

17 March 2013 <http://grenfellactiongroupwordpress.com>

PANTS ON FIRE AWARDS [1]

The Grenfell Action Group is under attack from both left and right. There have been clear signs recently of a smear campaign of lies and personal attacks against us orchestrated from Hornton Street and involving both Tory and Labour councillors and their lackeys. Recent comments posted anonymously on the Hornet's Nest blog have smeared all opponents of the KALC project as either "dope smokers and saddos" or as "a small bunch of dope smokers and pit bull breeders". Of course, this kind of poisonous vitriol reveals more about the bigotry and vindictiveness of our attackers than it does about us, or the courageous band of ordinary local residents who dared to join us in confronting Pooter Cockell and his cohort on Monday.

The smear campaign has kicked off big-time since the anti-Pooter demonstration (see "Pooter's Folly" below) but the attacks had started earlier, notably in emails from Coleridge and Blakeman revealed in our earlier piece "The Gloves Come Off". Contrary to their accusations against us, we have bullied and intimidated no one. On the contrary we have dared – at considerable personal risk – to confront powerful bureaucracies (ie the Council and the TMO) which have the power to bully and intimidate and, when provoked, can and will do so vindictively and with impunity.

Our fight-back begins today with a series of articles which we will be calling;

THE GRENFELL ACTION GROUP PANTS ON FIRE AWARDS

The first award goes to Blakeman herself whose come-uppance is well overdue.

In an email to us on 20th February, which she copied widely to councillors and officers of both the Council and the TMO, Councillor Blakeman made the following claim:

"The ward councillors – and indeed many others – find it very irritating that your Group claims to speak on behalf of 'the community'. We know that you speak on behalf of a small group of people. You do not speak on behalf of the wider community and you have never been able to demonstrate any legitimacy for this claim."

Let's just unpick this statement and see how it stands up to scrutiny. Firstly, we have never claimed to represent the wider community. We do, however claim to represent many, and perhaps the majority, of Lancaster West residents, and our credentials in doing so have been recognised by RBKC for some considerable time. The history of this is a matter of record.

In January 2011 Penelope Tollitt, Head of Policy and Design in the Planning Department began negotiating directly with the Grenfell Action Group as representatives of the Lancaster West community. We had formed a coalition with Lancaster West EMB, Lancaster West Residents Association and the Grenfell Tower Leaseholders Association, all of which had declared their opposition to the siting of the proposed new academy on the Lancaster Green site. The coalition received funding from RBKC so that we could pay for independent planning advice. It should be noted that the Grenfell Action Group took the leading role in this coalition and that 'Planning Aid for London' was subsequently appointed, on our advice, to support and represent the local community. The Grenfell Action Group has long been the lynchpin of local resistance to KALC, and Blakeman knows this better than anyone.

In September 2010 we asked Blakeman to assist us in organising a public meeting to give a voice to Lancaster West residents to express their concerns about the Council's plans for the KALC development. She duly obliged. The meeting, chaired by Blakeman herself, was held at St Clement's Church on 20th September 2010 and was attended by about 170 local residents. There was a great deal of anger and strong resistance to the KALC plans, all of which was reported in the Kensington and Chelsea Chronicle at the time.

The Council were clearly rattled by the fierce opposition they had encountered – so much so that their KALC working group began discussing plans to counter the opposition by actively supporting a 'Friends of Kensington Academy' group and organising a 'parent's petition' in support of the Council's plans. A petition was duly delivered by Councillor Blakeman on 10th December 2010. She later wrote to us (on 5th February 2011) bragging about the petition, in a clear attempt to discourage us and undermine our resistance:

"You may not be aware" she wrote "but a parents' petition in support of the school on this site was organised by a local primary school with around 200 signatures from local parents, including many from Lancaster West Estate, a number of whom are resident in Grenfell Tower and a number resident in Verity Close. Since the Academy is now 95% certain to be built and to be built on this site, it is vital that we build in as many safeguards and elements of community gain for the immediate locality as possible"

We were becoming increasingly suspicious of Blakeman's politicking, and we soon learned that a survey conducted locally by the Council in March 2011 had found that the majority of respondents (62%) did not support the Council's plans. So we wrote to the Council, using the Freedom of Information Act, to query the details of the petition. What we discovered, via a formal reply from Peter Bradbury at RBKC, was that Blakeman's email was largely a work of fiction.

FIRSTLY, the petition had made no reference to the Lancaster Green site. It simply supported the Council's proposal to build an Academy in North Kensington, and made no reference to any site or location. Readers should note that the issue, from our perspective, has never been the need for a new secondary school for North Kensington. We fully support that. Our only issue is with the siting of this school on the Lancaster Green site, which is too small to accommodate this development, and is essential as open space and green space to the Lancaster West community.

SECONDLY, The petition did not have "around 200 signatures" as Blakeman had claimed. In fact it had been signed by just 118 persons. Big difference there also.

THIRDLY, Blakeman claimed that the signatories had included "many from Lancaster West Estate". In fact only 26% of the signatories were from Lancaster West.

Given that there are nearly 1000 households on Lancaster West Estate – and 26% of 118 amounts to no more than 31 signatures – we would argue that the 26% quoted by Mr Bradbury could not reasonably or legitimately be described by Blakeman as "many from Lancaster West" and that the petition was in fact signed by only a very few Lancaster West residents.

SO WHAT'S THE POINT OF ALL THIS?

Well, Blakeman knew all along, and certainly since the St Clement's meeting in September 2010, that there was fierce opposition to KALC at Lancaster West, but it suited her contrary agenda to pretend otherwise, and to cynically misrepresent the facts on the ground to us, and to anyone else she was in a position to influence.

Blakeman was elected to represent the residents of Notting Barns, many of whom live on the Silchester and Lancaster West Estates, which together form one of the most deprived ghettos in North Kensington. Blakeman knows this area well.

She knew all along that the siting of the KALC development at Lancaster Green would mean the destruction of essential and irreplaceable open space, one of the few assets the Lancaster West community had, and that the consequent over-development of this area would severely impact the local community in a number of ways. She also knew that the Lancaster West community would never support these plans, but she chose, for political expediency, to betray this community, deliberately and cynically, by voting with the Tories, and colluding with them in under-representing the strength of local opposition to the plans, and falsely claiming a strength of support in the Lancaster West community that simply did not exist. For this campaign of treachery and deceit, and for the subsequent smear campaign against all opponents of the KALC project – notably ourselves – we award the first of our GRENFELL ACTION GROUP PANTS ON FIRE AWARDS to Judith Blakeman.

We strongly recommend that she share this award with the rest of the Labour group at RBKC, who are all complicit, one way or another, in the betrayal and abandonment of the Lancaster West community.