

Britain at political crossroads: study

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The National Centre for Social Research today released its latest British Social Attitudes report, its landmark study of the public's attitudes and values, published annually for almost thirty years.

This year's report delivers the public's verdict after thirteen years of Labour rule. It shows a nation at a political crossroads. On the one hand attitudes on welfare have hardened to the right. On the other, many think there were marked improvements in health and education under Labour, creating potential resistance to reform or cuts in these areas.

A shift to the right in attitudes towards welfare

The public remains concerned about the gap between rich and poor. Yet concern about [inequality](#) isn't matched by support for welfare and redistribution. In fact, attitudes to welfare are even tougher than when Margaret Thatcher left office twenty years ago. Attempts to reform the benefit system chime with the public mood.

- The public is now less sympathetic towards benefit claimants than at the end of the Thatcher era. In 1991, well over half (58%) thought the government should spend more money on benefits: this has halved to only a quarter (27%) by 2009.
- The public also has concerns about redistributing income from the better off to the less well off; only one third (36%) think the state should do this, down from a half (51%) in 1989.

- This is despite the fact that 78% think the gap between those with high and a low income is too large, up from 73% in 2004. More than half (54%) now support an increase in the [minimum wage](#).
- People think the chief executive of a large national company should earn only six times more than an unskilled factory worker. This is far less than the 20:1 ratio suggested by the Hutton report.

Recognition for improved health and education services

Voters may have rejected Labour at the ballot box but this hides a huge increase in satisfaction with core public services over the lifetime of Labour's government. The coalition government should bear this in mind as it grapples with reform and reducing public spending in services like health and education.

- With more health service reform on the way, satisfaction with the NHS is actually at an all time high. When Labour gained power in 1997, only a third of people (34%) were satisfied with the NHS, the lowest levels since our survey began in 1983. By 2009, satisfaction had nearly doubled, and stood at two thirds (64%).
- There is also high public support for the broader curriculum introduced by Labour as well as satisfaction with the performance of secondary schools.
- In 1996, around a half (56%) thought schools taught basic skills well, rising to nearly three quarters (73%) by 2008. Nearly three quarters (72%) also say schools should be judged on how well

they teach children skills for life.

- But widespread concern remains about the effectiveness of schools in preparing young people for work, with only half (49%) thinking schools do this well.

Implementing reform with a deficit of trust

The coalition government must wrestle with these apparent contradictions at a time when Britain's level of distrust in politicians and government has never been higher and trust in the banks is at an all time low.

- Four in ten (40%) "almost never" trust British governments of any party to put the national interest first, up from the previous all time high of 34% (2006) – and around four times as high as we found during the late 1980s (11% in 1987).
- The banking crisis has resulted in a catastrophic falling away in public confidence in the banks. In 1983, 90% believed banks were well run and their reputation for being well managed was higher than many other institutions including the police and the BBC. Now just 19% think banks are well run and their reputation for good management is far below that of either the press (39%) or trade unions (35%).

Penny Young, Chief Executive of the National Centre for Social Research, comments: "This year's British Social Attitudes results highlight the scale of the task at hand for the coalition government as it cuts the deficit and drives through its programme of reform. The survey points to a nation at political crossroads between left and right: it is perhaps little surprise that the election resulted in a coalition. On the one

hand we are seeing a hardening of attitudes towards welfare reform whilst on the other there is strong support for investment in health and education.

'Record levels of investment under Labour appear to have paid off in terms of public satisfaction – particularly on health, where satisfaction levels are now at all time high. The coalition will need to tread carefully to avoid a backlash against the potential impact of reform or failure to invest. In contrast, changing attitudes to welfare are in tune with the government, suggesting the public will back benefit reform.

'It is twenty years since Margaret Thatcher left office, but public opinion is far closer now to many of her core beliefs than it was then. Our findings show that attitudes have hardened over the last two decade, and are more in favour of cutting benefits and against taxing the better off disproportionately. But just as Blair and Brown incorporated key concepts of Thatcherism into New Labour's ideology, Britain today is sending a clear message to Cameron and Clegg that it values the investment Labour has made in this country's core public services.

'Perhaps the biggest problem for the government is how to lead the British public away from recession and implement reform when trust in politicians, government and banks is at an all time low. It will need to convince a sceptical electorate that it is working with their best interests at heart. Emphasising the fairness of any cuts while protecting the tangible outcomes of increased spending will be crucial. The public may want the government to spend less but they don't want to lose the gains of record investment."

Provided by SAGE Publications

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