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The stories, interviews and news behind this week's programmes

JOB CENTRE



COMMENT

UNDERCLASS OF 2004

Two decades on, **Matthew Parris** rediscovers a people in need



DOUBLE

Matthew Parris as an MP "living" on benefits in Newcastle (*main pic*), and returning 20 years later (*above*). He discovered that while the city has changed for the better, many people remain trapped by poverty

▶ Twenty years ago, when I was a newly elected Tory MP, Granada television's *World in Action* telephoned me and asked if I would be prepared to try living for a week in a deprived part of Newcastle upon Tyne on a single man's benefit.

Rashly, I said yes. It proved to be the most awkward week of my life. In a freezing maisonette in Scotswood, I eked out my £26.70. When I was not trying to make ends meet, I was being yelled at by out-of-work Geordies and attending meetings in council houses at which I was asked to explain my Tory philosophy that living on the dole was not supposed to be easy.

I failed to convince my audiences of my case, and I failed to last out the week. Short of 50p for the electricity meter, my lights went out on Saturday. The programme of my humiliation attracted the biggest audience *World in Action* had ever won.

At first I was considered (not least by Margaret Thatcher and her ministerial colleagues) to have been a mug to have tried. But in time I found that people remembered only that I did try. In retrospect, it was the beginning of my media career.

At the end of last year, the director who made that documentary invited me to repeat the experience. We would make a new one, he suggested. So we went back to the same house, and I spent a week meeting the people that I had debated with and come to know two decades before.

The social security benefits had changed, of course, and though I lived frugally and counted the cost, I did not attempt a carbon-copy experiment because what I wanted to find out was something different. What had happened to Newcastle? What had happened to Scotswood? And what had happened to me? The results and the

conclusion were — to me, anyway — fascinating, but perhaps less easy to summarise crudely than last time, when "Tory MP comes a cropper" was the obvious headline. I liked Newcastle then and I like it now, but the city is no longer the doom-laden place that it once was. I thought that Thatcherism was a bit simplistic then — I still think so — but I now believe that letting failing industry sink may be for the best, in the end.

And, more even than last time, I found myself getting caught up in the individual and very personal stories of the people that I met. Newcastle is a happier place than it was 20 years ago, but Scotswood is not. During those two decades, I fear that we may be able to observe the growth of an underclass: a community that can fail even when all around it is succeeding. ■

For the Benefit of Mr Parris: Revisited, Thursday, ITV1, 10.30pm