

# Grenfell Tower should mark the end of the Cowardly State...

Published: January 12, 2026, 11:27 pm

---

Harold MacMillan was right. In politics a great deal comes down to 'events'. These are the unexpected moments when moods change. I hate to describe Grenfell Tower as an event, but it is. It is and will remain a personal tragedy and trauma for many. I hope those scars will heal and lessen with time. But I hope too that Grenfell Tower will not be forgotten.

The anger over Grenfell Tower is real, raw and appropriate. This was not an accident. It has all the appearance of being a systemic failure. From the design with only one stairwell, to the refurbishment without sprinklers, to the cost cutting on the cladding; each decision was indicative not of particular failing alone (although some may be that) but of something much more significant. They are signs of a culture that did not care. And, as significantly, of a culture that thought that the state and those who relied upon it were a burden that had to be minimised.

The spend on Grenfell Tower was minimised. People have paid for that with their lives.

And people are angry. Theresa May is the focus of that anger, and rightly so. Watch Newsnight last night. See the report from John Sweeney, a man I have worked with and respect, talking about the anger. And then sense that anger in Emily Maitlis' interview with the prime minister. You can sense Maitlis' anger that Theresa May will not apologise, which she repeatedly refused to do.

The same failure was apparent in David Gauke's interview with Cathy Newman, where he too refused to answer questions.

There is good reason why they duck the issues now. In my book *The Courageous State* I described the coalition government of 2010-15 as a perfect example of cowardly politics. As I put it in the introduction:

*Cameron and Osborne, with their allies Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander ....have become the apotheosis of something that has been thirty years in the making: they are the personification of what I call the cowardly state. The cowardly state in the UK is the*

*creation of Margaret Thatcher, although its US version is of course the creation of Ronald Reagan. It was these two politicians who swept neoliberalism into the political arena in 1979 and 1980 respectively. Since then its progress has been continual: now it forms the consensus of thinking across the political divide within the UK, Europe and the US.*

*The economic crisis we are now facing is the legacy of Thatcher and Reagan because they introduced into government the neoliberal idea that whatever a politician does, however well-intentioned that action might be, they will always make matters worse in the economy. This is because government is never able, according to neoliberal thinking, to outperform the market, which will always, it says, allocate resources better and so increase human well-being more than government can.*

*That thinking is the reason why we have ended up with cowardly government. That is why in August 2011, when we had riots on streets of London we also had Conservative politicians on holiday, reluctant to return because they were quite sure that nothing they could do and no action they could take would make any difference to the outcome of the situation. What began as an economic idea has now swept across government as a whole: we have got a class of politicians who think that the only useful function for the power that they hold is to dismantle the state they have been elected to govern while transferring as many of its functions as possible to unelected businesses that have bankrolled their path to power.*

Of course May and Gauke could not apologise. They were part of that government. They live by that creed. They accept no responsibility because they have devolved their own duty of care to the market.

But the market does not care. It's not paid to. And as the complex web of contractors who worked on Grenfell Towet showed, none is anyway given that task.

And so people are angry. And rightly so. They want politicians who care. They want people to accept responsibility. They want a government that steps up to the mark and it is apparent that we have not got that.

In this sense Grenfell Tower is an event. It should mark the time when the cowardly politicians of the neoliberal era were consigned to history. It should be mark when responsibility was resumed. It should mark when the state began to care again.

I say should. I have to live in hope.