

Flammable cladding rife in Australian construction industry

By Paul Bartizan and Richard Phillips
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State and federal governments in Australia have reacted to the Grenfell Tower fire disaster in London with calls for urgent safety checks into the use of non-fire resistant aluminium composite panel (ACP) cladding on properties across the country.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten have demanded audits. Senators involved in a long-running federal committee investigation into the use of non-compliant building materials declared last week that the inquiry would now examine flammable cladding. The state governments in New South Wales (NSW), South Australia and Queensland have also announced audits.

The expressions of concerns by the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor about combustible ACP cladding are entirely cynical. The risks and dangers of this material were well-known to Australian fire safety and construction authorities and the relevant state and federal ministers long before the Grenfell Tower disaster. Over the past two decades there have been major fires in ACP-clad multi-storey properties in Britain, the US, South Korea, France, China, the United Arab Emirates and Australia.

The use of aluminium panels with highly flammable polyethylene cores is banned on the exteriors of high-rise buildings in Australia and many other countries. However, the use of the product is widespread because it is cheaper—\$35 per square metre less expensive than their fire-resistant counterparts—20 percent lighter and easily installed. Contrary to the current public posturing about the panels, state and federal governments and regulatory authorities have resisted taking any action to prevent the spread of the dangerous material, let alone conduct a national audit and order its removal.

Two days after the Grenfell Tower disaster, the *Age* newspaper revealed that the Australian Building Codes Board (ABCB), the industry regulatory body, had, in fact, been aware of the safety threat posed by ACP material

since 2010.

The newspaper reported that a fire-safety consultant had written to the ABCB in June 2010 explaining that most types of aluminium composite panels were “not able to achieve the criteria nominated in [the building code] to be deemed non-combustible.” The letter warned that these materials had been used extensively for about 25 years and that “millions of square metres” of ACP were installed on high rise buildings across Australia.

According to the *Age*, the board planned to send a national advisory note warning the industry about the cladding but this elementary action was delayed by negotiations in the Building Codes Committee in 2012.

In fact, the ABCB issued no specific warnings until well after a major fire occurred at the ACP-clad Lacrosse building, a 23-storey apartment block in downtown Melbourne, in November 2014. The fire, which started at 2 a.m. from a discarded cigarette on a balcony, spread rapidly, jumping from balcony to balcony, engulfing the upper-13 storeys within 15 minutes. Internal fire sprinklers prevented fire spreading inside the apartments and luckily no-one was hurt or killed.

Notwithstanding official bans on non-fire resistant ACPs on Australian high-rise construction, these rules are not seriously enforced because building safety certification has been deregulated, allowing construction companies to hire private certifiers who in a number of documented cases have authorised dangerous and unsafe structures. Urgent calls by peak fire and building safety bodies for Australian governments to end privatised building safety certification have been ignored.

All levels of Australian government, which are increasingly dependent on millions of dollars in tax revenue from the residential property boom, have no interest in policing construction safety, let alone introducing laws that might impede the industry.

The rallying cry of every government, Liberal-National

and Labor, federal, state and municipal alike, is “get rid of business red tape.” In other words, successive governments have created the conditions for the run-down of building safety and inspection standards, deregulation, and other cost-cutting construction methods throughout Australia.

Almost three years since the Lacrosse apartment fire there has been no national audit of the extent of flammable ACP-cladding on high-rise buildings in Australia, despite the fact that building regulatory authorities and the responsible government ministers know there are hundreds of these potential death traps.

The only audit has been by the Victorian Building Authority in the aftermath of the Lacrosse fire. A limited and selective audit of 170 high-rise buildings with ACP cladding in central Melbourne and its immediate surrounding suburbs found that 51 percent of these structures had the non-compliant combustible ACP cladding.

A secret briefing note from NSW’s Department of Planning and Environment leaked to the *Australian* newspaper in mid-February 2016, estimated that there were between 1,800 and 2,500 high-rise buildings in metropolitan Sydney with ACP cladding. If the proportion with the non-compliant combustible type of panel is similar to Melbourne then there could be over 1,000 buildings in Sydney alone prone to fire risk. If extrapolated nationally, hundreds more high-rise buildings in Brisbane, Gold Coast and other Australian cities are threatened.

While the focus has been on high-rise buildings, the danger of combustible cladding on other buildings is being ignored. Victorian state firefighting authorities estimate that there are at least 800 low-rise buildings just in Melbourne with suspect ACP cladding. Buildings under 25 metres high (about eight storeys) are not required to have sprinkler systems.

Early last year peak fire safety agencies issued an urgent warning about the dangerous and uncontrolled use of combustible ACP cladding. Fire Protection Association Australia chief Scott Williams described the cladding as “a ticking time bomb” and the “dirty secret of the building industry in Australia.”

Williams said that the Gold Coast was one of the worst-affected cities in Australia for high-rise buildings covered in flammable external cladding and said state governments had been lax in regulating the use of the non-compliant material.

A few days after the Grenfell Tower blaze, the

Victorian state Labor government’s planning minister, Richard Wynne, declared that the Grenfell Tower disaster was not possible in Melbourne or elsewhere in the country because Australia had “the best building codes of any first-world country.”

This worthless assurance is motivated by concerns that the truth about the extent of ACP cladding in Australian construction will generate a public outcry and demands for its removal. This would drastically impact on property prices and the increasingly fragile construction industry.

While the official investigation into the Lacrosse fire called for the immediate removal of the cladding from the building, the panels remain in place with hundreds of people still living in the apartments. The cladding has not been removed because the 328 apartment owners, who have been ordered to replace the ACP by July 2018, at a cost of at least \$8.6 million, are involved in ongoing court action with the builder over who will pay.

Likewise, six other apartment blocks in Melbourne with flammable cladding and on the Metropolitan Fire Brigade’s “enhanced response list” are still covered with the dangerous material. According to an *Age* newspaper report on Saturday, residents in some of the apartments have not even been informed about the cladding and the dangers they confront.

In June 2015, Engineers Australia released a report revealing that 85 percent of strata units in NSW were defective at completion and that the state had Australia’s worst building certification system. While the report did not deal with ACP cladding, commonly reported problems included inadequate fire separation between apartments, faulty installation of fire dampers to stop the spread of smoke and defective electrical installations.

As one of the report’s authors Robert Hart told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “I’m waiting for a major fire to happen in one of these buildings ... I wish I could say it won’t, but it will ... and when it does, it will be the NSW government that has blood on its hands for its total failure to provide a proper system of certification for the building industry.”

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