



Public attitudes to welfare and public services in the midst of the pandemic: British Social Attitudes Survey 2021

To: All Chief Executives, Senior Policy Officers Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Introduction

A mainstay on our television screens on any election night, Professor John Curtice - Senior Research Fellow at NatCen Social Research and Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde - delivered a presentation on whether the pandemic has 'reset' attitudes to public services at the APSE Annual Seminar in Birmingham. This briefing therefore provides an oversight into the research findings and what they could mean for local authorities.

NatCen Social Research

Each year NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey asks around 3,000 people what it's like to live in Britain and what they think about how Britain is run. Regarded as the 'gold standard' of surveys, Professor Curtice joined the APSE Annual Seminar via video link to look at the extent to which attitudes might have shifted on account of the pandemic and perhaps creating a different climate of opinion for policy makers than the one that existed pre-March 2020.

The survey posed two very broad questions:

1. Are the public ready to embrace a larger state – or do they want things to return to 'normal?'
2. Has the unveiling of inequalities and the exposure to economic uncertainty during the pandemic resulted in increased support for welfare provision – or do people still interpret the world through a pre-pandemic lens?

In relation to question one, Professor Curtice was keen to point out that because the survey was looking at the long-term, it wasn't looking at particular policies, namely because the debate about particular policies moves on from one year to the other. The power of the state has grown considerably during the pandemic and it has also spent a significant amount of money. Do we want, therefore, a larger state in the longer term?

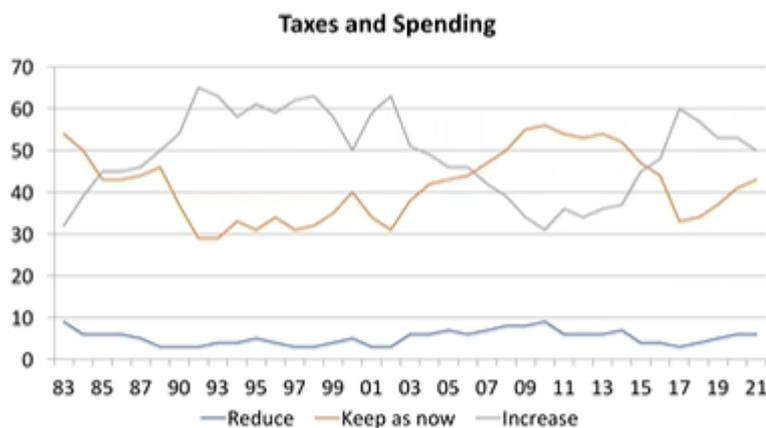
In relation to question two, Professor Curtice noted that the pandemic has led to a lot of discussion about the degree of inequality in British society. This has arisen largely due to the highest morbidity from the virus occurring in areas of higher deprivation, but also because those who thought they had secure middle-class jobs are now feeling a great deal more vulnerable. Question two therefore asks whether that exposure to economic uncertainty, together with this greater heightened awareness of inequality has meant we now think the welfare state should be doing more.

Taxes and spending: A classic thermostat?

When it came to taxes and spending, the public were asked three questions:

1. Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits
2. Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now
3. Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits

A Classic Thermostat?



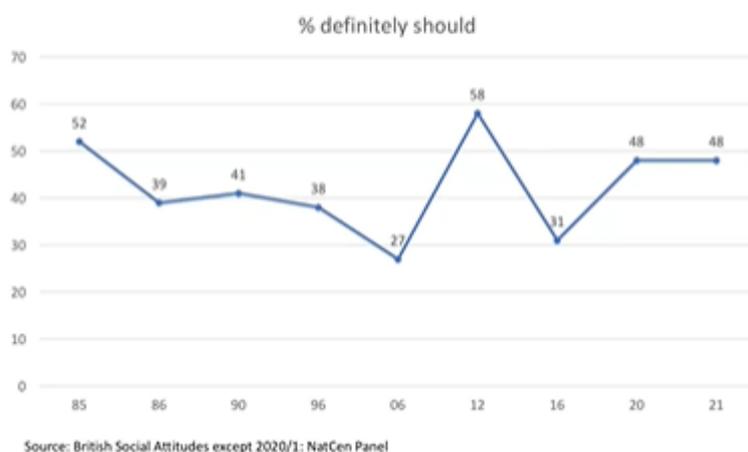
Source: British Social Attitudes except 2020/1: NatCen Panel

As the graph above shows, the public tend to react thermostatically to changes in levels of public spending. In other words, and contrary to what many politicians think, people do not have fixed views on the size of the state. In the words of Professor Curtice, "It's an issue on which it is impossible for a politician to win." That said, though there has been no real dramatic change in light of the pandemic, it is still noticeable that, as of 2021, that a plurality of the public wish to see increased taxes and a boost in public spending.

When breaking down the most recent readings, Professor Curtice noted that these could be interpreted in two ways. One is that people have reset their thermostat and we are therefore living in a different public mood. Alternatively, it may be that the public have not 'adjusted their set' and thus not really taken on board what has happened during the pandemic.

Do we think Government should help industry to grow?

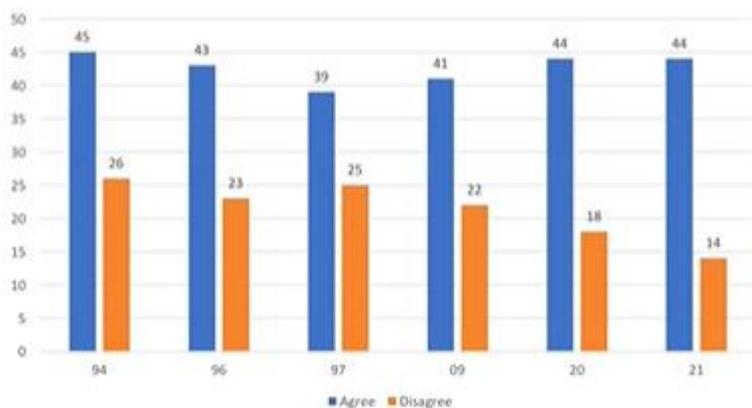
Govt Should Help Industry Grow



When asked whether central government should definitely help industry grow, Professor Curtice noted that the percentage of those who answered yes was a bit higher now than in 80s and 90s, but not by much, and not as much than at height of recession. However, this has grown 17% points since question was posed in 2016, and with the exception of 2012 (in the wake of the financial crash), is the highest since 1985. Likewise, when asked whether the government should provide jobs for all, the percentage of those that responded yes was higher than in 2016, and the highest it has been for most of the twenty-first century.

Major public services should be state owned?

Major public services/industries should be state owned



Source: British Social Attitudes except 2020/1: NatGen Panel

Support for having major public service industries being in state ownership is rather more popular than many people perhaps have appreciated and, despite the Labour Party's difficulties in recent elections on this specific policy area, it is actually not an unpopular point of view. The pandemic certainly hasn't undermined that and, if anything, the proportion of people who disagree is now a little bit lower than it was.

Who should pay for social care?

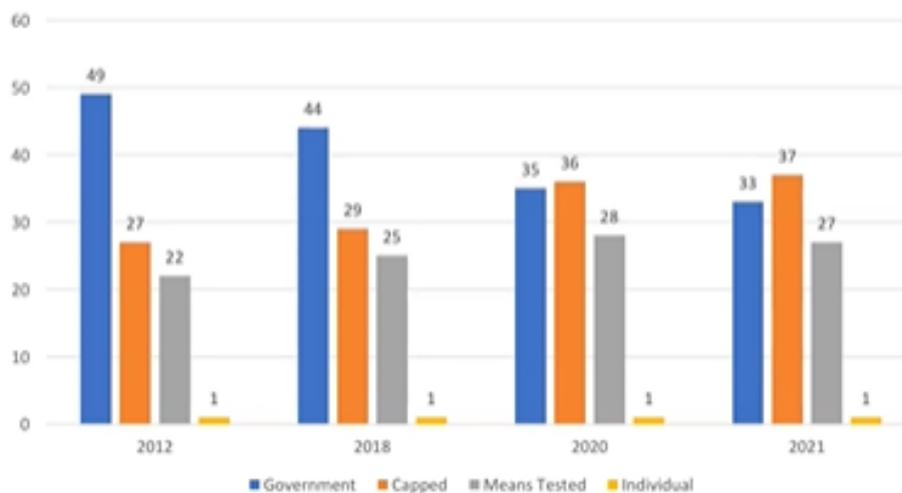
When looking at the size of the state – this area seemed a particularly salient one. Debate on the extent to which social care should be funded by government or should be funded by the individual has been going on for some time. This is an area where public policy in England has diverged from that of Scotland as well as, in some respects, the other devolved administrations.

The BSA Survey posed the question: Who do you think should pay for social care for people who cannot look after themselves because of illness, disability or old age?

1. The government (In Wales the answer referred to Welsh Govt and in Scotland etc.)
2. The individual
3. The individual should pay what they can and the govt should pay the rest (roughly in line with current policy position in England – means tested until assets whittled away)

- The individual should pay what they can up to a capped amount and the govt should pay the rest (The position England is moving to this to some degree (proposal outlined in Dilnot Report)).

Pay for Social Care?



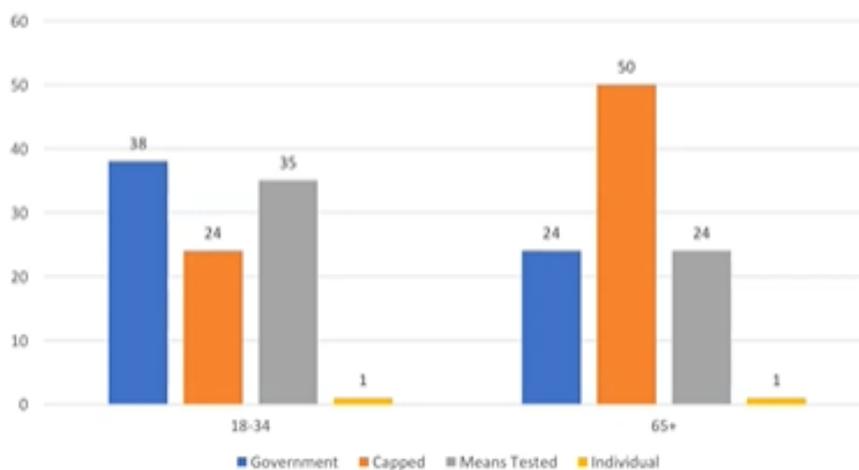
Source: British Social Attitudes except 2020/1; NatCen Panel

Professor Curtice finds that this question raises a really interesting scenario; now you might have thought that one of the reactions to the experience of the social care sector during the pandemic and, particularly in the first wave, the high level of morbidity that it suffered is that support for the government taking over would have grown. Indeed, in Scotland, at public policy level, that is the reaction; moving towards a National Care Service and where it looks as though the provision is going to be much more from the state and not just simply the funding; which is already greater north of the border. However, this is not how the public have reacted. In both of the surveys conducted during the pandemic (2020 and 2021), support for government funding all of the cost of social care is now lower than it was in the relatively recent past. What has become more popular is capping. It's not that the current system of means testing is particularly popular – it is only around one in four, and it's clear from the survey very few think it is just something wholly for individual responsibility, but it's interesting to know that capping – where England is moving – is relatively popular.

Perhaps the interesting thing about capping is that it hits the sweet spot of the tension between two instincts - on the one hand protecting the ability of people to be able to pass on some of their inheritance if they've worked hard back to their

family but on the other hand ensuring the state (and by extension the taxpayer) aren't liable for too much of the cost.

Age Differences



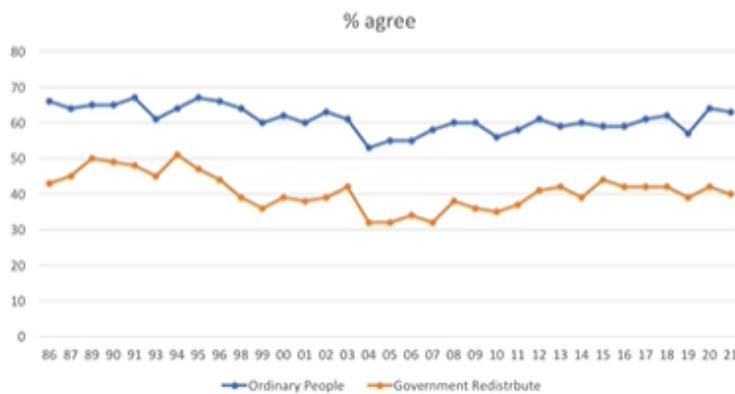
Source: NatCen Panel 2021

When broken down by age, it's notable how much capping is not popular amongst younger voters. Younger voters are somewhat more likely to say means test but they're actually also more likely to say that the government should be paying, so here, again, the situation is perhaps a little more complicated than we might have anticipated. Arguably, the pandemic hasn't had the effect that we might have anticipated on the public's approach to social care funding. On the other hand, the research has given some indication as to why capping was perhaps an obvious direction for Prime Minister Boris Johnson's administration to go.

Attitudes towards inequality

The blue line in the graph below shows you whether or not the public believe that ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth. This is something that has tended to be very stable over time ever since the mid-1980s; around 60% have tended to agree with this proposition although it's tended to be a little bit lower in the last 20 years or so than it was before that. The fact the blue line has risen these past two years shows that this may be a sign and, some of the survey's other measures suggest this, that there is a higher level of recognition of inequality in British society.

Attitudes towards inequality



Source: British Social Attitudes except 2020/1: NatCen Panel. Full text: Ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth (94 data interpolated between 93 & 95) & Government should redistribute income from the better-off to the less well-off.

That said, Professor Curtice did acknowledge the shift towards more liberal attitudes that were in evidence before the pandemic are still in place. Thus, it's not that the pandemic has necessarily changed attitudes but rather the pandemic occurred at a time when we were already thinking that perhaps we should be doing something more about welfare for those of the working age.

Summary

Professor Curtice maintained there are three main takeaways from this survey:

1. The public have not reacted against the increase in public spending but it's not certain yet whether they have reset their desired level of government intervention or not.
2. A capped social care funding regime is now more popular than a wholly government funded one (and especially among older voters).
3. We have become more liberal in our attitudes towards those of working age – but this trend predated the pandemic.

Study Design

2,413 people interviewed (mostly) online in July 2020 and 2,217 again in June 2021. All has previously responded to 2018 and 2019 British social Attitude surveys. BSA is an annual high quality random probability face to face survey that has asked the same survey questions about a range of political topics since its foundation in 1983. By asking these questions we can assess whether the pandemic has 'reset' attitudes

and values. Funded by UK Research Innovation and Economic and Social Research Council as part of COVID response.

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[The full recording of Professor Curtice's presentation is available to watch here.](#)