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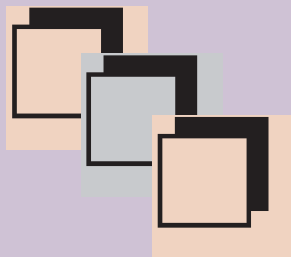
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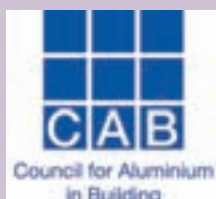
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Comment

'Reports' 'Enquiries' 'Royal Commissions' – the British way of talking about what happened. Sometimes, undoubtedly, a useful tool to make the public think that a government wants the truth uncovered, perpetrators brought to book and, in the extreme, actually cares about the matter under enquiry.

A big problem, often, is the distance from an event to an enquiry. The enquiry into the events of 'bloody Sunday' – 30th January 1972 – was not set up until 1998. (A previous tribunal, headed by Lord Widgery, reported 11 weeks after the event and was widely criticised as a 'whitewash'.) At least the distance between the Grenfell Tower fire and Dame Judith Hackitt's review of building regulations, which Grenfell triggered, is very much shorter. Whether it suits everybody or tells us much is another matter.

Hackitt makes a number of recommendations. The London Fire Brigade has welcomed her proposals to increase the fire service role in building safety though the Brigade has raised concerns over the quality of construction of some buildings. It has been calling for a review of building regulations for a number of years. One of the recommendations is the setting up of a new – yet another – authority to oversee matters. The 'Joint Competent Authority' (JCA) would have a key role during consultation in the design, construction and refurbishment of buildings. This body would include the local authority building standards and the health and safety executive.

A proposal of which Sir Humphrey would be proud! More jobs for more civil servants paid for by the tax payer.

There is no doubt that the existing building regulations leave much to be desired. The standards it imposes are often the result of negotiation with the industry and are what the industry can achieve rather than what is desirable. Not just in the matter of fire safety but across the whole gamut of standards.

The further problem is the application. When I started in business a friend said to me: "If you want to make a profit, never work out the break-even point of your company because that will be what you end up working to." Something similar applies to building regulations and to the standards they apply. In the case of Grenfell it seems, from early reports, that the cladding was of an acceptably fire resistant standard which was cheaper than a higher grade. There has also been a report of fire doors failing.

A big concern for many is the failure to recommend an outright ban on the type of cladding used on Grenfell. Members of the cladding industry have expressed surprise at the omission. Hackitt prefers to call for better testing regimes. This may be to misunderstand that we tend to achieve standards by good old British compromise rather than imposition by a standards authority. (See my previous paragraph.) If there is any doubt in your mind about this I would cite my first visit to the British Standards Institution. In those days, the eighties, I was a keen cyclist, equally in those days no cyclist wore a helmet. I was interested to know about a British standard – a Kite Mark – for a cycle helmet. "Oh," I was told, "There isn't a standard planned, the industry doesn't want one."

John Roper

