

VOICE OF THE DAILY Mirror

Caring for Real Brits

LISTEN to our political leaders posturing over the next three weeks and you could be forgiven for wondering if this pampered elite lives in a different world.

The party conference season is a depressing round of spin, soundbites and self-serving speeches from a Westminster class who appear increasingly divorced from the realities of life for the overwhelming majority of people they're supposed to represent.

Little wonder that turnout at general elections has plummeted to historically low levels as voters are repulsed by politicians who speak a different language to the rest of us.

When Britain last had an opportunity to decide who governs our nation, in May 2010, more people didn't bother to visit a polling booth than voted for the Conservatives who emerged as the biggest block in Parliament - with the result that David Cameron now rules from Downing Street.

Take, for example, the furious political row and well-funded lobbying campaign for the axe to be swung and the 50p rich tax chopped on the £150,000-plus incomes of the wealthiest 1% in the land.

Politicians, tycoons, businessmen, sports stars and other public figures advocating abolition should be forced to declare any vested financial interest.

Because paying tax on earnings of £150,000 a year - equivalent to nearly £3,000 a week - may be their world but it certainly isn't the experience of the 99% who survive on incomes barely a fraction of that.

Starting today, and continuing every day this week, the Daily Mirror will bring a series of hard-hitting reports from Real Britain.

Our writers have been on the streets talking to people like you about the issues which matter to you - not to hectoring politicians in their conference bubbles.

We will voice the concerns of men and women who feel neglected by this country's political leaders.

They make sweeping decisions which have an enormous impact - good and bad - on the lives of tens of millions of people who those politicians know little about and, sad to say, probably care about even less.

The Real Britain deserves to be heard.



DAY ONE



EXCLUSIVE

THIS week the Daily Mirror lifts the lid on the Real Britain in a hard-hitting series of reports.

Every day we will expose the grim realities of life in 2011. The results are truly shocking and must be read by every politician.

Because the platitudes spouted at party conferences make our leaders sound as if they are on another planet.

Today TOM PARRY looks at the poorest in society and how their numbers are swelling by the day.

CLASPING an envelope stuffed with discount coupons for cut-price food stores, OAP Linda Maxen glares angrily towards the London Olympic Park.

The second-floor ex-council flat where she has spent her whole adult life is near the 2012 site and the new £1.8-billion Westfield Stratford City, Europe's largest shopping mall - but Linda, 64, does not have money to spend at either.

Hogging the skyline to the south is Barclays' HQ in Canary Wharf, where chief executive Bob Diamond might be contemplating how to spend last year's £8million bonus.

This is real Britain, where the haves and have-nots exist side by side. This is the recession front line.

Mega-rich bankers peer down from the dizzying heights of their skyscraper offices on one side; desperate families dreading overdue bills they simply cannot pay live in dreary flats on the other.

Linda, who lives in Newham - the capital's most run-down area - tells me: "At the moment we have to sacrifice a lot just to get by. All the basic essentials are becoming more expensive. It's a case of make do and mend again, just like it was when I was growing up after the war. I feel like we are going backward."

Linda, who depends on the £102.15 a week state pension, points to the site of the 2012 Olympics opposite and says: "The people that live around here have been trodden on."

As Tory-led spending cuts combine with rising food prices, fuel bills and record increases in public transport fares, tales like Linda's are increasingly common.

To reach a minimum acceptable standard of living - defined as having enough money to cover basic living costs - a couple with two children need to

£37,000
Minimum total wage a couple with two children now need to earn to cover basic living costs

TWO SIDES
Estate & gleaming towers

Pictures: CARL FOX

It's like it was as I grew up after the war. I feel we're going backwards

LINDA MAXEN

▲ DISCOUNT HUNT Linda



A DIVIDED NATION

13.5m live in a Britain where parents face a choice... feed their children or keep them warm at night

STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE IN THE SHADOW OF BANKS' WEALTH



deprived Tower Hamlets, Newham's neighbouring borough. Tower Hamlets includes the imposing skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, but 57% of the children here live in poverty, according to the End Child Poverty group.

Gran Debbie Keller, 50, out shopping with her daughter Natalie Elms and grandson Alfie, has been on benefits since being signed off work with severe diabetes.

"We shop here because it's £8 return to go to Canary Wharf on public transport," she tells me.

"That's beyond our budget. We can't think about going there even though it's not far away."

As we speak a man leans out over a third floor balcony opposite the Salvation Army soup kitchen.

He is draping hand-washed socks over the end of a single bed which he uses for a washing line.

The high-rise buildings here are brutal blocks like the 27-storey Balfour Tower. This is the kind of place where people rush past with their heads bowed, terrified of making eye contact with their unknown neighbours.

But peer through any gap in the decayed housing blocks and you can see the banks' towers of wealth tantalisingly close.

In the shopping centre, I meet aptly named Terry Poore, 60. "Yep, that's right. No money, with the 'e'," he bitterly jokes.

Charities fear hard-up families will be forced to borrow money from high-interest lenders.

STRUGGLING

Barnardo's chief executive Anne Marie Carrie says: "Many parents living in poverty today are faced with choosing between feeding their children or keeping them warm."

"Unless we act now, more and more will be forced into the clutches of high-interest money lenders."

Family Action chief executive Helen Dent says: "The very disadvantaged families we work with are really struggling to make ends meet. And the future is not looking any brighter. Whilst the Government are focused on getting down the deficit, vulnerable families and children are paying the price of austerity."

"What we're threatened with now is writing off another generation of children who are going to see their life chances smashed by the cuts."

On Hackney's Kingsmead estate, Agnes, a 62-year-old retired newspaper courier, is pushing a pram containing her nine-month-old great granddaughter.

She lives with her 87-year-old mother and is on her way to the corner shop to top up her electricity meter key. Her meter often runs out and she and her ailing mum are left without power for long spells.

"If you have two loads of washing and you only have £3 left on the meter on a Sunday night, then you have to make a choice between clean clothes or having the TV on," she says.

She is not alone. More people are waking up in poverty every day. This is real Britain.

Fed by charity: Page 16

57%
Number of children living in poverty in London borough of Tower Hamlets, which also includes banking base Canary Wharf

earn £18,400 each, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation social research charity. That is 20% more than last year.

Last week it emerged unemployment is now at 2.51 million after rising by 80,000 over the previous three months, the largest increase in nearly two years. The jobless rate now stands at

7.9% of the workforce. And many of those in work are enduring wage freezes, so poverty is claiming new victims daily who are both employed and unemployed.

I went out on the streets to delve into the real stories behind the latest statistics, which show 13.5 million people in Britain are officially poor - a fifth of the population. Figures released last year by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showed this means surviving on less than £288 per week for a couple with two young children under 14.

Crucially, the data reveals 1.5 million more people are in poverty compared with 2004. Following six successive years of significant decreases under

Labour, poverty is getting more widespread for the first time since the mid-1990s. And no one believes the slump will be arrested any time soon.

I am told a story of one family so hard up the parents decided to skip meals so they had enough food for their children.

Then there is Chris Clarke, 45, a mechanic forced out of work because of illness. He lists his family's total monthly income: £500 from his wife's part-time school job, £400 in disability living allowance and £240 a month in incapacity benefit.

From this - just over £1,100 a month in total - he and wife Nicki have to provide for four children.

Chris, a housing association tenant, says: "That has to cover every-

1.5million
Increase since 2004 in the number of people who are officially poor in Britain - up to 13.5million, or a fifth of the population



▲ DECAY Tower Hamlets flats

thing. I know if the Government cuts incapacity benefit then it will add to our misery. Every month we're always £10 short. You pay one bill, another one comes along."

Today, the poorest in society are unlikely to wear rags as the most marginalised did in the post-war rationing years. They do, however, have a statistically shorter life expectancy, often a less balanced diet, lack of access to the best healthcare and schools and less chance of advancing themselves or enjoying luxuries like holidays.

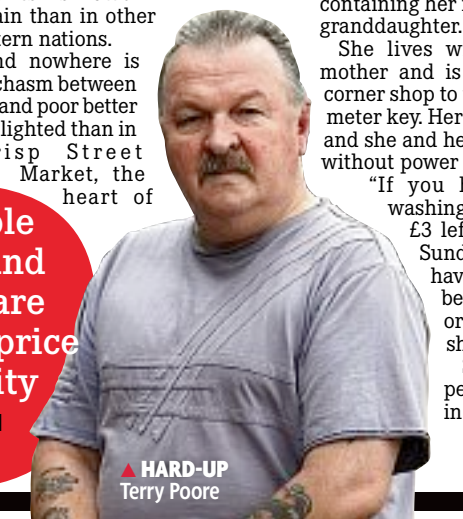
The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development says the chances of a child from a

poor family enjoying higher wages and better education than their parents is lower in Britain than in other western nations.

And nowhere is the chasm between rich and poor better highlighted than in Chrissp Street Market, the heart of

Vulnerable families and children are paying the price of austerity

FAMILY ACTION



▲ HARD-UP Terry Poore