

GRENFELL TOWER LESSONS

Channel 4 News is to be congratulated for its sustained investigations into important human issues. This has been the case with its coverage of the Grenfell Tower fire, where it has given enormous attention to the victims of the fire and to the various bodies responsible for the safety of such buildings and government policy for housing. On 1st August politicians, local leaders and residents were interviewed with the burnt remains of the tower in the background. These were Tony Devenish (Con. London Assembly), Linda Wade (Lib. Councillor), Samia Badani (Chair, Bramley House Residents Association), Melvyn Atkins (local resident), Emma Dent-Coad (Lab. MP Kensington), Maria Trinidad (local resident), Anna Minton (author of *Big Capital*), Ilhan Yonis (social housing campaigner), and Kate Mackintosh (architect).

Asked for their thoughts, Linda Wade began by saying that there has long been a lack of concern for planning for social housing in the borough. Samia Badani remarked that the local housing association is only concerned with its own interests and ignores requests from tenants, for example to restore a broken water supply. Melvyn Atkins said that since the establishment of the housing association in 1995 they have never listened to tenants concerns. "When they consult tenants on what actions to take, quite often they have already made a decision, using the consultation merely as a paper exercise. They have a limit to how much they think people in social housing are entitled to. We see that in how much they spent on cladding. The income from rent in the borough is about 17 million, and 75% of that is going on staff salaries, rather than being reinvested in housing stock. That cannot be right."

Emma Dent-Coad described how she gets shouted at in council meetings and whatever the Labour or Liberal Democrats say is ignored. "They don't answer your emails. They treat residents as a nuisance." Tony Devenish ignored the questions put to him saying "the government has given 3 billion pounds for 90,000 houses and Mr Khan, the Mayor of London, needs to get on with building those homes." "I am not here to comment on specific views and I totally respect all the residents and deal with these issues every day".

In response Samia Badani said "We have lost all confidence in the CMO management and they still make decisions regardless of us". Likewise, Melvyn Atkins remarked "they do not consult the people they are there to serve and provide services for and that is not acceptable, especially considering what has now happened. To continue to operate in the same vain just beggars belief. We cannot live in a society where there is one rule or one outcome for one socio-economic class and another outcome for another. If that had been a building of leaseholder owners I am absolutely certain they would not have had the outcome that we have, or the decisions that were made, and the refurbishment of the building would have been different". Samia Badani said "we need a system where tenants can plan services and policies".

Footage was then shown of UK housing after the war when council houses were called 'homes for heroes'. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan proudly announces they have built three hundred thousand houses in 1953. It is also shown how all classes of people lived together in these communities, from doctors to labourers. In the 1970's almost half the nation lived in council houses. All this came to an end when in the 1980's the government introduced the 'right to buy' policy. Since then no government has properly

invested in social housing. Footage is shown of the slum-like conditions of modern estates where no care is now given to them.

Tony Devenish, in response to the film, suggested that land now owned by councils needs to be put in the hands of private builders. Anna Minton responded saying that "you only have to look at the London skyline to see that construction is going up everywhere. Lots of homes are being built, but they are for billionaire investors, off-shore investors. They are not for Londoners and certainly not affordable." Even the 25% affordable homes that was included in those developments "was redefined by the Conservatives to up to 80% of market rent". Devenish disputed these figures but Minton insists with examples from the Elephant & Castle development, saying that half of that development has been sold to foreign investors. Devenish defended these practices by saying "some still goes to affordable housing". Minton says "how is 80% of the market value affordable?" Devenish says "if you stop the market you won't get any social housing".

Ilhan Yonis said "I agree with Anna. The new homes being built are not affordable. Who is London for? After I leave university am I expected to stay up north?" "I grew up in a tower block sharing a bed with two of my sisters, with my two brothers sharing a bed in the same room. We lived in cramped, damp conditions, with a sister with asthma and only after bidding for years could we move." Kate Mackintosh said "I'd like to remind everybody that Britain is the fifth richest country in the world. It is totally disgusting that with the reduction in assistance for rent, which is all money going from the public sector to the private sector, and that is predicted that thousands of children will be evicted across this country. In other countries they have a different priority. They realise that the future of their country depends on the next generation. In Norway they have a ministry for housing and all proposed policies have to be passed by the ministry as to what the effect on children will be."

Devenish says "The market has to be able to work, so that if we sell as many houses as possible, then we will get more social housing built. If you just have a centralised planning system you won't build anything." Minton replies "The market has never worked." In reply to Ilhan Yonis, Minton says that in Westminster the policy is to send anyone in need of social housing to other cities. "That is the official policy."

Atkins remarks that shortage of homes is only part of the problem. Local people who own their own homes say that it is social housing that prevents more people buying homes, "and so there is a huge socio-economic divide, and it makes people fight amongst themselves over space that is actually for everyone". Minton responds "We should have a land value tax. It is a way of damping down this speculative, casino market. We have this housing crisis because the market is totally dysfunctional. So market answers can never be the solution". Develin defends the Thatcher 'right to buy' policy, "which is why she won all those elections". Minton responds saying "Those properties are now owned by private and professional landlords and rented out at 3 and 4 times the social rent". Mackintosh points out that "in Scotland more social housing has been built than in the rest of the UK, and because of this the proportion of household income taken in housing is lower than in the rest of the UK".

Yonis concludes by saying "the Grenfell tragedy was due to the residents being ignored for years and that it was a crime".