

WORLD FIRE CONGRESS

Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour for me and my colleagues to contribute to such a significant and strategic congress.

For thousands of years the human family lived in the Holocene epoch when the climate was stable and humanity was subordinate to the four classical elements of the earth, water, air and fire. Then with industrialisation the human family began to master the elements and began to dominate the natural world and in so doing changed the climate of the air with its carbon emissions, developed a new form of fire with nuclear explosions, poisoned the waters of the rivers and oceans with plastics and polluted the earth with toxic chemicals that eliminate species that are essential to our survival.

But it seems to me that this Anthropocene era stands on the brink of a further development where at least one of the classical elements is reasserting itself – and that element is fire.

Air – with its changing climate and devastating winds; Water – in its scarcity though lengthy droughts leaves the Earth and her forests parched and inflammable. These now create the conditions for Fire to present its greatest ever challenge to the human race and especially to you the Global Fire and Rescue Community.

I heard recently a senior Fire Officer say that you and your colleagues in the Fire and Rescue Service have for years been on the front line of Climate Change. Your Congress here in London could not be more timely as you share experiences and insights into how humanity lives with the four great elements which are both the key to our survival and a threat to our existence.

You are experts in your field and I am here with my colleagues to give voice to ordinary people who sometimes find themselves failed by those who have responsibility to keep them safe and to protect them. This is our Why.

Here in London in 2017 we became aware of that threat when the Grenfell Tower went up in flames claiming the lives of over 70 people which presented the greatest challenge to the London Fire Brigade and the emergency services.

Some months later in the aftermath of the disaster I was contacted by Grenfell United the group formed by the bereaved and survivors. I had just chaired and produced a Report on the Hillsborough Disaster in which 96, now 97, football fans had been unlawfully killed at a Football match in Sheffield.

The Report was commissioned by the British Government so that we could learn from what the families had gone through and ensure that their pain and suffering would never be repeated. Grenfell families had read it and said that they were now going through all that the Hillsborough Families had experienced. The title of the Report, “The Patronising Disposition of Unaccountable Power”. This is how the families had felt about how they had been treated by public authorities who had failed to keep them safe and resisted telling them the truth about how their loved ones had been killed.

I had chaired the Hillsborough Independent Panel which exposed the serious failings of the Police and how they had treated the fans and the bereaved families on the day of the tragedy and in the aftermath. In a word their treatment was dehumanising.

Furthermore, the police altered their statements about what had happened which led to verdicts of 'accidental death' and to a narrative reinforced by the media that the fans themselves had been responsible for the deaths of the 97.

This travesty of the truth cut a deep wound in the hearts of the grieving families that would not and could not heal until the balm of truth could be told and applied.

Hillsborough is the story of how victims of public tragedy were treated by public authorities who when challenged by honest questions closed ranks to protect themselves and their reputation. It is a parable for our times.

Twenty years after the Hillsborough Disaster at the annual remembrance service held at the Anfield Stadium of the Liverpool Football Club Andy Burnham, now our Prime Minister, addressed the crowd of over 30,000 people. He had hardly begun his speech when he was heckled by a single voice from the stands shouting, "Justice for the 96".

With that the whole crowd stood and chanted, "Justice for the 96".

If you had gathered everyone into the stadium an hour earlier to rehearse them they could not have been more in unison. Andy Burnham was clearly shaken by the force of the protest and persuaded the then Prime Minister to address the twenty year struggle of the families and survivors for truth, accountability and justice. The Government set up the Hillsborough Independent Panel. I was asked to chair it and Ken Sutton, who is here with me today headed the Secretariat and was assisted by Ann Ridley who is also here.

The Panel's job was to achieve maximum possible disclosure of all documents held by public bodies, to analyse them with a team of experts and to write a report so to add to public understanding of the tragedy and its aftermath.

We published our Report in 2012. It revealed the incompetence and inhumanity of the police and produced compelling evidence of the police falsifying documents that sought to shift the blame away from the police and onto the fans. It also argued persuasively that 41 to 56 of the fans might have lived had the police instigated the proper emergency response.

The Report led to the quashing of the original Inquest verdicts, the setting up of fresh Inquests and eventually the radically different determination of 'unlawful killing' in which the fans were totally exonerated of causing the tragedy.

It had taken 23 years for the truth to be told. The courage, tenacity and dignified determination of the Families were vindicated.

My second Report 5 years later 'The Patronising Disposition of Unaccountable Power' showed how the Families had been pushed back, patronised and re-traumatised by public bodies when in good faith and with a clear conscience they had simply tried to get answers to their legitimate questions and to find out the truth about how and why their loved ones had died.

I also observed how grief is a journey without destination and how there can never be closure to the love you have for someone you still love even though you have lost them.

I would like to add here that one of the expressions of grief is anger. After a disaster resulting in multiple deaths it often manifests itself unpredictably; it can break through the surface in ‘free-floating rage’; it invariably leads to divisions among the bereaved and survivors with the emergence of different campaigning groups.

Why should this be? Many marriages don’t survive grief so why should friendships especially if they have been forged out of grief?

Public bodies including the emergency services can often fail to handle such anger. They can be repelled by it with the resultant stand-offs and impasse.

I have chaired a number of meetings between the Grenfell Tower communities and the Secretary of State for Housing. The anger in the crowded room was often palpable.

One in particular was very difficult. As it came to an end I said that the people were right to be angry and to show it. Somehow just acknowledging from the Chair their right to be aggrieved and to be angry brought a measure of stillness into the room.

I know that around the world there’s a number of inquiries following devastating fires with tragic outcomes and loss of life. It is important that we learn how to engage with those whose lives have been traumatised by public tragedy and to be vigilant about those who seek to make a living by taking advantage of their vulnerability.

Please notice that I have not used the word ‘victim’. It’s a word that many who have suffered refuse to use for it underlines their powerlessness and denies them proper agency as they seek the truth, accountability and justice.

In my Report 'The Patronising Disposition of Unaccountable Power' there were 25 Points of Learning from the experiences of the Hillsborough Families including three principal recommendations:

- A) There should be a law compelling public officials to tell the truth at Inquiries. This Duty of Candour is now currently going through the United Kingdom Parliament.
- B) There should be legal representation at Inquests for those afflicted by Public Tragedy. This too is currently going through the UK Parliament.
- C) Public Bodies should sign the Charter for those Bereaved through Public Tragedy.

The significance of this Charter is that it is one thing to change the law but another to change the culture of an organisation and society. The Charter has six principles:

1. Activate your emergency plans, support the bereaved and protect the vulnerable.
2. Put the public interest above protecting your own reputation.
3. Approach public scrutiny in an honest and transparent way.
4. Avoid defending the indefensible.
5. When you fall short apologise.
6. Recognise that you are accountable.

In the UK many public bodies have now signed this Hillsborough Charter including the National Police Chiefs Council, the Crown Prosecution Service and the National Fire and Rescue Service. In the end the central issue is the restoration of trust in public bodies.

In the nation of Wales the South Wales Police led by the Deputy Chief Constable Mark Travis and assisted by the Chief Executive of the Welsh Fire and Rescue Service Dawn Cocx brought together over 50 public bodies to understand the change in culture required and to commit to the Charter

Over recent years I and my colleagues have met with the leadership of these organisations to make the case for changing the culture of public bodies.

I have made the point that it is encouraging to be invited to address them but that this is no substitute for listening to the very voices of those who have been afflicted by public tragedy. To this end we have been accompanied by five such voices whom I am honoured to present to you so that they themselves can tell their story.

Margaret lost her 17 year old son James and Sue her brother Graham at Hillsborough.

Paul lost his partner Elaine in the Manchester Arena bombing and spent nine months in hospital.

Ed escaped from the 14th Floor of Grenfell Tower.

Jeff was one of four children rescued from the rubble of Aberfan 60 years ago.

FIVE GIVE THEIR TESTIMONIES

But let me conclude with a story from Hillsborough. Anne Williams campaigned for a fresh inquest into the death of her teenage son Kevin who died at Hillsborough. She had evidence that he was still alive after 3.15pm the arbitrary cut-off time set by the Coroner. She was constantly rebuffed and patronised by state authorities and denied a fresh inquest.

When the Hillsborough Independent Panel reported she already knew that she was dying of cancer. But in the Cathedral with the other Families the findings of the Report seemed to give her new strength as if she'd been given a blood transfusion. Her stooped body lifted and her face radiated as she heard that she had been right all along and was at last vindicated.

As she was dying I was asked to visit her. I knew I wanted to take her a gift and on the mantle piece in my study was a marble ornament of the Pieta, the body of Jesus being taken down from the cross and being cradled by his mother Mary. It had been given to me by my own mother after a visit to Rome.

As my meeting with Anne drew to a close I asked her if she would like me to say a prayer. She readily agreed. She had no fear of death, rather she was looking forward to being re-united with her beloved Kevin. Before praying I said I would like her to have this gift. She placed it on her lap. As she unwrapped it she looked up and asked, 'How did you know?'

'How did I know what?'

'How did you know that the last gift that Kevin gave me was a miniature Pieta that he had brought back from a school trip to Rome?'

Anne never lived to see the new Inquests, but she died knowing that the truth had at last been found and told. And the truth had set her free from the patronising disposition of unaccountable power.

We live in a complex and ever changing world. New conditions present new challenges including as I began Fire reasserting itself as a Global challenge . We are constantly learning how to survive and to flourish. Our communities look to our leaders to keep us safe. They do not expect us to be perfect but in and through everything their one plea is to 'Respect our humanity'.

The Right Reverend Bishop James Jones KBE 8th September 2026