

Britain's Grenfell tragedy expert gets in on Victoria's Building Act

By [Noel Towell](#)

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The British engineer who rewrote her country's high-rise regulations after the Grenfell Tower tragedy will join a review of Victoria's building code to avoid a repeat of the state's own flammable cladding crisis.

The announcement that Dame Judith Hackitt will join a six-person panel to review building laws comes as the government says there are now no more buildings considered "extreme" risks by authorities.



Dame Judith Hackitt outside RMIT in February. LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI

Planning Minister Richard Wynne says Victoria's Building Act, which has been largely unchanged since 1993, needs to be updated into a "modern and effective" code, using lessons learnt in the five years since the Lacrosse Tower fire in Melbourne's Docklands.

Dame Judith will join Red Tape Commissioner Anna Cronin, consumer policy expert Lauren Solomon, Victorian Master Builders Association president Melanie Fasham, CFMEU official Gerry Ayers and construction law expert Ian Bailey in the review.

The renowned engineer led the review of the British regulatory system for high-rise buildings in the wake of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire, in which 72 people died.

Dame Judith, who visited Melbourne in February to study the Victorian government's response to the state's cladding crisis, told a House of Commons committee last year that the Australian and

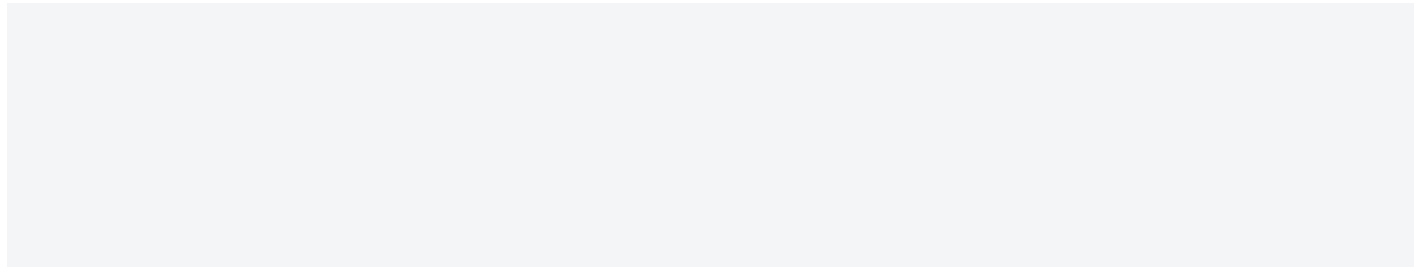
British construction industries had the same problems of “no enforcement, unclear standards and a race to the bottom”.

When she came here in February she told *The Age* flammable cladding should be urgently removed from Melbourne’s skyscrapers

"Provided it is clear what can and cannot be used, replacement of existing non-compliant material should be pushed as a priority," Dame Judith said.

"The challenge will be who pays for the remediation."

She could not be contacted on Tuesday for comment.



Mr Wynne’s office said the panel would make recommendations to the government on "a more efficient, responsive and modern Building Act", in the first steps of a reform process that is expected to take some time.

“We’ve appointed experts from Victoria and around the world to help us deliver a better building system,” Mr Wynne told *The Age* on Tuesday.

“Our building and construction sector underpins much of our growth and economic activity so it makes sense to support this with a modern and effective legislative framework.

“This panel has a wealth of knowledge and experience and is the first step towards delivering the most comprehensive review ever undertaken into Victoria’s building system.”



The Victorian government has announced a \$600 million fund to repair residential buildings deemed a serious risk.

Mr Wynne's office also said on Tuesday that under the current assessment model, there were no more buildings in the "extreme risk" category – after 72 buildings were recorded in that category in the Cladding Taskforce's final report published in July.

The numbers reflect a changing approach from authorities, prioritising fire safety over a rush to strip cladding from buildings.

A spokesperson for the minister said that when a risky building was identified, emergency safety measures, including sprinklers and other features, were put in place within 24 hours to reduce the risk of a cladding-fuelled blaze.

But evacuation was still an option if the building could not be quickly made safe.

"We'll evacuate buildings if necessary, but the first priority is to make buildings safe to live in," Mr Wynne said.

Master Builders of Victoria chief executive Rebecca Casson said the make-up of the expert panel reflected the group's desired "whole-of-industry" approach.

"We have long advocated for a whole-of-industry approach to finding the solutions we need, and this is a step in the right direction," Ms Casson said.

The government's "cladding rectification levy", a charge on property developers to help pay the estimated \$600 million bill for removing cladding from the most dangerous buildings, will begin to be charged on January 1.

The Victorian Building Authority has confirmed that the charges, expected to be attached to about 3 per cent of planning applications, will be levied on some metropolitan building projects worth more than \$800,000.

With Clay Lucas



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