

## 2015 Election: Rail commuters hold key to half of marginals

### Campaign for Better Transport briefing

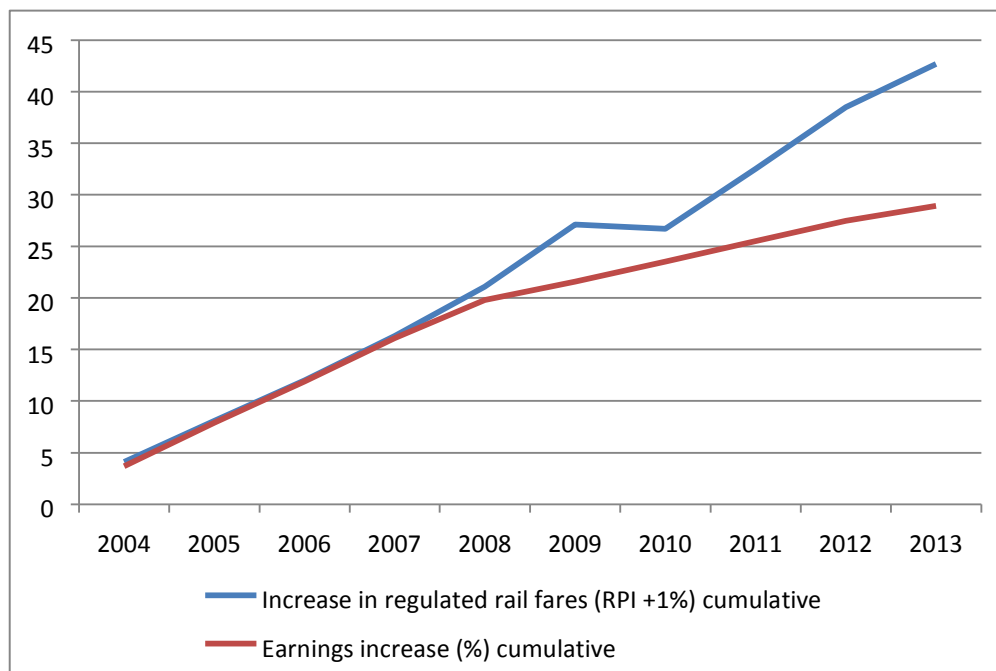
#### Summary

This briefing sets out the central role that rail commuters could have in deciding the outcome of the 2015 General Election. Over the last decade, successive Governments have followed a policy of raising fares by above inflation. This means ticket prices have gone up by around 45 per cent in 10 years. Using official data, Campaign for Better Transport has identified 74 marginal seats in England and Wales where there are large numbers of rail commuters. Many of these are in the wider south east, where commuters face annual fares of £4000-£5000. Political parties will be keen to appeal to rail commuters, with policies to end above inflation fares central to the debate.

#### Background and context

On current polling, the 2015 General Election will, even more than most, be won and lost in the marginal constituencies. Our research shows large numbers of rail commuters in half of the most closely contested seats, often outnumbering the size of the incumbent's majority. Given that the cost of living looks set to be a central issue in the election, the price of rail commuting could play an important role in the outcome.

Transport costs are the largest single monthly outgoing for the average household. But unlike energy, where responsibility (and therefore blame) for price increases is split between the energy companies, the regulator and the Government, with rail fares the Government is clearly responsible. It lets the rail franchises, regulates many fares and sets the rules for the rest. Over the last decade, successive Governments have followed a policy of increasing regulated fares by an average 1 per cent above Retail Price Index inflation (RPI), with flexibility for companies to increase them by more. This has seen average commuter season tickets increase in price by 40-50 per cent while wages have stagnated (see graph below).



Many of the rail commuter marginals are in the south east where season ticket prices to London of £4000-£5000 are now the norm. But railways are an important part of the transport mix in nearly all marginal constituencies, not just in London and the South East. Of the 160 most marginal constituencies, half contain 3 or more railways stations while only 13 have no railway station. There is no end in sight – the Government has told the rail industry that its “planning assumption” should be annual above inflation rises for the whole of the next Parliament, though Ministers have also expressed a wish to end above inflation rises as soon as possible. No party has yet announced policy proposals that would tackle the spiralling cost of using the railways.

To become the biggest party, both Labour and Conservatives would need to win or retain the majority of rail commuter marginals. The Liberal Democrats have a significant number of seats to defend. Anger over the cost of rail fares is significant and has already had a political effect.

- In the 2010 Spending Review, the Chancellor George Osborne announced plans to raise rail fares by 3 per cent above RPI for the subsequent three years. Widespread criticism meant he was subsequently forced to back down and eventually scrap the plans altogether, reverting to the policy of RPI+1 per cent.
- Pressure from campaigners, commuters and some Conservative backbenchers led to a review of fares and ticketing which reported earlier this year. The policy of increasing season tickets and other regulated fares of RPI+1 per cent remains in place, although this limited the flexibility train companies have to impose the highest fares.

## Research findings

Using official data, Campaign for Better Transport has identified 74 marginal seats in England and Wales where rail commuters stand to have a significant say in the outcome of the election.

Breakdown of the 74 rail commuter marginals:

- 49 Conservatives
- 14 Labour
- 10 Liberal Democrat
- 1 Green

Main challengers in the 74 rail commuter marginals:

- Labour are the main challenger in 46 seats, Conservatives in 18 and Liberal Democrats in 10
- Of the 49 Conservative held seats, Labour is the main challenger to the incumbent in 41
- Of the 14 Labour held seats, Conservatives are the main challenger in 12 and the Liberal Democrats in 2
- Of the 10 Liberal Democrat held seats, Conservatives are the main challenger in 7 and Labour in 4 (1 seat is a three-way contests between the main parties)

Geographical split

- 42 seats are in London and the South East, 12 in the Midlands, 10 in Yorkshire and the Humber, 4 in the North, 3 in the South West and 3 in Wales.

Notable MPs

- Two members of Labour’s shadow transport team - Mary Creagh and Lilian Greenwood
- Health Minister Paul Burstow and the Parliamentary Private Secretaries to Cabinet Ministers including Nick Clegg, George Osborne, Michael Gove, Jeremy Hunt and Patrick McLoughlin
- High profile backbenchers including Zac Goldsmith and Caroline Lucas

## Top Labour targets

Of the rail commuter marginals, Labour will target seats where it is second and the incumbent has only a small majority. Below are the top 20 seats that fall into this category:

Constituency	Majority	MP	Party	Region	Estimated rail commuters
Thurrock	92	Jackie Doyle-Price	Conservative	Eastern	4,067
Hendon	106	Matthew Offord	Conservative	London	3,878
Cardiff North	194	Jonathon Evans	Conservative	Wales	1,216
Bradford East	365	David Ward	Lib Dem	Yorkshire & Humber	4,367
Wolverhampton SW	691	Paul Uppal	Conservative	West Midlands	2,412
Brighton Pavilion	1,252	Caroline Lucas	Green	South East	11,014
Brent Central	1,345	Sarah Teather	Lib Dem	London	4,376
Bedford	1,353	Richard Fuller	Conservative	Eastern	3,064
Watford	1,425	Richard Harrington	Conservative	Eastern	4,198
Dewsbury	1,526	Simon Reeve	Conservative	Yorkshire & Humber	1,758
Pudsey	1,659	Stuart Andrew	Conservative	Yorkshire & Humber	2,090
Enfield North	1,692	Nick De Bois	Conservative	London	5,878
Hove	1,868	Mike Weatherley	Conservative	South East	3,392
Brentford and Isleworth	1,958	Mary MacLeod	Conservative	London	8,585
Hastings & Rye	1,993	Amber Rudd	Conservative	South East	2,437
Halesowen & Rowley Regis	2,023	James Morris	Conservative	West Midlands	1,434
Ipswich	2,079	Ben Gummer	Conservative	Eastern	2,375
Keighley	2,940	Kris Hopkins	Conservative	Yorkshire & Humber	2,820
Croydon Central	2,969	Gavin Barwell	Conservative	London	29,113
Worcester	2,982	Robin Walker	Conservative	West Midlands	1,971

## Top Conservative targets

The Conservatives will need to defend rail commuter marginals they already hold. They will also be targeting other rail commuter marginals where they are a close second. Below are their top targets:

Constituency	Majority	MP	Party	Region	Estimated rail commuters
Hamstead & Kilburn	42	Glenda Jackson	Labour	London	8,800
Bolton West	92	Julie Hilling	Labour	North West	2,285
Solihull	175	Lorely Burt	Lib Dem	West Midlands	2,009
Southampton Itchen	192	John Denham	Labour	South East	3,448
Wirral South	531	Alison McGovern	Labour	North West	1,987
Birmingham Edgbaston	1,274	Gisela Stuart	Labour	West Midlands	3,159
Halifax	1,472	Linda Riordan	Labour	Yorkshire & Humber	1,642
Sutton and Cheam	1,608	Paul Burstow	Lib Dem	London	9,170
Wakefield	1,613	Mary Creagh	Labour	Yorkshire & Humber	1,816
Eltham	1,663	Clive Efford	Labour	London	8,294
Walsall S	1,755	Valerie Vaz	Labour	West Midlands	1,080
Eastleigh	1,771	Mike Thornton	Lib Dem	South East	2,790
Nottingham S	1,772	Lilian Greenwood	Labour	East Midlands	2,057
Luton South	2,329	Gavin Shaker	Labour	Eastern	3,288
Chippenham	2,470	Duncan Hames	Lib Dem	South West	1,125
Tooting	2,525	Sadiq Khan	Labour	London	10,902
Eastborne	3,435	Stephen Lloyd	Lib Dem	South East	3,581

## Liberal Democrat targets

The Liberal Democrats will be looking to defend the rail commuter marginals they already hold (identified above) and to target a number of seats where they are a close second. Their top targets are:

Constituency	Majority	MP	Party	Region	Estimated rail commuters
Sheffield Central	165	Paul Blomfield	Labour	Yorkshire & Humber	3,860
Rochdale	889	Simon Danczuk	Labour	North West	1,085
Harrogate & Knaresborough	1,039	Andrew Jones	Conservative	Yorkshire & Humber	1,017
Watford	1,425	Richard Harrington	Conservative	Eastern	4,198
St Albans	2,300	Anne Main	Conservative	Eastern	7,080
Winchester	3,048	Steve Brine	Conservative	South West	4,582
Ealing Central & Acton	3,716	Angie Bray	Conservative	London	4,722
Richmond Park	4,091	Zac Goldsmith	Conservative	London	13,082
Chelmsford	5,110	Simon Burns	Conservative	Eastern	10,247

## What would happen if a General Election were held tomorrow?

Successfully appealing to rail commuters in marginal constituencies could make a very big difference to the outcome of the election. If currently opinion polls were replicated in a uniform swing in the 74 rail commuter marginals, there would be the following outcome:

- Labour – 64 seats (retain all the seats currently held and gain 42)
- Conservatives – 7 seats (retain 2 seats and gain 5 seats)
- Liberal Democrats – retain 1 seat

There are still 18 months to go until the General Election and much can and will change. Given tactical voting and the emphasis that all parties will be placing on marginal constituencies, it is unlikely that these seats will follow the national picture exactly. For further information, see polling of marginal constituencies carried out by Lord Ashcroft ([March 2013](#)).

## Current policies on rail commuting ticketing

Rail commuting fares are expensive – as noted above, successive governments have promoted above inflation fares rises as a means of cutting public funding for the railways. This has had the following impacts:

- Most season tickets have risen by between 40 and 50 per cent, significantly outstripping inflation and rising 20 per cent faster than wages
- Commuter fares to London from the wider south east have seen some of the biggest increases. For example, a season ticket from Ashford International to London has risen by over £2000 since 2003
- There have also been big increases outside the South East. From January 2013, commuters travelling between Worcester and Birmingham Moor Street pay £1240 for a season ticket compared with £816 in 2003. This is an increase of £424 or 52 per cent
- Fares increases have not always been matched with improvements in passenger experience. Woking has seen fares to London increase by 41 per cent, making them £848 more expensive than in 2003. The Woking to London Waterloo journey is consistently recognised as one of the most congested on the network, yet investment in longer or more frequent trains appears to be some way off
- Research by [Passenger Focus](#) showed that South East commuters pay around a third more than the European average

The Government argues that with massive investment going into the railways, passengers need to contribute more to the costs. But rail investment doesn't just benefit passengers – wider benefits, like taking traffic off the roads, need to be considered. Contrary to assertions by some, not all rail commuters are well off – Campaign for Better Transport has testimony from some who are facing real hardship from continued season ticket increases.

### Examples of London commuter season ticket costs 2003 – 2014

City	2003 season ticket	2014 season ticket	£ increase	% increase
Cambridge	£3,040	£4,536	£1,494	45%
Chelmsford	£2,400	£3,640	£1,240	48%
Colchester	£2,920	£4,680	£1,760	56%
Eastbourne	£2,720	£4,432	£1,712	58%
Luton	£2,480	£3,832	£1,352	50%
Milton Keynes	£3,104	£4,772	£1,668	49%
Reading	£2,664	£4,088	£1,424	49%
St Albans	£2,080	£3,208	£1,128	50%
Stevenage	£2,560	£3,432	£872	30%
Woking	£2,048	£2,980	£932	41%

### Research methodology

The list of rail commuter marginal was arrived at by combining all seats in England and Wales which changed hands at the 2010 General Election with any additional seats which can now be considered marginal, with the incumbent having a majority of under 1900. From this, constituencies with over 1,000 daily commuters were identified using season ticket entry statistics from the Office of the Rail Regulator.

### Conclusions

Given the electoral arithmetic, political parties will want to present policies to appeal to rail commuters. At the centre will be the issue of whether above-inflation rises will continue indefinitely. With further above inflation rises due in January and again in 2015, the pressure will be on the politicians of all parties to end above inflation rises. Other policies, such as introducing season tickets for part time workers and rolling out smartcards like the London Oystercard, will help, but above inflation rises will remain the central issue and could play an important role in the election.

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Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

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