

Holborn and St. Pancras: London's great social divide

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The Socialist Equality Party is standing candidates in the May 7 general election in the constituencies of Holborn and St. Pancras, London and in Glasgow Central.

David O'Sullivan is the SEP candidate for Holborn and St. Pancras.

With 84,000 households, the constituency comprises most of the London borough of Camden with the remainder lying in the constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn.

With a population of 220,000, Camden has some of the richest and also the poorest districts in London.

Hampstead and Highgate, in the north of the borough, are two of the most expensive places to live in the capital. With their gated "communities" and unbelievable wealth, they are a world away from the impoverished social housing estates further south in St. Pancras and Somers Town, Regents Park, Kilburn, Haverstock and Gospel Oak, Kentish Town and Kings Cross.

Dividing the constituency north to south is Euston Road, upon which sit the three great railway termini of north London—Euston, St. Pancras and Kings Cross. The Victorian Gothic St. Pancras station has been restored as an exclusive hotel and its upper floors transformed into 67 multi-million pound flats. The disused marshalling yards and industrial factories behind the stations are being bulldozed to make way for expensive high-rise apartment buildings.

These developments, part of an ongoing orgy of property speculation, stand in marked contrast to the impoverishment that, since the economic crash of 2008, has grown rapidly in the surrounding streets.

This may surprise visitors entering London through these luxurious refurbished stations on their way to visit the many museums, universities (Camden has the

largest full-time student population in London) and fashionable shopping streets to the south. But turn down any side street off Euston Road and within minutes large working class estates are visible, many of which still consist of the utilitarian high-density small-roomed flats constructed in the 19th century by charitable institutions.

Charities have returned again to fill the housing shortage left by the privatisation of social housing by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and the refusal of the Labour government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown to reverse the policy and of Labour councils to oppose it. Many of the scourges of 19th century London are returning through the deliberate imposition of austerity.

A measure of the poverty in Camden is shown by surveys of the 35,000 or so "Lower Super Output Areas" (LSOAs) in England and Wales. These are small statistical areas with a population of about 1,200 people. Nearly 60 of Camden's 133 LSOAs are in the bottom 30 percent of the most deprived areas in England and Wales.

In 2013, Camden saw the highest growth of malnutrition referrals of any London borough—53 cases. The majority of these cases were children, up from 13 the previous year. Some 34 percent of children in the borough live in poverty, the seventh highest rate in London. Free school meal eligibility in Camden is the highest in the country.

These figures do not express the full scale of inequality when it comes to child deprivation, which ranges from zero in Highgate to 66 percent in Regents Park.

Statistics published by the Trussell Trust charity also shatter the conception that London is the land of milk and honey. In February 2014 the Trust announced that

the number of people in London visiting food banks had increased by 394 percent in two years. In 2011-12 there were 12,839 visits to food banks in London. Just in the eight months from April 2013 to December 2013 this number rose to 63,367. In that period 24,510 children visited food banks in the capital.

In January 2013 the Trussel Trust opened three food banks in Camden alone.

The Trust described the causes of the phenomenal growth in food handouts as a “Perfect storm of benefit cuts, low wages, zero hour contract, rise in food and energy prices.”

Camden is now one of the most overcrowded places in the UK.

A quarter of households in the constituency have an income of £20,000 or less and in St. Pancras and Somers Town this figure rises to 44 percent. The average house price in the borough is £625,000 and average weekly rent is £463, nearly double elsewhere in London and four times the average in England and Wales. Unlike most of the rest of the country, property prices are now higher than pre-2008 crash levels. It is not surprising, therefore, that Camden has the highest rate of any London borough for accessing debt advice.

Camden also has the highest level of social housing in London and its residents are totally dependent on welfare assistance. A third of households need housing benefits, which the government has capped—meaning many workers and pensioners can no longer afford the extra rent. The Labour council contemplated the removal of over 2,000 residents to other parts of the country, in what would have been one of the biggest single acts of social cleansing in the capital.

A further example of the social cleansing taking place in the borough was the treatment meted out to nurses, doctors and cleaning staff who were tenants in dwellings run by the charity associated with University College London Hospital. In 2012 the tenants received letters telling them they had a new landlord who required vacant possession of their homes and was serving notices to quit.

The tenants told the local *Fitzrovia News* how the landlord “really put the frighteners on us. It was like something out of a television crime programme.”

The newspaper’s reporters were told that “almost all the tenants work for the hospital whose charitable arm has sold off their homes. The tenants were also shocked

to find that their homes were listed on web sites as ‘investments opportunities’ before they were notified of the new landlords. The flats were being marketed to international investors and even featured in a Hong Kong newspaper.”

Although life expectancy in Camden is said to be average for England and Wales, those in the most deprived areas live 11.6 years less. In nearby Church Street, once part of the constituency before boundary changes, the poorest live 17 years less than the richest.

For further details visit: www.socialequality.org.uk



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