Difficult questions about Grenfell Tower

JAMIE PRIESTLEY, correspondent London.

On a cloudless morning in June I looked out of my window and noticed Grenfell Tower for the first time, even though it is only a few hundred metres from where I live. All 22 of its floors were on fire and many of its 300+ residents were trapped. The death toll (80 so far) is already 50% more than the number of Londoners killed in the "7/7" attacks in July 2005. But we fear this number will rise because the building probably housed many immigrants who were not registered: friends and family of the Tower's legitimate tenants. Whatever the final number, this is a national tragedy on my doorstep. How did I not see it coming?

In Paris the poor live in the banlieues while the more comfortably-off live in its centre. In the USA the reverse is often true: inner cities are rough and suburbs are desirable. But London's rich and poor often live next to each other. As house prices rise, Londoners move further from the centre to find more space – if they can. My idea of central London is very different from that of my parents. It now includes Grenfell Tower and Notting Hill is ten minutes' walk from it. When my parents married in the 1950s, Notting Hill presented a difficult compromise. People like them could not afford the living space they needed for their new families. So

ber last year, the Grenfell Action Group said it feared that only a catastrophe would expose the carelessness of the local government, the landlord of Grenfell Tower. The Action Group quotes from the Grenfell Planning Consent Notice, which says the new exterior will 'preserve the appearance of the local area' and ensure that the 'living conditions of those living nearby are suitably protected.' Was the main priority of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (the local government) to make the building pretty? If so, it could achieve the same effect whether it used more fireproof materials or cheaper, less fireproof ones. The refurbishment contract was

victory is an impatience about cuts in government expenditure which make life disproportionately hard for people who are already poor. Many more Brits are becoming curious about the alternatives to austerity.

And for people like me who live near Grenfell Tower in relative comfort? How did I not spot the approaching disaster? Because I was too immersed in my own world. Every day I see the survivors of Grenfell Tower. We drink in the same pub, go to the same gym, take the same bus. Now I will make sure I talk to them – and long after their rage has abated. Badly overdue but not too late.

by Jamie Priestley

they moved to neighbourhoods like this one: unfashionable but cheaper.

Nowhere is income difference more striking than in Kensington and Chelsea, the borough where I live. The average of all salaries is £123000 a year. But the halfway point between highest and lowest, the median, is £33000. In 1958, if you had £15000 to buy a house in a street called Holland Park (about a mile from Grenfell Tower), you were certainly well off, but you didn't need to be a rockstar. The same house sells today for £20 million to a market populated only by tycoons, footballers and sheikhs. And 12% of these houses are empty: 10500 homes in Kensington & Chelsea serve only as investments, which has a debilitating effect on local communities and businesses.

The desire to improve the appearance of Grenfell Tower

Rising house prices lead to the gentrification of areas like the one where Grenfell Tower stands. This phenomenon is depicted in *Notting Hill*, a film whose plot devotes little time to the area's many inhabitants who are poorer and less well educated. This is an important detail for those trying to understand the fire. What started the fire was the explosion of a fridge. What caused the catastrophe was the building's new exterior, installed last summer. The ostensible reason for the refurbishment was to follow EU guidelines and improve the building's insulation. But there is widespread belief that there was another, more pressing reason that proved fatal: the desire to improve the appearance of Grenfell Tower (built in 1974) – not for its tenants but for those thinking about buying a nearby property. In November won by a company called Rydon which saved the borough £2.5 million; its price was 22% less than that of its nearest competitor. Rydon consequently spent less on materials, for example installing a cheaper, more combustible exterior for the building. An insurance expert I spoke to said that towers like Grenfell should be classified as if they are built of wood.

General Election

The boss of the Royal Borough has since been fired (to show some respect for the anger of the survivors). But a deeper, more complex feeling was already visible the week before the Grenfell Tower inferno. For the first time since the 1970s, the Labour party won the Kensington & Chelsea seat in the June 8 General Election. A Conservative party defeat seemed so unlikely that the votes were counted three times. Officials were sent home to sleep between the second and third counts. Finally, late on June 9, it was announced that the Labour candidate had won 16333 votes – just 20 more than the Conservative candidate.

The victory shows deep misgivings about Mrs May's tragi-comic approach to Brexit (even though the Labour party is as divided about Europe as the Conservatives). Many here still relish the idea of becoming independent from Europe, as they see it. A growing number see Mrs May's macho Brexit strategy as a bad dream that will hurt the UK much more than it hurts Europe. A recent guerilla campaign around London mocked this year's most laughable brand: Mrs May's disastrous attempt to portray her leadership as Strong and Stable. But there is not much joy in our Schadenfreude. The second reason for the

How Mrs May would like to see herself – and how people see Mrs May.