

Two Britains: The Grenfell inquiry and the royal wedding

Thomas Scripps
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Monday saw the opening of the government inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire. Over the next two weeks, testimony will be heard from the friends and families of the victims of one of the worst peacetime disasters in modern British history, which, on June 14 last year, claimed at least 72 lives.

Yet not a single national newspaper deemed this event worthy of a position on its front page. Instead, they continued to obsess over the minutiae of the weekend's royal wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

Blanket coverage of the wedding, including a "sumptuous 32-page souvenir photo album" from the *Daily Mail*, followed Sunday's equally ludicrous coverage, when 10 national newspapers devoted 282 pages to the topic. There was saturation reporting on the day itself, and weeks in which everything from Markle's dress to the type of food, drink and music to expect was dissected and presented to a bemused public.

Throughout, the message delivered time and again was that Harry, presently sixth in line to the throne, marrying a multimillionaire American actress with a black mother, was a fundamental and progressive departure for British social and political life.

To this end, an inordinate amount of attention was given to the "blackness" of the proceedings. Markle, along with guests Serena Williams and Oprah Winfrey, were touted as inspirations for young black women and symbols of change. Bishop Michael Curry was another oft-cited highlight for his sermon on slavery, civil rights and a Christian "revolution" founded on love, which was greeted by many of the assembled royals with barely concealed contempt.

Yet the ceremony, described in terms of it "inclusivity" and "diversity," was nothing but a

gathering of the rich and powerful. Just 600 guests were invited to watch the ceremony in Windsor Castle, bringing with them a combined estimated personal wealth of \$16-21 billion.

The Queen's wealth is roughly \$500 million, followed by Prince Charles (\$100 million), Princes William and Harry (\$40 million each), Prince Philip (\$30 million) and the Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton (\$10 million). Joining with and often outstripping the British monarchs were Markle's fellow celebrity "royalty," including Oprah Winfrey (\$2.8 billion), George Clooney (\$500 million), David and Victoria Beckham (\$450 million and \$300 million), Elton John (\$450 million) and Serena Williams (\$150 million). Representing the moneyed heights of politics, finance and property were former Prime Minister John Major (\$50 million), hedge fund manager James Matthews (\$2 billion) and the owner of substantial swathes of London's Mayfair, Hugh Grosvenor (\$9.5 billion).

The wedding itself cost an estimated £32 million, of which £30 million at least was funded by the taxpayer. Of the remaining roughly £2 million, known expenses included the £400,000 for Markle's Givenchy wedding dress.

When told that the peasants had no bread, Queen Marie Antoinette is meant to have replied, "Let them eat cake." On Saturday, it was the 200 rich "special guests" who ate all the £50,000 lemon and elderflower cake—around £250 a portion.

In stark contrast, the government continues to stonewall demands to ban the use of the flammable cladding that acted as an accelerant and turned a kitchen fire in Grenfell Tower into a raging inferno—after the Hackitt inquiry refused to even make this recommendation. And the £400 million promised

for the removal of dangerous cladding from council and housing association blocks is reportedly slated to be taken from the affordable housing budget.

On the very day the inquiry opened, “BBC Panorama” revealed that the insulation on Grenfell Tower had never passed the safety test and that the manufacturer, Celotex, had used extra fire retardant in the product that qualified for the safety certificate.

The terrible consequences of such abject contempt for the safety of working-class people was made apparent in the heart-rending testimony of the families of six of the victims.

Marcio Gomes described holding his stillborn child, delivered while his wife, along with his two daughters, were still in a coma after escaping the blaze. “Everything was ready” for his baby’s arrival, including a message that had been painted on the nursery wall. It had “felt like our hearts had broken. ... He was going to be my superstar.”

The family of Mohamed Amied Nedap, who fled from Afghanistan to escape the Taliban, played his final recorded words, “Goodbye, we are leaving this world now, goodbye.” Sam, the son of 69-year-old Joseph Daniels, related, “He stood no chance of getting out and this should never have happened.”

This is the real face of a British society rent by immense inequality. Shortly after the Grenfell Tower fire, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained that the suffocation and burning to death of at least 72 working-class people, in homes left unsafe for the sake of saving a few thousand pounds, took place in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the wealthiest borough in one of the wealthiest cities in the world—home not only to the Royal Family but various parasitic oligarchs.

This is where Harry and Meghan returned after the wedding, to his “cottage” on the grounds of Kensington Palace, while they mull over a move to the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester’s 21-room apartment and the purchase of a property in the Cotswolds countryside.

Because of this brutal demonstration of “the underlying reality of social relations between the classes,” we wrote, “In years to come it will be necessary to refer to the political life of Britain in terms of ‘before’ and ‘after’ Grenfell.”

And yet commentators now insist that it is not this tragedy that defines the present state of social and

political life in Britain, but the pageantry of a “multicultural” royal wedding.

The media hope to replace “before” and “after” Grenfell—an event they would rather see forgotten—with the narrative “before” and “after” Meghan.

Guardian columnist Irenosen Okojie expressed this most clearly, writing that “the Grenfell Tower debacle and the horrific treatment of the Windrush generation [are] very much at the forefront of current conversation within the UK’s ethnic minority communities. ... Yet the wedding, though couched in pomp and tradition, still seems to me like a radical act. ... There’ll be some sense, some admiration for a Britain that can be forward-thinking.”

These words express the sentiments of a section of the upper middle class so enamoured with the wealth and splendour of its super-rich idols that it has lost all contact with reality. But such trite nonsense, presenting the coupling of a junior member of the Windsor clan to an African-American actress as some sort of epochal event, becomes no less hollow through endless repetition.

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, will be holding the next of its regular meetings on Saturday, May 26, at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend.

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting

Saturday May 26, 2 p.m.

Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk

London, W10 6SW (nearest tube: Latimer Road)

For further details visit facebook.com/Grenfellforum



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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