

Meghan Markle's Grenfell cookbook: The royal family in damage control mode

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Meghan Markle unveiled her first solo charity project last week with the launch, in the gardens of Kensington Palace, of *Together: Our Community Cookbook*.

Sponsored by the Royal Foundation, the charity vehicle of the younger royals—princes William and Harry and their wives Kate and Meghan—the cookbook includes recipes from Grenfell Tower survivors. Its stated purpose is to raise money for the Hubb Community Kitchen, founded by volunteers after the June 2017 fire that claimed 72 lives.

The full colour hardback, published by Penguin Random House, features photos of Markle in the kitchen with Hubb volunteers. By the day of the launch, pre-sales had pushed the book to the top of Amazon UK's best-seller list.

In the face of saturation media coverage, it is necessary to step back, see beyond the personalities involved and consider the deeper political significance of this event.

In June 2017, millions of workers and young people understood that the Grenfell Tower fire was not an accident but a crime. In the richest borough in the UK, home to the royal family and some of the most expensive real estate on Earth, 72 people died because of deliberate decisions by government, local authorities and corporations made in the interests of the super-rich.

Decades of cuts by Tory and Labour governments and a decade of austerity after the 2008 financial crash saw Grenfell Tower—and hundreds more like it—turned into death traps. The decision by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council to cover Grenfell in cheap flammable cladding symbolised the contempt, neglect and ruthlessness of the capitalist class towards the working class.

In the days after the fire, survivors and evacuees were left to fend for themselves, the only help coming from a

groundswell of volunteers. Working people of all nationalities came together, sweeping aside divisions based on race, gender and religion that are promoted by the ruling class.

All the institutions of state were implicated. When TV news crews descended on Grenfell, angry residents confronted the BBC: “You didn’t come here when people were telling you that the building was unsafe! That is not ‘newsworthy’. You come here when people die!” British Prime Minister Theresa May became a figure of scorn after she refused to visit grieving relatives, holding a brief private meeting with emergency services before fleeing the scene.

The queen visited with Prince William on June 16, speaking with survivors and acting, in the words of the BBC, as the “head of the nation.” “There is a howl of pain and anger being directed at an establishment that has the royals at its heart,” conceded the BBC’s Peter Hunt, describing the monarch’s visit as a “masterclass in how to respond.” But as the queen and her grandson were being escorted back to their vehicle, she was heckled—an unprecedented occurrence—with William attempting to placate locals and promising, “We’ll be back.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* commented June 27, 2017, “There are events in world history that lead to a fundamental change in consciousness and create the basis for developing a socialist political orientation among broad masses of workers. The June 14 Grenfell Tower inferno is such an event.”

Markle’s “first solo project” is therefore not a personal initiative. It is an attempt to restore public faith in the monarchy, present a caring and “culturally diverse” image and prevent the working class from challenging the wealth, privilege and power of the British ruling class.

Earlier this month, William made his own contribution to these efforts with a guest appearance on two episodes of the BBC's *DIY SOS: Grenfell*. The popular show saw volunteer construction workers, architects and designers build a new gym for the Dale Youth boxing club—the old gym was housed in the tower—and a new community centre. "This could have been my family in that tower," says one worker. Arriving in a motorcade, donning a hard hat and high-vis vest, the Duke of Cambridge is met by the show's host Nick Knowles. William paints a wall and is introduced to locals, including survivors.

He tells Knowles, "Progress needs to happen... But there's still lots to do." He speaks with a survivor who says, "We're just trying to get back to normal," to which the prince responds, "It's a bit hard to do that whilst people are still living in hotels." His barbed comments are a public rebuke of the Conservative government by a member of an institution that, by virtue of its position at the apex of the social order, understands the dangers posed by Grenfell. The royal family wants the crisis on its doorstep resolved, not out of concern for the residents but an acute sense of class preservation.

Meghan Markle offers a valuable addition to the royal family's efforts at damage control. The former *Suits* actress was praised for delivering a three-minute launch speech without a script. Her mother Doria flew in, with the tabloids describing this as "a royal coup" lending authenticity to Markle's message of "diversity."

However, Markle's appearance exposed the chasm dividing the royals from the vast majority of the population. Standing in a white marquee in the gardens of Kensington Palace, Markle, who had just taken off her £956 Smythe jacket, told the assembled guests that "The story behind" *Together: Our Community Cookbook* "is the power of food... When you get to know the story behind the recipe, you get to know the person behind it and help us celebrate what connects us rather than divides us. That is the ethos of *Together*."

When it comes to "the power of food" Markle is on familiar ground. Her wedding cake cost £50,000 and the "story" for the 1,200 members of the public invited to the wedding, including community workers and disadvantaged youth, was a royal letter telling them to bring their own lunch.

The royal family's appeal for "togetherness" cannot

disguise this fundamental class divide. In the Golborne ward where Grenfell is located, 51 percent of children live in poverty. Across London one in 10 families relies on foodbanks to survive. A staggering one in 24 families is homeless.

In contrast, the Crown Estate is the largest property owner in the UK, worth an estimated £44.5 billion. The royal family's own personal fortune is £1 billion and this year it claimed an annual "sovereign grant" of £104.8 million. Their closest neighbours are even richer. The average house price on Kensington Palace Gardens, fifteen minutes-drive from Grenfell, is £36 million, 165 times the value of the average UK home. One in five homes in that part of the borough stands empty, their absentee owners—oligarchs, celebrities and sheiks—visiting rarely.

Meanwhile, residents who were evacuated from the blocks next to Grenfell have been ordered by the council to return or risk losing their tenancy rights. More than 80 survivors are still in temporary accommodation. Still no one—not a single politician or business figure—has been prosecuted for their role in creating the conditions for the Grenfell disaster.

No charity cookbook or televised royal appearance can disguise or remedy a social chasm of such grotesque proportions. There were hints during *DIY: SOS* of the community's distrust, with few locals visiting the project. "Don't get me wrong, it's fabulous," says Yvonne, whose elderly parents lived in Grenfell Tower, "but how long will it remain in the community's hands?" Knowles tries to reassure her, but Yvonne replies, "We shouldn't be here today having this discussion. This shouldn't be happening because of Grenfell. This should have just happened because the community needed it."

To discuss these questions, we invite all WSWS readers to attend today's Grenfell Fire Forum at 4.00pm, at the Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk London, W10 6SW (nearest tube: Latimer Road).



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