



Former Grenfell Tower resident **Gill Kernick** reports on the psychological impact of accountability and postulates that by accepting accountability for the psychological contract with citizens, the quality and impact of politicians' responses to major incidents would improve

# Power and accountability: Policy lessons from catastrophic events

Accountability is best used proactively to ensure those in positions of power think hard about decisions and their consequences. If we were obsessed with accountability before a disaster, we would prevent more of them.

But accountability has become a reactive blame game, rather than a proactive means of ensuring good governance.<sup>1</sup> The Institute for Government expressed concern about failures to address 'fundamental gaps in accountability' to ensure it keeps 'pace with the increasing complexity of modern government'.

One area this plays out in is the effectiveness (or otherwise) of accountability after a catastrophic event. Current responses tend to fall short in the public's eye.

Based on my own experience after the Grenfell Tower fire, I argue that by accepting accountability for the psychological contract with citizens, the quality and impact of leading politicians' responses to such events would improve.

## The Psychological Contract

We all have a 'psychological contract' with those in power. Although intangible, such contracts can be more influential than formal rules.<sup>2</sup>

We expect that councils will listen to tenants about safety concerns, that those involved in refurbishing a tower block will put the safety of residents above profit, and that the government will ensure that key workers at the front line of a pandemic will have enough PPE.

1 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/IfG%20accountability%20discussion%20paper%20april%202018.pdf>

2 <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/employees/psychological-factsheet>



After a catastrophic event those in positions of power have an accountability to attend to and restore this psychological contract. And yet, many leaders' response is lacking. Examples include Theresa May's private visit to Grenfell the day after the fire, when she failed to meet Grenfell survivors or bereaved;<sup>3</sup> or Robert Black, Chief Executive of the company that managed Grenfell, who, while watching the tower burn, wrote a memo to colleagues saying: 'We need to pull some of this together pretty fast in terms of health and safety compliance'<sup>4</sup>.

By contrast, leaders who understand that they are accountable for this psychological contract respond to crises in a way that builds trust. The outstanding example is New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, both in her response to Covid-19 and the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack.<sup>5</sup>

I recently re-read the *The patronising disposition of unaccountable power*<sup>6</sup>, a report commissioned to ensure the perspective of the Hillsborough families is not lost. It highlights how reputation is prioritised over 'The citizen's right to expect people to be held to account for their actions' and concludes that it is a cultural condition and 'a change in attitude, culture, heart and mind' is needed.<sup>7</sup>

3 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/theresa-may-grenfell-fire-victims-no-visit-security-concerns-tobias-ell-wood-a7792686.html>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/nov/15/grenfell-tower-management-company-chief-sent-warning-memo-during-fire>

5 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/20/female-world-leaders-hailed-voices-reason-amid-coronavirus-chaos/>

6 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/655892/6\\_3860\\_HO\\_Hillsborough\\_Report\\_2017\\_FINAL\\_WEB\\_updated.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/655892/6_3860_HO_Hillsborough_Report_2017_FINAL_WEB_updated.pdf)

7 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/656130/6\\_3860\\_HO\\_Hillsborough\\_Report\\_2017\\_FINAL\\_updated.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/656130/6_3860_HO_Hillsborough_Report_2017_FINAL_updated.pdf), page 6, para 4 and 5

Accepting accountability for tending to and restoring the psychological contract with citizens after a catastrophic event would go a long way to shifting this patronising disposition. It would require a fundamental shift in the role of politicians in responding to catastrophic events.

## Key Elements

### Transparency

Attempts to spin the narrative do little more than inflate already heightened emotions and increase distrust. It might seem counterintuitive, but practising radical transparency is what is required.

The government's reporting of Covid-19 deaths is a good example. There was little transparency that initial figures only included those who died in hospital after testing positive, and that deaths in care homes or in the community were not included.<sup>8</sup>

While bold promises may make sense, when these are ungrounded, they damage trust. This was clearly illustrated by Teresa May's promise that those left homeless by Grenfell would be re-housed in three weeks.<sup>9</sup> Nearly three years after the fire not everyone has been re-housed.<sup>10</sup>

Being transparent no matter how bad the news is, is critical to the psychological contract.

### Immediate Acceptance of Responsibility

After a catastrophic event, there are inherent tensions between the desire by those most impacted for 'heads to roll', the time formal processes take to reach conclusions and the need to ensure systemic versus individual failings are identified.

A willingness by both politicians and heads of key organisations to accept responsibility because 'this happened on my watch' versus 'is my fault' would go some way to easing these tensions.

Doing nothing whilst waiting for formal processes to reach conclusions further damages the psychological contract. Watching those in power continue as usual is untenable and contributes to both suffering and increasing calls for retribution.

There is a perfectly correlated dance of the symbolic resonance or dissonance of actions with either restoring or further damaging the psychological contract.

For example, Benita Mehra's appointment to the Grenfell Inquiry Panel when she had run an organisation that received a grant from the charitable arm of Arconic, the manufacturer of the ACM panels used on Grenfell, was a symbolically dissonant action. Her subsequent resignation was resonant.<sup>11</sup>

Or former Housing Minister Gavin Barwell's appointment to the board of the country's largest housing association, Clarion. Barwell, the Housing Minister in 2016 and 2017 failed to act on seven letters from a group of MPs responsible for scrutinising fire safety rules. Warning of the risk of a deadly fire they called for the promised review of building

regulations to be carried out.<sup>12</sup> The issue is not whether he is guilty or not but about the symbolic dissonance of this action and how it impacts the psychological contract.

### Swift Correction

Grenfell revealed systemic issues with the UK's building stock.

Hundreds of high-rise residential buildings have ACM cladding similar to that on Grenfell. Thousands are clad in other flammable facades. Post-Grenfell fire safety inspections revealed systemic issues such as non-compliant fire doors and missing or incorrectly fitted cavity barriers. Social housing landlords estimate that the cost of making their buildings safe will exceed ten billion pounds.<sup>13</sup>

The MHCLG has said all high-rise residential buildings with ACM cladding similar to Grenfell must be remediated. It released funding for this for public (in October 2018) and private (in May 2019) sector buildings. As of March 2020, 144 (32 per cent) of the 457 buildings had completed remediation. One hundred and fifty (33 per cent) had not started work.<sup>14</sup>

Eighteen months after conducting the *Independent Review of Building Regulations*, its author Dame Judith Hackitt criticised the slow pace of change saying the building industry lacked the leadership to make the necessary changes to make itself safe and describing common practices as "jaw dropping".<sup>15</sup>

Failing to make buildings safe promptly is a gross violation of the psychological contract that citizens should be safe in their homes.

### Appropriately Borne Consequences

Linked to the issue of correction is where consequences are borne.

This cannot be more tragically evidenced than the consequences for government failings to stock appropriate PPE in preparation for a pandemic being borne by those at the front line of care.

Redressing such imbalances in consequences is key to restoring the psychological contract. This is not a legal argument, but a moral one.

In the wake of Grenfell, thousands of leaseholders, who bought apartments in good faith, are being asked to pay to make their buildings safe. Estimates are that 500,000 people are caught in flats that are unsellable while work is carried out to identify cladding and other fire safety issues.<sup>16</sup>

The government could have worked with industry to create a fund for making buildings safe. They could have diverted money away from the law courts and toward ensuring people are safe in their homes.

When there is a divide between who caused and who bears the consequences for events, the psychological

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/pms-chief-of-staff-did-not-act-on-multiple-warnings-about-fire-safety-in-months-before-grenfell-new-letters-show-61883>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/02/social-landlords-face-10bn-bill-to-fix-fire-safety-problems>

<sup>14</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/879610/Building\\_Safety\\_Data\\_Release\\_March\\_2020.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879610/Building_Safety_Data_Release_March_2020.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/hackitt-attacks-industry-for-excuses-she-hears-over-slow-pace-of-change/5104389.article>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/leaseholders-impacted-by-cladding-crisis-write-to-chancellor-calling-for-building-safety-fund--65298>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/coronavirus-uk-cases-death-toll-statistics-hospital-nhs-a9472036.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40496029>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/grenfell-response-and-recovery/grenfell-tower-and-grenfell-walk-housing-policy-and-progress>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51252297>

contract gets further broken. It leads to those most impacted having to campaign tirelessly to 'fight for justice'. The government in its 2020 budget (nearly three years after Grenfell) assigned £1 billion to the removal of non-ACM cladding.<sup>17</sup> In the same budget £2.5 billion was allocated to fixing potholes.<sup>18</sup>

### Timely and Effective Learning

As much as they want some form of justice, those closely impacted by catastrophic events want to prevent similar tragedies, to prevent others from experiencing the loss and grief they have endured.

The ineffectiveness of current systems for learning, such as public inquiries, have long been identified.<sup>19</sup> There is no process for ensuring that recommendations from public inquiries are either implemented or effective.

Until those in power take learning from previous events seriously, they will fail to restore the psychological contract with citizens. Justifying inaction until the 'Inquiry is over' creates a narrative that these formal systems are designed to effectively sustain the status quo.

### Barriers

Politicians and others in power are navigating complex trade-offs between irreconcilable goals.<sup>20</sup> They present a network of barriers or tensions that frame the context inside which decisions get made and actions taken.

Critically, we collectively create these, and it is incumbent on us all to create a context that pulls for those in power to be accountable for our psychological contract.

### Blame Versus Learning<sup>21</sup>

As a society we are fixated on blame. We seek out bad apples and call for their blood. This does not equate to learning.

We operate from an old view that complex systems are inherently safe, and failures result from human error. When something goes wrong, find and remove the bad apple.

A culture of blame can develop because it is often easier, cheaper, and more emotionally satisfying to hold an individual responsible for an accident than to acknowledge more fundamental problems... A culture of blame prevents the identification of other underlying causes.<sup>22</sup>

The new view of failure suggests rather than look for what people did wrong you need to understand the context inside of which they acted. People, rather than being the problem, are needed to create safety by navigating complex trade-offs between irreconcilable goals.

We can either have blame or learning. Not both.

### Power Versus Transparency

At the heart of learning is the willingness to admit mistakes and errors. To learn, you must be willing to be transparent

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/chancellor-announces-1bn-building-safety-fund-for-all-forms-of-cladding-removal-65387>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/budget-2020-potholes-chancellor-rishi-sunak-council-spend-ing-a9392816.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/summary-how-public-inquiries-can-lead-change>

<sup>20</sup> Dekker, Sydney, 2006, reprint 2011, *The Field Guide to Understanding Human Error*, Ashgate, page xi

<sup>21</sup> Dekker, Sydney, 2006, reprint 2011, *The Field Guide to Understanding Human Error*, Ashgate, page 1

<sup>22</sup> Reason, James; 1990; *Human Error*, Cambridge University Press.

about failures. At the heart of politics, whether at an international, national, local or organisational level, is gaining and holding onto power.

In an adversarial political context, where honour and value driven leadership are notably lacking, and the media is obsessed with blame, being transparent about mistakes and failures would take both enormous courage and a willingness to lose power.

### High Probability Versus Low Probability

In a world of limited resources and short term, siloed thinking, it is easy to justify ignoring lower probability risks.

Resilience to catastrophic events requires an in-built adaptive capacity which is at odds with demands for efficiencies and savings. To be prepared for a low probability, high impact event (such as Covid-19) you must be willing to stand accused of over-reacting.

Until politicians, key stakeholders, the public and the media are educated about and supportive of investing in mitigating low probability events, we will continue to be unprepared.

### Blunt Versus Sharp End Voices

History tells us that the interplay between those at the top and bottom of the power ladder is critical to both learning and prevention. Whether it be failing to listen to residents' safety concerns in the lead up to Grenfell or frontline health workers' concerns about PPE during Covid-19.

The tacit knowledge of those at the sharp end is critical to preventing catastrophic events. Rules, regulations and experts will not guarantee good outcomes. Old notions of elitist power where the few dictate the rules for the many to follow are not only outdated, they fail to take into account that the knowledge of the 'many' is critical in increasingly complex environments.

We need to create a context in which there is equality of life and equality of voice. All lives matter and all voices count. The job of those in power is to ensure the voices of those with less power are both heard and count. The job of those with less power is to keep speaking until we are heard.

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[https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/REPORT\\_Policy\\_Lessons\\_from\\_Catastrophic\\_Events\\_-\\_FINAL\\_005.pdf](https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/REPORT_Policy_Lessons_from_Catastrophic_Events_-_FINAL_005.pdf)



#### About the Author:

Gill Kernick works with senior executives in high hazard industries to develop the culture and leadership to prevent catastrophic events. She lived on the 21st floor of Grenfell Tower from 2011 to 2014. Seven of her former neighbours died. Gill writes and speaks to bring the thinking of major accident prevention to Grenfell. She edits *The Grenfell Enquirer* dedicated to learning and preventing such events.

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