of the views of all Londoners. Instead, the number of stations and engines to be lost was reduced slightly, to 10 and 14, respectively, while the number of fire-fighter job cuts was increased to 522.

Using powers introduced by the Labour Party, which enable the mayor to overrule and “direct” the authority to carry out his instructions, Johnson decreed that the cuts should go ahead. In a statement at the time he said he was “not minded to provide additional funding” to the LFEPA for 2014-15.

He was supported by then-London Fire Commissioner Ron Dobson, who had drawn up the cuts package under the grotesquely misnamed “London Safety Plan 5.” Only two years before, in November 2011, Dobson was allowed to retire from his £200,000 position, aged 52, in order to gain access to his pension entitlements, some £133,000 a year, - before being immediately reemployed in the same post.

Johnson's decision was challenged at the High Court by seven London councils—Tower Hamlets, Camden, Greenwich, Hackney, Islington, Lewisham and Southwark. They argued that it “ignores the fire risks posed by a concentration of potential terrorist targets, tourist attractions, social and student housing and high-rise buildings in the affected boroughs.”

The eighth claimant was Ms. Ingrid Richardson, who lived with her husband on the seventh floor of a south London 15-storey tower block. She suffered from Parkinson's Disease and could move only with the help of a walking frame, while her husband had Alzheimer's disease. Her claim was added to highlight the increased fire risks facing older and disabled residents.

Mr. Justice Foskett ruled that the closure decision was lawful, as the mayor was entitled to make use of his powers. His decision made all the more unforgivable the efforts by the Labour Party and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) to focus the considerable opposition amongst residents and fire fighters on legal challenges they knew would fail.

Dobson stated arrogantly at the time that “fire stations and

fire engines do not stop fires happening—proactive prevention work does.” Except that there was no “proactive fire prevention” at Grenfell Tower or many other residences. Quite the opposite.

Official advice to “stay put” in a fire applies only to high-rise buildings that are fitted with fire-proofed doors. But not all the doors in Grenfell Tower were fire-proofed. Under conditions in which external cladding that was known to be combustible had been added across the entire exterior of the building as a cheap means of prettifying it, Grenfell Tower was a death trap.

A report by Insurers RSA into an August 2016 fire at the Shepherd Court tower block, also in West London, had found that flammable material in insulation panels “melts and ignites relatively easily,” and can cause “extremely rapid fire spread and the release of large volumes of toxic smoke.” The report added, “*This allows extensive and violent fire to spread, and makes firefighting almost impossible.*” [emphasis added]

Fire chiefs wrote to the local authorities to warn them, but no action was taken.

On Friday, police confirmed that preliminary tests on insulation samples collected from Grenfell Tower “combusted soon after the tests started.” They continued, “The initial test on the cladding tiles also failed the safety tests.”

Yet during the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower, when the cladding was installed, the building was inspected 16 times between 2014 and 2016 by Kensington and Chelsea Council, which signed off on the work.

During the horrific fire, it became clear that the LFB (and presumably many other fire services across the country) is manned with hoses that can reach only to the 12th floor of any building. The fire service had to “borrow” a larger platform that could reach to 42 metres—still only the 15th floor—from Surrey, nearly two hours away.

Like many other high-rises in the UK, Grenfell Tower had only a single stairwell. As the flames spread, it would have become quickly apparent that those in flats above the 15th floor had no means to escape the toxic fumes given off, much less the fire, and no means of rescue.

They waited to die.

Residents of North Kensington have praised the courage and commitment of the firefighters who attended Grenfell Tower and fought to save those inside, against almost insurmountable odds. They did so above and beyond the call of duty, in some instances over a 19-hour shift.

In total, some 200 fire fighters and officers attended the call-out, with 40 fire engines. Fire fighters have told how they could not get past the 15th floor and how they had to choose whom they should try to save.

Why did the fire fighters have to work such long hours under such conditions? Why do most accounts describe fire crews from Whitechapel being first to enter the building—a station in east London, more than 40 minutes drive away? What happened to the “fire prevention” measures Johnson claimed meant the LFB could be cut?

The answer is clear. Small wonder that firefighters and local residents who witnessed the events broke down in tears of sorrow and fury.

Last year, a report by Lancaster University statistician Dr. Benjamin Taylor found that Johnson’s cuts had led to deaths. Analysing response-time data to 24,000 house fire call-outs between 2012 and 2015, Taylor found that the average time in some areas before the fire stations were shut was “well under five minutes,” whereas some stations afterwards were taking up to 10 minutes to respond.

The London’s Burning report said firefighters were unable to respond to the six-minute target time in more than half of the fires studied. A least eight deaths were attributable to these delays.

In November 2015, Johnson and Dobson axed a further 13 engines in London, just two weeks after a man had jumped to his death from a burning housing block in Camden. The man, Choi Yip, was forced to jump after it took fire fighters more than 13 minutes to reach the blaze at the sheltered housing block.

The 13 fire engines had already been removed from service in preparation to break a strike by firefighters against the attack on their pensions, and were due to be returned. But a review ordered by Johnson decided they were surplus to requirements. This left the LFB with 142 engines, down by one-quarter of its strength from the end of 2013.

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