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The great constituency swap

Here's a way for MPs to see how the other half lives

by Danny Dorling, Simon Szreter / March 6, 2015 / [Leave a comment](#)



A different class? Labour MP Frank Field (left) and Tory Sir Nicholas Soames should try swapping for a week. © Fiona Hanson/PA Wire/Press Association Images/Dominic Lipinski/PA Wire/Press Association Images

How in touch are MPs with life in Britain today? We suggest that many are not as in touch with it as they should be. So we're challenging them to spend a week each year seeing how the other half lives. Far more edifying and publicly useful than pursuing a paid second job outside parliament, which is sometimes defended as "keeping in touch," our already well-paid MPs should try to get to know two very different constituencies as part of their job of representing the people. In 1984, the journalist Matthew Parris, then a young Conservative MP, decided he would try to experience life in a community rather different from the bucolic West Derbyshire constituency he then represented. He wanted to show that he could live in Newcastle for a week on the statutory benefit rate for a single

adult. He found that he couldn't—rather publicly, in a documentary aired on national television. After this chastening reality check, Parris did the honourable thing: in 1986, he stood down from the Commons and left politics for good.

A criticism often made of MPs in general—and of many of the most successful career politicians on the front benches in particular—is that too many of them have not had much, if any, experience of the “real world,” either before or after they begin their careers in the Westminster “bubble.” This isn't entirely fair, of course, as most of us only ever get to experience a very particular slice or two of the “real world.” But the critics do have a point. It is certainly fair to expect that our elected MPs—including ministers—make a reasonable effort to stay in touch with the diverse society they claim to represent. Parris certainly found the experience illuminating 30 years ago.

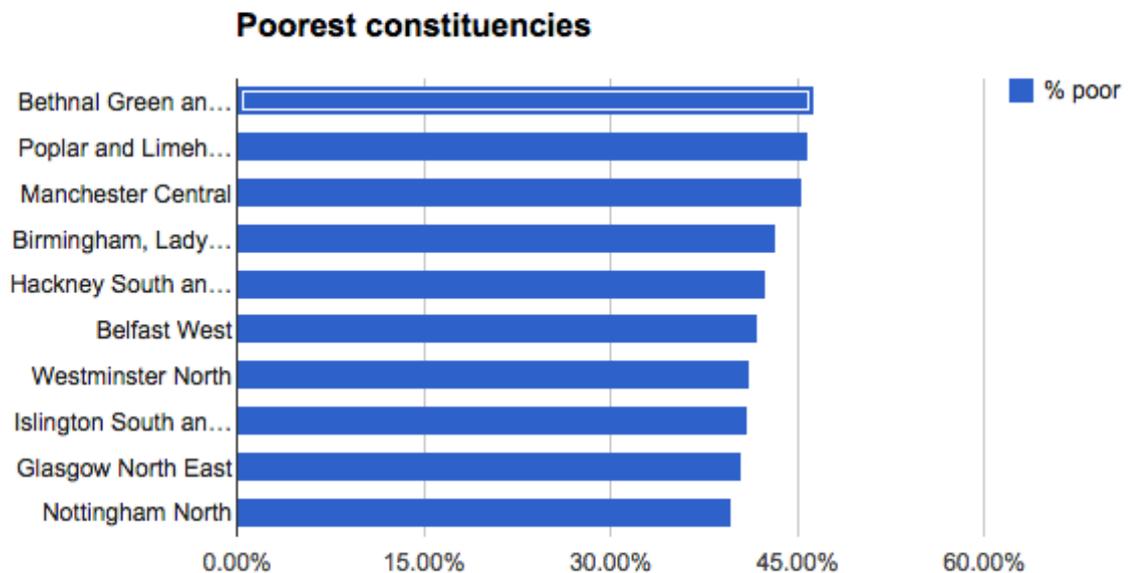
One opportunity that all MPs have for a regular reality check is their weekly constituency surgery. This valued institution helps to keep MPs' feet on the ground and puts them in face-to-face contact with members of the community which elected them. While serving ministers of the Crown may have teams to relieve them of the duty of taking surgery, you could argue that this is a false economy, and that even the Prime Minister and the Chancellor should take a constituency surgery at least once a month or so. It would help to keep them grounded.

There is a problem here, however, and it comes from the way that Britain is geographically divided. The now well-established trend of growing income and wealth inequality over the past four decades is increasingly reflected in extensive forms of geographical segregation. We're not just talking about the much-discussed north-south divide, either, but also about social segregation between particular constituencies, too.

This means that in addition to spending most of their lives with other politicians, lobbyists and the media, during the brief periods when they do leave Westminster to take their constituency surgeries, far too many MPs are getting a systematically distorted picture of the real world. Many Conservative MPs, for example, are returned by some of the most affluent places in the country and so get a very different clientele with very different problems in their surgeries than do most Labour MPs, whose constituencies tend to be in the poorest parts of the country. This is demonstrated in the table below which shows the 88 most unequal constituencies in the UK. There is only one Conservative MP (Nick de Bois in Enfield North) in the 44 constituencies with the greatest proportion of child poverty (listed on the left). Conversely, no Labour MP takes a surgery in any of the 44 most privileged constituencies (listed on the right). Just as many Labour MPs may have little idea of, say, how congested the roads are in the most economically successful parts of Britain, so few Conservative MPs have to face in their surgeries the individual consequences that the Coalition government's austerity measures have arguably had on the poorest communities.

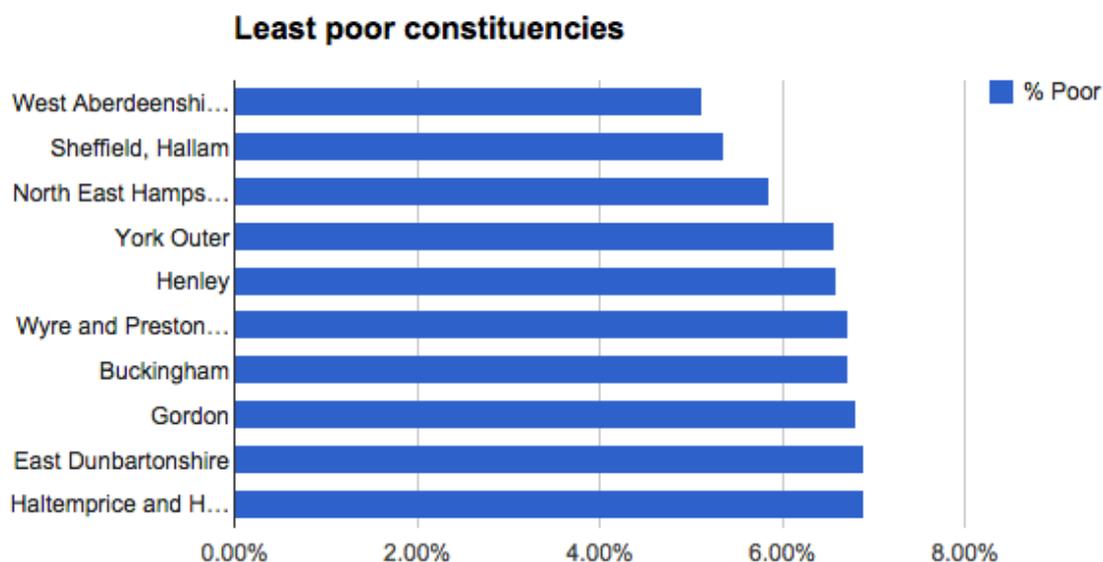
Our proposal, therefore, is that once a year those MPs representing constituencies with significantly deprived or notably affluent constituencies should spend a week seeing how the other half lives. This could easily be arranged because it is now possible to order all constituencies in the country along a continuum from the most privileged to the least. There are many ways to do this, of course, but we think one excellent way, which gets to the heart of the matter, is a measure of “the proportion of children living in families either in receipt of out-of-work benefits or in receipt of tax credits with a reported income which is less than 60 per cent of national median income.” It is based on an exact count of such children. This measure provides a broad proxy for relative low-income child poverty as set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010 and enables analysis at a local level. It is also the government's own preferred measure. The data we use is from August 2011, so it does relate to the current Parliament and its constituencies.

The UK's 10 poorest constituencies



The proposed swaps would make for some interesting reality checks. Michael Gove, for instance, would spend his week in Coventry North-East, where he would encounter a community in which more than 30 per cent of children live in poor households, compared to fewer than 10 per cent in his own constituency of Surrey Heath. He has in the past said that the only reason food banks are needed is poor financial management by householders. That may, indeed, be true of a few (although not all) poor households in affluent Surrey Heath, but a week taking the surgery in Coventry North-East might give him a different perspective. George Osborne should spend a week in Glasgow North-West, but if he isn't keen on travelling north of the border, he could go to Sheffield Central instead, which has 30.8 per cent of children in impoverished households, three times the rate found in his affluent Cheshire constituency of Tatton. David Cameron represents an even more privileged constituency: Witney in Oxfordshire has only 8 per cent of its children living in poverty. So he should spend a week in North Belfast, the place with a proportion of underprivileged children more than four times that in Witney. Or, if he prefers staying in England, he could try Brent North, where just over 35 per cent of children living in impoverished households.

The 10 constituencies with the least poverty



Cameron's fellow Old Etonian Oliver Letwin, who represents idyllic West Dorset, would be spending his week in gritty Burnley, swapping with the Liberal Democrat Gordon Birtwistle. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg represents the urban constituency with the lowest incidence of child poverty: In Sheffield Hallam the figure is just one in 20 (5 per cent), exceeded only by the rural hideaway of West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine. Clegg should spend his week in Poplar and Limehouse, where almost fully one-half of children (46 per cent) are growing up in poor households.

Poplar's 46 per cent of children in poor households is exceeded only by Bethnal Green and Bow, and almost matched by Manchester Central, Birmingham Ladywood and Hackney South and Shoreditch. The Tory MPs for North-East Hampshire, York Outer and Henley, respectively, should be spending their weeks in these inner city communities: James Arbuthnot, Julian Sturdy and John Howell would swap with their Labour opposite number—Lucy Powell, Shabhana Mahmood and Meg Hillier. Meanwhile, Ed Milliband would not have to travel far, swapping Doncaster North with Greg Mulholland's Leeds North West, while only Ed Balls, in Morley and Outwood, would have to swap with a member of his own party, Michael Dugher's Barnsley East.

Constituency swaps needn't cost the taxpayer anything. The MPs involved could live in each other's homes for the week. They might also consider moving their families, and giving their children a taste of the local schools. This would at least begin to give them an insight into the diversity of the nation they legislate for in Parliament.

Top Swaps...

% poor	Constituency	MP	% poor	Constituency	MP
46.31%	Bethnal Green and Bow	Ali, Rushanara (L)	5.12%	West Aberdeenshire & Kincardine	Smith, Robert (LD)
45.96%	Poplar and Limehouse	Fitzpatrick, Jim (L)	5.37%	Sheffield, Hallam	Clegg, Nick (LD)
45.45%	Manchester Central	Powell, Lucy (L)	5.87%	North East Hampshire	Arbuthnot, James (C)
43.26%	Birmingham, Ladywood	Mahmood, Shabana (L)	6.57%	York Outer	Sturdy, Julian (C)
42.42%	Hackney South and Shoreditch	Hillier, Meg (L)	6.60%	Henley	Howell, John (C)
41.79%	Belfast West	Maskey, Paul (SF)	6.72%	Wyre and Preston North	Wallace, Ben (C)
41.14%	Westminster North	Buck, Karen (L)	6.73%	Buckingham	Bercow, John (C/Speaker)
41.10%	Islington South and Finsbury	Thornberry, Emily (L)	6.81%	Gordon	Bruce, Malcolm (LD)
40.53%	Glasgow North East	Bain, William (L)	6.89%	East Dunbartonshire	Swinson, Jo (LD)
39.73%	Nottingham North	Allen, Graham (L)	6.89%	Haltemprice and Howden	Davis, David (C)
39.03%	Liverpool, Riverside	Ellman, Louise (L)	7.10%	South Northamptonshire	Leadsom, Andrea (C)
39.03%	Edmonton	Love, Andrew (L)	7.35%	Orkney and Shetland	Carmichael, Alistair (LD)
38.50%	Leeds Central	Benn, Hilary (L)	7.38%	Wokingham	Redwood, John (C)
38.19%	Tottenham	Lammy, David (L)	7.50%	Westmorland and Lonsdale	Farron, Tim (LD)
37.87%	Holborn and St Pancras	Dobson, Frank (L)	7.60%	Mole Valley	Beresford, Paul (C)
37.63%	Birmingham, Hodge Hill	Byrne, Liam (L)	7.60%	Rushcliffe	Clarke, Kenneth (C)
37.29%	Islington North	Corbyn, Jeremy (L)	7.69%	Kenilworth and Southam	Wright, Jeremy (C)
36.62%	Liverpool, Walton	Rotheram, Steve (L)	7.70%	Chesham and Amersham	Gillan, Cheryl (C)
36.50%	Middlesbrough	McDonald, Andy (L)	7.83%	Winchester	Brine, Steve (C)
36.04%	Sheffield, Brightside & Hillsborough	Blunkett, David (L)	7.94%	North Somerset	Fox, Liam (C)
36.00%	Blackley and Broughton	Stringer, Graham (L)	7.97%	Ribble Valley	Evans, Nigel (C)
35.64%	Foyle	Durkan, Mark (SDLP)	7.98%	South Cambridgeshire	Lansley, Andrew (C)
35.53%	Belfast North	Dodds, Nigel (DU)	8.09%	Witney	Cameron, David (C)
35.38%	Brent Central	Teather, Sarah (LD)	8.16%	Horsham	Maude, Francis (C)
35.34%	Glasgow Central	Sarwar, Anas (L)	8.18%	South West Surrey	Hunt, Jeremy (C)
35.32%	Manchester, Gorton	Kaufman, Gerald (L)	8.23%	Skipton and Ripon	Smith, Julian (C)
34.99%	Leicester West	Kendall, Liz (L)	8.28%	Epsom and Ewell	Grayling, Chris (C)
34.83%	Vauxhall	Hoey, Kate (L)	8.35%	Cheadle	Hunter, Mark (LD)
34.83%	Birkenhead	Field, Frank (L)	8.38%	Mid Sussex	Soames, Nicholas (C)
34.62%	Walsall North	Winnick, David (L)	8.47%	Hitchin and Harpenden	Lilley, Peter (C)

34.53%	Birmingham, Erdington	Dromey, Jack (L)	8.47%	Maidenhead	May, Theresa (C)
34.38%	Nottingham East	Leslie, Chris (L)	8.57%	Mid Bedfordshire	Dorries, Nadine (C)
34.35%	Glasgow East	Curran, Margaret (L)	8.65%	Saffron Walden	Haselhurst, Alan (C)
34.33%	West Ham	Brown, Lyn (L)	8.68%	Hexham	Opperman, Guy (C)
34.23%	Enfield North	de Bois, Nick (C)	8.73%	The Cotswolds	Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey (C)
34.08%	Birmingham, Northfield	Burden, Richard (L)	8.77%	South West Devon	Streeter, Gary (C)
34.05%	Knowsley	Howarth, George (L)	8.85%	Sutton Coldfield	Mitchell, Andrew (C)
33.82%	Barking	Hodge, Margaret (L)	8.85%	South Leicestershire	Robathan, Andrew (C)
33.81%	Bermondsey and Old Southwark	Hughes, Simon (LD)	8.90%	Fareham	Hoban, Mark (C)
33.80%	Wolverhampton South East	McFadden, Pat (L)	8.90%	Harrogate and Knaresborough	Jones, Andrew (C)
33.64%	Hammersmith	Slaughter, Andy (L)	8.96%	Windsor	Afriyie, Adam (C)
33.52%	Kingston upon Hull North	Johnson, Diana (L)	8.98%	Beaconsfield	Grieve, Dominic (C)
33.46%	Newcastle upon Tyne Central	Onwurah, Chi (L)	8.99%	Esher and Walton	Raab, Dominic (C)
33.34%	Wolverhampton North East	Reynolds, Emma (L)	9.00%	South West Hertfordshire	Gauke, David (C)