



Passive Subjects or Custodians of the Free Market? Civil Servants and the Grenfell Tower Fire

Khadijah Na'eem

University of London, United Kingdom

Abstract

Research on the government's role in the Grenfell Tower fire has tended to focus on the local authority that managed the building. While important, the Grenfell Tower Inquiry makes clear that the local authority was unaware of the dangers posed by combustible cladding. Meanwhile, Westminster civil servants were aware of the risks associated with combustible cladding materials but failed to protect the public from those dangers. Through a documentary analysis of individual civil servant testimonies and accounts to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, this article sheds light on the behaviour and thinking of civil servants responsible for the government's regulatory failures. It makes two main arguments: firstly, that civil servants had been conditioned to feel their work was not a government priority unless it served deregulatory interests. Secondly, this article argues that civil servants were not passive subjects in political processes but had characterised themselves as custodians of the free market, protecting it against what they perceived as unnecessary complaints and concerns about the risks of combustible cladding.

Keywords: Grenfell Tower fire; civil servants; Whitehall; free market; deregulation.

Introduction

At the time of writing, it has been nearly nine years since 72 people died in the fire at Grenfell Tower, which was part of a social housing estate in West London. The fire spread rapidly around the building's exterior because it had been recently refurbished and clad with highly combustible materials. One of the children who died in the fire was a young girl with a "contagious" laugh: Jessica Urbano Ramirez was weeks away from her 13th birthday (Basnett et al., 2017).

Since the fire, a wealth of research and investigations has revealed an institutionalised disregard for health and safety. This stretched from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) and its Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), which managed the building, to central government. Amongst culpable actors, the KCTMO has received the most criticism because of its racist and classist treatment of the Tower's residents, 85% of whom were global majority (Bulley et al., 2019; Cooper & Whyte, 2022; MacLeod, 2018; Tombs, 2010). Researchers are highly critical of the decision to clad the Tower to prevent it from looking, in RBKC's words, "like a poor cousin" to surrounding new buildings (Grenfell Tower Inquiry [GTI], 2021, Day 128, p. 31). During Grenfell Tower's refurbishment, the KCTMO made cost-cutting decisions that led to the selection of highly combustible cladding materials while persistently disregarding residents' safety concerns. As Preston (2019) argues, the refurbishment reflected a wider capitalist process in which racialised and classed residents became less important than the need to produce capital through construction.

While the KCTMO's behaviour was inexcusable, the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) investigations clearly show that its staff did not know they were cladding the Grenfell Tower in a "barrel of petrol" (GTI, 2018, Day 2, p. 31). In this article, I turn attention towards the Fire Safety and Energy Division (Division). The Division was part of a larger government department



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that worked on building regulations.¹ The Division's civil servants knew about the risks of combustible cladding materials, such as the polyethylene (PE)-cored aluminium composite material (ACM) panels used on Grenfell Tower. Civil servants had been warned numerous times that these panels were being "routinely" used on high-rise buildings in England and Wales (GTI, 2024a, p. 8). Civil servants had the knowledge and power to institute immediate changes, for example, by issuing publicly-available Frequently Asked Questions or warnings to the construction industry, but chose not to act on their understanding (GTI, 2024b, pp. 145–198; see also Civil Service, 2015). Civil servants also played a key role in maintaining the inadequacy of *Approved Document B* (ADB), the primary fire safety regulatory document, thereby enabling corporations to sell unsafe products for use in high-rise buildings (GTI, 2024a). Yet civil servants are not a focus of research into the fire (an exception is Apps, 2022). More broadly, despite their key role in major government failures, there is limited research on civil servants who inadvertently facilitate corporate harms.

The GTI's Phase 2 final report details the series of omissions by the Division that led to the widespread use of combustible materials on high-rise buildings. While the final report attributes some blame to deregulation, criticism is limited to two post-2010 policies: the One-In and Out rules and the Red Tape Challenge, which were designed to discourage civil servants from introducing regulations (GTI, 2024a). It is unclear from the final report how deregulatory policies and civil servants' failures interact. In particular, the GTI's recommendations do not address the Department's ways of working, including how to manage the effects of politico-economic policies on civil servants. This is despite numerous civil servants raising issues about the impact of deregulation on their work during hearings (GTI, 2022f, Day 244, pp. 9–12; GTI, 2022e, Day 243, p. 6; GTI, 2022k, Day 257, pp. 171–175). While the GTI provided valuable insights, its scope and subsequent recommendations are limited (Moore-Bick, 2017). Thus, research must continue without assuming the final report has effectively addressed the Fire's systemic causes.

To understand why civil servants did not prioritise public safety over corporate interests, it is necessary to examine the historically evolving power dynamics shaped by a neoliberal, free-market agenda, rather than focusing solely on the immediate policies associated with the fire. Analysis must be historically grounded (Whyte, 2014) and recognise how the state has, over several decades, mobilised the Civil Service to construct the administrative and legal conditions necessary for market-driven governance. Without this knowledge, civil servants could be blamed without accounting for the roles of ministers and the Department's policies. The Conservative Minister for the Department between 2013 and 2015, Eric Pickles, was keen during the GTI to evade responsibility by claiming civil servants had "got themselves into a whirl ... a self-fulfilling prophecy, a kind of parody of what we wanted" (GTI, 2022o, Day 262, p. 146). In reality, civil servants' choices reflect a long-term central government project, led by ministers such as Pickles, to reorient the Department toward prioritising economic concerns over public safety regulatory issues.

The significance of this article is twofold. Firstly, it enhances understanding of how political agendas are communicated to civil servants. Successive United Kingdom (UK) governments invested considerable effort in shaping civil servants' thinking about regulation through political policy and discourse. It argues that within the Department, deregulatory priorities were reinforced through implicit modes of communication: the everyday administrative procedures that guide specific ways of thinking, attitudes, or behaviours. Two specific modes of communication were identified: silence and delay. Through these, the Department communicated its priorities and non-priorities to fire safety civil servants. By examining the impact of modes of communication, this paper argues that the Division self-regulated by valuing itself and its work only to the extent that it served the free-market agenda.

Secondly, the article emphasises the power and influence of civil servants in the regulatory process that led to the use of highly combustible materials on Grenfell Tower's cladding. Civil servants should not be understood as passive actors, silenced by the central government's priorities. Some civil servants were keen to argue to the GTI that they were overwhelmed by the pressure to deregulate (GTI, 2022k, Day 257, p. 242; GTI, 2022b, Day 240, p. 91). The GTI's final report also accepts that deregulation meant civil servants "felt unable to propose regulatory interventions" (GTI, 2024b, p. 159). While civil servants were guided by free-market logic, this article demonstrates that their failure to challenge the government's agenda was more active than passive. Occupying influential roles within the Civil Service, they had many opportunities to temper government expectations for deregulation. However, key civil servants did not highlight the urgency of emerging fire safety issues. Instead, this article suggests they leveraged their technical authority as government experts to advance the government's agenda.

Civil Servants and the Grenfell Tower Fire

Literature on the Grenfell Tower fire has focused on the role of RBKC and its KCTMO (Bulley et al., 2019; Cooper & Whyte, 2022; MacLeod, 2018; Tombs, 2010). While this is important, the government has found that combustible cladding is an issue reaching far beyond the confines of RBKC. As of May 2025, 5,031 high-rise buildings across England have unsafe cladding,

with privately owned buildings accounting for the largest proportion (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025a). The common denominator among these cladding systems is that they were all certified, approved, and marketed as compliant under the same regulatory framework. This convergence highlights the production and enforcement of regulation in neoliberal government as a critical site of inquiry.

Hampton and Ewen detail the impact of neoliberal policy on fire safety. Hampton (2025) criticises neoliberal policies since the 1970s and their impact on the effectiveness of fire safety regulation and the London Fire Brigade. Similar to Hampton, Ewen (2023) demonstrates, through a historical analysis of approaches to fire safety, that, contrary to popular political narratives, “red tape saves lives” (p. 39). While thorough accounts, Hampton and Ewen do not explore the impact of neoliberal policies on the everyday regulatory processes within the Civil Service that maintained inadequate fire safety regulations. Notably, MacLeod (2018) also discusses the impact of deregulatory policies on fire safety but does not tease out the state policies and practices that compromised life safety. Housing journalist Apps (2022) breaks down the Department’s failure to respond adequately to warnings about the risks associated with combustible cladding without considering how neoliberal forms of thinking developed to influence civil servants. It remains unclear from existing literature how neoliberal policy and discourse were organised within the state to direct regulatory failures before the Grenfell Tower fire. This article considers how the state interwove its neoliberal agenda into the Department’s everyday activities and how the regulatory civil servants engaged with these directions.

While contributing to studies of the Grenfell Tower fire, this article is also relevant to policy research on the agency and power of civil servants when they fail to recognise and highlight critical information with life safety implications (see Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2018; Niklasson et al., 2020; Sausman & Locke, 2004). Research suggests that civil servants may avoid raising issues or policy proposals for fear of becoming involved in controversy or crises (De Graaf, 2010; Kingston, 2002). Kingston (2002), who considered a variety of Western countries, argues that civil servants must balance the gain from raising issues, which are often small, with the risk to their career if they are incorrect or fail. A bureaucrat may seek ways to sidestep blame when things go wrong, including by avoiding difficult information (Kingston, 2002, p. 202). In the English context, civil servants may have become less effective at challenging policies and decisions out of fear of being seen as pessimists (Stanley, 2022). In 2019, Sir Amyas Morse, former head of the National Audit Office, criticised the power imbalance, explaining that civil servants understand that disagreeing with a minister can be “pretty ugly” (Morse [2019] as cited in The Times, 2019).

When things go wrong, however, civil servants are often blamed. For example, civil servants responsible for failures in establishing the Universal Credit system were found to have had a “fortress mentality” and “good news reporting culture,” managed themselves poorly, and been ineffective at planning information (Department for Work & Pensions, 2013, p. 9). Civil servants in the Department for Transport responsible for the failure of the West Coast Main Line deal were also criticised for a “complete lack of common sense” (Public Accounts Committee, 2013, para. 3). Similarly, Stanley (2024) states that fire safety officials before the Grenfell Tower fire “lacked common sense” (para. 19). Such statements reduce the complex causes of events to the mistakes of specific individuals, minimising the role of broader political forces. In contrast, this article examines the political policies and discourses that shaped civil servants without reducing their power in decision-making.

Method

Documentary analysis is a systematic method of reviewing or evaluating written documents to derive meaning, understand, synthesise, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003). It is accomplished by analysing and organising data, often publicly available, into themes or categories. In this article, the primary sources of documentary analysis were data collected by the GTI, including hearings, witness statements, emails, and other correspondence within the Department before the Grenfell Tower fire. I used NVivo, a qualitative data management software, to manage and analyse this data. During the initial “skimming” (Bowen, 2009, p. 32) of testimonies to the GTI, I aimed to understand the various roles of those involved, the sequence of events, and their relevance to the Grenfell Tower fire. After identifying the significance of the Division’s role, I engaged in a more careful, focused reading of the civil servants’ testimonies to identify key themes and explanations that elucidated their thinking. Whilst at first, I felt highly critical of civil servants, as I engaged with testimonies, their perceptual world became more apparent. An overall picture emerged, challenging assumptions that they had failed in their roles or lacked “common sense” (Stanley, 2024, para. 19).

In documentary analysis, data are corroborated through triangulation across multiple data sources. This enhances credibility and helps mitigate bias, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings (Patton, 1990). To help me understand the historical roots of the issues civil servants raised, I triangulated their accounts with primary and secondary sources of political discourse concerning regulatory governance in the UK since 1979. I examined fire safety and deregulatory legislation, policy documents, parliamentary debates, select committee reports, political speeches, and letters to the Civil Service. Triangulation was important

because testimonies regarding the force of the government's deregulatory agenda differed significantly between ministers and civil servants during the GTI hearings (GTI, 2024b, pp. 158–159). While ministers were keen to argue that deregulation was not a major government priority, political policy and discourses suggested otherwise.

There is debate over whether publicly available data should be anonymised to protect the identities of research subjects, particularly when sensitive information is involved (Buck & Ralston, 2021; Clark, 2006). In the Economic and Social Research Council's *Framework for Research Ethics* (2025), anonymisation is encouraged to avoid harm. Yet preventing harm through anonymisation is a challenging objective in the study of a high-profile event such as the Grenfell Tower fire. Interested readers can trace quotes through the GTI's website, which does not anonymise witnesses. Civil servants have also been widely reported on in media outlets, including in a recent Netflix documentary entitled *Grenfell: Uncovered*. The high-profile nature of the fire means that meaningful anonymisation of civil servants cannot be achieved, as they can readily be identified from publicly available data. While civil servants are not anonymised below, care is taken to report the data carefully and responsibly.

Deregulation in Policy and Discourse

To understand civil servants' decisions, it is important to consider the historical politico-economic context in which they worked. This section briefly explores the UK government's growing enthusiasm for neoliberal, free-market logic, focusing on policies and discourses that targeted the Civil Service. It demonstrates that the central government directed civil servants to establish the administrative and legal framework for market success at all costs, including before 2010, thereby compromising health and safety.

Prompted partly by the UK's economic decline in the 1970s, the incoming Conservative government of 1979 argued that the state needed to be rolled back and interference in economic activity curbed. In the years that followed, regulation was a key government target (Young, 1985). Politicians used provocative language to convey their intentions, such as calling for a "bonfire of controls" (Hansard, Column 998, 1994). Eager to extend Margaret Thatcher and John Major's neoliberal policies, the 1997 New Labour government pursued a deregulatory approach with greater effectiveness than the preceding Conservative governments. However, it did so behind the thin veil of "better regulation" because "good regulation can benefit us all- it is only bad regulation that is a burden" (Cabinet Office, 1997, para. 2). A key policy impacting the Civil Service was the introduction of the Better Regulation Task Force in 1997, which embedded deregulation into government practice through the use of Regulatory Impact Assessments. Through these assessments, civil servants would need to consider whether proposed regulations were genuinely worth the burden of costs and reduced profits they imposed. Tombs and Whyte (2010) argue the assessments operated through a "pro-business, anti-regulation logic" because they asked civil servants to pre-empt and minimise the risks associated with new regulations (p. 50).

After 2010, and in response to the 2008 financial crisis, the discourse on deregulation intensified. The 2010 Coalition government stated that "health and safety culture" needed to be killed off for businesses to grow and the economy to thrive (Cameron, 2011). In 2011, David Cameron professed that "Britannia didn't rule the waves with arm-bands on" under a "shadow of health and safety" (Cameron, 2011, paras. 149–150). "Health and safety culture" was a developing enemy that required a war to be "kill[ed] off ... for good" (Cameron, 2012, as cited in Woodcock et al., 2012, paras. 7–8). The threat posed by health and safety could affect the hearts and minds of the workforce because it "saps personal responsibility and drains enterprise" contrary to "risk-taking spirit," trust and "common sense" (Cameron, 2012, as cited in Woodcock et al., 2012, paras. 26, 27, 33). While a speech does not constitute law, Cameron's words were rich with the intended moral form of regulatory enforcement. In this intended reality, health and safety were admonished for being an "enemy" to all things central to British success: empire, businesses, innovation, and common sense.

Urgent language was also communicated to members of the Civil Service through letters. At the time, Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service Gus O'Donnell wrote to all government permanent secretaries about reducing red tape. He called on all departments to make reducing regulations a "high personal priority" and regularly met with permanent secretaries to monitor progress (O'Donnell, 2011). Cameron also wrote a letter pressuring ministers to reduce regulatory burdens. He made it unequivocally clear that this was "not a polite request" but a change that meant ministerial teams should see themselves "personally accountable" for regulatory increases (Cameron 2011). "Be in no doubt," he said, all unnecessary regulation "must go, once and for all" with "rapid progress" (Cameron, 2011).

Policies were implemented to encourage pro-market activity. The Red Tape Challenge launched the deregulatory fight against bureaucratic, costly, ineffective regulations. It reviewed 6,500 regulations to scrap as many as possible (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013). Concerning building regulations, a Housing Standards Review was conducted in 2010 and a Cutting Red Tape Review of Housebuilding in 2016 (HM Government, 2017). A second key policy was the One-in, One-

out policy, which mandated that a regulation be removed whenever a new one was introduced. As the government became increasingly keen to deregulate, this policy became the One-in, Two-out and One-in, Three-out by 2016 (HM Government, 2011). The “main point” of the policy was to make government departments “hesitate to regulate” and create a “cultural effect” which would reduce the Civil Service’s “tendency” to regulate. Furthermore, it aimed for “net zero” on the cost of new regulation from January 2011 (HM Government, 2011, pp 5-6).

Free-market policies instituted pro-business, free-market logic into the Civil Service over several decades. Fire safety civil servants were directed to focus on deregulation, particularly between 2010 and 2015. Discussed below are civil servants’ testimonies that they had to serve economic interests at all costs (see GTI, 2022f, Day 244, pp. 9–12; GTI, 2022e, Day 243, p. 6; GTI, 2022k, Day 257, pp. 171–175). One commented to the GTI that his regulatory job made him “an enemy of enterprise” to the Prime Minister (GTI, 2022j, Day 255, p. 36). At the same time, there were modes of communication beyond explicit words and policies that, from civil servants’ perspectives, implicitly directed them not to pursue work that did not meet the criteria for deregulatory or pro-market policies. It is to these modes of communication that this article now turns.

Silence and Delay as Modes of Communicating to Civil Servants

This section examines how implicit modes of communication discouraged the Division from challenging ministers or advancing regulatory work, leading civil servants to feel that their safety work was politically undesirable. In this way, implicit modes of communication influenced the Division’s civil servants’ perceptions of themselves, their work, and their role within the government.

A key example of how silence and delay were implicit modes of communication came in 2015, when commissioned government research was scheduled for publication (Harral, 2018, para. 65). Without this research’s publication, ADB, the key fire safety document, could not be reviewed (GTI, 2022c, Day 241, p. 196). When the Division asked ministers to sign off on these publicly funded reports, they were ignored multiple times. Lucy Yates, a private secretary, noted the silence and asked her fellow staff members why this straightforward work was not progressing (Yates, 2016). After a series of follow-up emails, Private Secretary Omer Elahi, responded, “there are some potential issues here- I will come and speak to you both” (Yates, 2016, p 1). While no notes exist on the advice, the government conceded to the GTI that these emails were “very unusual” (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022, p. 16). The private, off-the-record meeting between Elahi and Yates suggests that the Department’s private secretaries reconsidered publishing the report. The Division’s staff pursued ministers in March, May, July, August, October, November, and December 2016, as well as in January and March 2017, to disseminate fire safety-related research reports. Their efforts were to no avail, and the reports were only published nearly two years after the Grenfell Tower fire, in February 2019.

In September 2015, Richard Harral, then the Division’s Head of Technical Policy, submitted a document to James Wharton for a productivity review of Local Authority Building Control (LABC), building regulations, and approved documents (Harral, 2015). Wharton, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Department between May 2015 and July 2016, agreed to create a discussion document on building regulations to set the agenda for the next five years (Harral, 2018, para. 82). Again, the progress of this work was subject to endless delays, which caused a “real sense of frustration” in the Division (Harral, 2018, para. 4). When Harral tried to highlight the work, he was told by the Department Director, Simon Gallagher, in July 2016 that he should not be “rushing” to make this proposal (Harral, 2018, para. 108). Instead, he was asked to redraft and reflect the position of the new administration that had come into power that same day, making it palatable to the new government’s agenda. Harral explained to the GTI that, under the new administration, Gavin Barwell, Minister for the Department between July 2016 and June 2017, and his private office consistently hampered any chance of their work progressing. He periodically compiled lists of areas where their work was blocked and issued them to Department directors for escalation (Harral, 2018, para. 121).

Harral was told that the priority was the housing and planning white paper and that only “highest priority” issues would be considered “until the white paper was published” (Harral, 2018, para. 32). While Harral assumed this would take a few weeks, in practice, it took months. Barwell accepted in the GTI that the wait was “wholly unsatisfactory,” and while he could understand the delays due to the housing and planning white paper, he could not explain subsequent delays (GTI, 2022i, Day 259, pp. 87–88). By the time of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, a formal working group for regulatory work had not been established, nor had any impact assessments or public consultations been conducted (GTI, 2022h, Day 249, pp. 131–132). From the Division’s perspective, resources were being diverted from it because regulatory work on fire safety failed to meet the criteria set by neoliberal logic for state resources. As Harral explained to the GTI, “prioritisation policies in the Department were just consistently working against us. We were always at the back of the queue for briefings. When the administrations changed, we were always — you know, lower priority by far” (GTI, 2022f, Day 244, p. 11).

Bob Ledsoe, Deputy Director of the Division from June 2011 to September 2017, also explained that Harral had “excellent ideas” about proceeding with the reviews of approved documents and had tried his best to “find a way through”. However, the central government's priorities at the time made this impossible (GTI, 2022g, Day 245, p. 116). Exhausted by the rejections, Brian Martin, the Division's Principal Construction Professional between September 2008 and November 2017, explained to Harral that work on ADB was being deliberately thwarted. He said, “I'm pretty sure that the Department's upper echelons have sat on my hands for the last 18 months!” (Martin & Harral, 2017). Harral agreed, acknowledging the review's low priority: “They are not even aware your hands exist to sit on” (Martin & Harral, 2017). Harral maintained the position expressed in these informal emails to the GTI. Amongst his reasons for feeling this way was a sudden reallocation of the Division's resources before a general election to support a planning budget shortfall. Harral explained:

I was starting to think that there was a risk that there was some form of concerted effort to slow this process down so that we would be available to go into another cycle of just pure deregulation to deal with the Department's budgets. (GTI, 2022f, Day 244, pp. 9–10)

Again, the significance of delay, a tool through which silence is achieved, is apparent as an exercise of state power for communicating politico-economic priorities. Combined with enthusiastic deregulatory policies and discourse, implicit modes of communication led civil servants to feel that their work was being hindered to protect deregulatory policies and to evade potential criticism arising from fire-related research. Harral argued that after 2010, the Division's civil servants felt “psychologically ... just beaten up” (GTI, 2022f, Day 244, p. 140). Dame Melanie Dawes, Permanent Secretary for the Department, also confirmed deregulation “cast quite a shadow” on teams like the Division and was “an extreme set of policy demands” (GTI, 2022h, Day 249, p. 49).

Ministers were keen to argue during the GTI that the deregulatory agenda was not as robust as civil servants claimed in their testimonies. Barwell argued that deregulation was not a particular focus for him, and that if civil servants felt this pressure while he was minister, he was “at a loss to understand how that can be the case” (GTI, 2022m, Day 260, p. 3). Pickles was eager to distance himself from criticism by arguing that deregulatory exercises, such as the need to remove regulations before imposing new ones, were not as explicit as civil servants testified (GTI, 2022n, Day 261, pp. 50–51). In relation to Cameron's letter urging deregulation, Pickles argued that it was not meant to be taken seriously, that it was a “veneer” to “rally the troops, get a sense of focus” and likably to an “ice cream van jingle” (GTI, 2022o, Day 262, pp. 5–11). Yet considerable evidence and testimony, discussed above, demonstrate that regulatory work was undesirable. For example, in May 2013, Pickles admonished the Welsh government for introducing new legislation on sprinkler installation, arguing that it increased red tape and regulatory burdens (King, 2014, pp. 7–8). Ministers' gaslighting of civil servants' feelings was firmly rejected in the GTI final report, which finds that deregulation had permeated the Department's activities (GTI, 2024b, pp. 158–159).

Civil servants felt strategically undervalued, and ministers are accountable for this. At the same time, deregulation does not mean that civil servants were powerless in the face of ministerial will during the policy-making process (Kingston, 2002). In practice, their involvement in government regulatory failures was more complex. The following section considers how civil servants reacted to deregulation. It considers their power and agency in processes that could have improved regulatory guidance for high-rise buildings.

Passive Subjects or Custodians of the Free Market?

This section argues that, while under pressure to deregulate, civil servants cannot be considered passive actors in Westminster (Kingston, 2002). Instead, the evidence demonstrates that they were active agents in shaping an economic reality that marginalised voices calling for increased regulation. Analysis of the testimonies and behaviour of civil servants working in the Division at the time suggests they characterised themselves as custodians of the free-market agenda, safeguarding its interests against what they considered unnecessary complaints about fire safety regulations. Civil servants wielded their power neither reluctantly nor submissively, serving the free market within this framework.

Civil servants' position as custodians of the free market is evident in their response to those who sought to draw the government's attention to the potential dangers posed by combustible cladding. For example, the Division's civil servants directed ministers not to prioritise All-Party Parliamentary Group for Fire Safety's (APPGFS) concerns, advising Barwell to refuse meeting requests (GTI, 2022m, Day 260, p. 176). In November 2014 email exchanges, Martin described Ronnie King from the APPGFS as “annoying” and advised they “ignore him” (Martin & Maude, 2014). If civil servants felt disgruntled by deregulation and concerned about their health and safety at work, how can their disregard for those advocating for regulatory improvement be understood?

The response to the Lakanal House fire is another crucial example of how civil servants used their technical authority over fire safety regulations to deflect regulatory increases. Lakanal House, a refurbished block of flats, experienced a devastating fire in 2009 that spread both vertically and horizontally, resulting in the deaths of six people (GTI, 2022a, Day 229, p. 220). The incident revealed potential flaws in the regulatory system, but investigations were limited, and changes to ADB were only made after the Grenfell Tower fire. This was despite a 2013 coroner's inquest highlighting significant weaknesses in the fire safety framework. The Coroner noted that ADB was "difficult to use" and failed to provide clear answers to "relatively straightforward questions" about fire protection materials (Lambeth Council, 2013). She urged the Department to review ADB to clarify key life safety issues, including external fire spread. However, the Division's civil servants did not give much attention to the Coroner's recommendations (GTI, 2022l, Day 259, pp. 87–88). Unlike other issues on the Department's agenda, there was no protocol or system to track progress on her recommendations.

The Division's civil servants were key drivers in the process that effectively dissolved the Coroner's recommendations in two main ways. Firstly, they reinterpreted vital recommendations. For example, in April 2013, Martin made a submission to the then Liberal Democrat Junior Minister for the Department, Don Foster, on the Coroner's recommendations, specifically regarding building regulations (Martin, 2013). Martin's submission did not address how her recommendation to review guidance on external fire spread would be implemented; instead, he wrote that reviewing ADB was too "significant" a project and recommended delaying it for a future "fuller review" (Martin, 2013, para. 11). This was incorrect because the Coroner never recommended a rewrite of ADB, but clarification concerning guidance on external fire spread. Martin agreed in the GTI that the Coroner's recommendation was "narrow, focused and pretty specific" but that a considerable rewrite was required to meet her recommendation (GTI, 2022k, Day 257, p. 133). This interpretation advised the Minister to avoid conducting a review without first discussing the feasibility of the Coroner's recommendation. The Division's civil servants drafted the official response to the Coroner and, regarding the clarity of ADB, wrote:

We have commissioned research which will feed into a future review of this part of the Building Regulations. We expect this work to form the basis of a formal review leading to the publication of a new edition of the Approved Document in 2016/17. The revision would be drafted in accordance with a new "style guide" for Approved Documents. (Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG], 2013, p. 2)

Inaccurate responses are the second way civil servants disrupted the Coroner's recommendations from being realised. The 2016/17 timeline followed the scheduled ADB review, while the "style guide" was part of a routine cross-departmental initiative. Neither was a response to the Coroner's findings; these were routine changes. Internally, the Division's civil servants decided that the 2006 version of ADB already addressed the Coroner's concerns (GTI, 2022c, Day 241). Yet they did not mention this in the inquest hearings or in the official response to the Coroner. This is a significant omission; if civil servants were confident that the 2006 version of ADB addressed the issues being raised, they should have put this information to the Coroner for assessment. Internally, Ledsome and Anthony Burd, Head of Technical Policy in the Division from 2007 to 2013, had decided to leave the simplification of ADB for a complete review in the future because they had "a lot else on our plate with the Housing Standards Review and everything else" (GTI, 2022c, Day 241, p. 124). The suggestion from Ledsome in the GTI was that the focus on deregulation meant they could not consider the life safety implications of the Coroner's recommendations.

Everyday conversations suggest that dismissing the Coroner's recommendations was more intentional than a mere distraction by other tasks. For example, emails were forwarded to Martin regarding her recommendation concerning the retrospective fitting of sprinkler systems into buildings. He responded on 16 April 2013:

Tell the Coroner that we've already raised this with social landlords. But for others, it is up to them ... so we don't plan to do anything. (we only have a duty to respond to the coroner, not kiss her backside). (Upton & Martin, 2013, p. 1)

Other civil servants may have shared a similar mindset. In a presentation to Barwell, in which he was expected to set out the Division's priorities and key issues, Ledsome omitted any reference to the Lakanal House fire or the Coroner's recommendations. Instead, the presentation reassured the Minister that fire-related deaths were decreasing (Ledsome, 2016, p. 3). Consequently, Barwell concluded that "the system was working" based on information from civil servants (GTI, 2022m, Day 260, p. 21). At this point, only eight months remained before the promised deadlines to address the Lakanal House recommendations, which should have been highlighted. Ledsome could not explain this failure and admitted it was an "omission" during his hearing (GTI, 2022d, Day 242, p. 59).

In a subsequent submission, two years were added to the deadline to meet the Coroner's recommendation, but this was not flagged, and there was no emphasis on the date change (Wharton, 2021, p. 5). Harral argued that he did not want to risk making

the document too long as the Department enforced a two-page limit on submissions at the time (GTI, 2022e, Day 243, pp. 180–181). While the Division wished for key safety issues to be addressed, they did not emphasise, even in a few words, the waning or extended deadline.

An email sent on 13 May 2013 suggests that internalised, free-market logic was motivating their failures. The Coalition government's deregulatory approach was in full swing, just before One-in, Two-out rules were enacted. Louise Upton, the head of the Fire Safety Policy Team, sent Pickles suggestions on responding to the Coroner. The submission stated, "a full review of the Approved Document would require significant resources and have a disruptive effect on the construction industry" (Upton, 2013). Members of the Division likely drafted these words under the Department's oversight. Martin explained to the GTI that they may have been included to appease ministers who wanted to avoid work that disrupted the economy (GTI, 2022k, Day 257, pp. 137–139). Thus, without instruction from ministers, civil servants acknowledged the potential cost of reviewing ADB and wished to avoid its "disruptive effect" (Upton, 2013). This is likely why they did not engage with the Coroner meaningfully, nor advocate for her recommendations to be fully and adequately accepted. The GTI final report also concludes that the deregulatory agenda "dominated" their thinking during these years "to such an extent that even matters affecting the safety of life were ignored, delayed or disregarded" (GTI, 2024a, p. 9).

Dictated by free-market logic, it appears civil servants operationalised a series of omissions that delayed the Coroner's recommendations into non-existence. They failed to discuss the spread of external fire in the letter to Foster, the response to the Coroner was dishonest, and subsequent submissions to ministers were silent about the failure to meet her recommendations within the promised time frame. These omissions demonstrate how civil servants, as technical experts of ADB, operationalised their authority to direct resources away from questions that, in their own words, would have been costly for government and industry.

It is worth reiterating that these failures cannot be attributed solely to civil servants. GTI Phase 2 report states that Martin had a "defensive and dismissive attitude" (GTI, 2024, p. 8). Such words can construct a narrative of the fire being a one-off event caused by a poorly performing employee who did not want to engage with increased regulations. However, as this article has demonstrated, civil servants' behaviour reflected a political project that directed them to prioritise market interests over safety, and ministers were at the forefront of this project. Barwell's private office consistently hampered the Division's life-safety work (Harral, 2018, para. 121). Stephen Williams, Minister of the Department between 2013 and 2015, was unwilling to advance work to improve building regulations for fear of disrupting deregulatory efforts (Harral, 2018, para. 59). Pickles admonished regulatory increases during his time as minister (GTI, 2024b, pp. 158–159).

The purpose of this article is not to blame civil servants; doing so would make them scapegoats and shift blame away from successive governments that promoted commercial interests at the expense of safety for decades. Instead, it demonstrates how the pressure to deregulate, directed by ministers, evolved from external pressure to an internal sense of self-regulation that shaped civil servants' decision-making. Dawes explained to the GTI that while civil servants should engage with ministers' objectives, they are not expected to "just walk blindly into these issues ... but to pull out risks and consequences" (GTI, 2022h, Day 249, pp. 45–46). In contrast, Martin explained to the GTI several times that it is "not a civil servant's job to confront government policy; it's their job to implement it" (GTI, 2022i, Day 252, p. 153). It is a significant finding that civil servants took this understanding of their role and submitted to the government's agenda by both being silenced and silencing the possibility of increased fire safety regulation.

Civil servants appeared to feel personally responsible for protecting the free market. In emails between Martin and Ken Knight, the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor to the Department at the time, Knight inquired about potential proposals from the National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting (NICEIC) involving regulatory increases (Knight & Martin, 2010). Martin replied that the situation was complex and likened giving NICEIC more control to "letting Ronnie King write ADB!" Ronnie King, as an advocate for better fire safety regulations, would prioritise public safety over the national economy. Martin explained to the GTI that if regulators like himself had life safety and not economic or commercial interests as their primary concern, then "the country would be bankrupt" and "we'd all starve to death, ultimately" (GTI, 2022i, Day 252, pp. 131–132). This testimony illustrates Martin's commitment to protecting the free-market economy, positioning himself as a custodian against what he saw as excessive regulatory burdens.

Conclusion

This article has examined the complex forces that influenced and directed the civil servants involved in regulatory processes before the Grenfell Tower fire. Civil servants were subject to free-market policy and discourse that directed them to deprioritise public safety. In their everyday work, silence and delay were operationalised in a way that made them feel their work was not

a government priority unless it served deregulatory interests. Civil servants' words, behaviour, and omissions demonstrate that they were far from passive subjects in the deregulatory processes that failed to prevent the Grenfell Tower fire. Instead, the evidence indicates that they operationalised their authority as technical governmental experts of ADB to direct resources away from questions that, in their own words, would have been costly for government and industry. Wielding their power, knowledge, and authority, they aligned fire safety work with the state's agenda by silencing themselves and others about the possibility of regulatory increases. Civil servants viewed themselves as custodians of the free market, protecting its interests against what they perceived as unnecessary complaints and concerns. Government policy and discourse, through ministers, directed this thinking, and civil servants drove it forward.

Successive governments, including the current Labour government, have problematised safety regulation while placing the burden of protecting the market on regulators, including civil servants with regulatory roles. In January 2025, UK Prime Minister Kier Starmer likened red tape to "Japanese knotweed" and pledged to "kick down the barriers to building" and "clear out the regulatory weeds" to enable home ownership (Starmer, 2025, p. 1). Similar to his predecessors, Starmer placed the responsibility of protecting the market on "every state regulator [who] will be given an explicit duty to consider growth". The government is continuing its commitment to deregulation, placing the burden of ensuring market freedom on regulators. Such discourse has implications for regulatory civil servants, who, as this article has demonstrated, may feel the value of their work is determined by its ability to protect market interests. While the government has committed to substantial changes to the construction industry since the Grenfell Tower fire (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025b), it has bypassed the root cause of issues: political attitudes towards regulation and safety. Attitudes must change, and civil servant regulators should be seen as crucial for maintaining public safety, not the economy.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Dr Jane Marriott and Professor Robert Jago for their support and feedback on my work. I am also grateful to Professor John Scott for his encouragement and to the anonymous reviewers for their feedback. This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Correspondence: Khadijah Na'eem, Arts and Humanities Research Council Funded Doctoral Candidate, Royal Holloway, University of London, United Kingdom. Khadijahnaeem316@gmail.com

¹ The Department is an abbreviation used by the public inquiry for the government departments responsible for fire safety, building regulations, and housing between 1991–2017.

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