

'Public opinion' is as complex a creature as it has ever been.
There's certainly been no simple 'shift to the right'.



WHAT BRITAIN THINKS

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A GREAT DEAL of political argument and policy is justified on the basis of assumptions about what ordinary people think. References to the 'moderate' views of public opinion, the electorate, or the British people are legion in the rhetoric of the Right and play a crucial legitimating role. It is projected that there is a single or unified conservative consensus in social attitudes which holds across class and other boundaries. This claim, obviously, is often and correctly challenged by socialists. But the Left too has its own favourite images of popular beliefs - of an inherently radical working class, for example, or of an array of 'progressive forces', or - in another guise this time - the British people.

In the sense that all political phraseology and campaigning tries to *construct* a social response as much as it reflects it, there is nothing wrong with these appeals. In another sense, however, the Left shares with the Right a tendency to regard its hopes about working class opinion as already achieved realities. The danger here is that on some issues we can become distinctly 'out of touch' with what's going on.

Opinion polls are one means of tapping the broader political culture, and the 1984 report of the *British Social Attitudes* survey¹ is the first attempt since the Mass Observation studies to sift through sampled responses on, not just political and economic

policy, but views about class, race and gender.

Without entering fully into the debate about whether polling in general can be trusted, there are at least some reasons for treating this particular survey with respect. First, since it is not an *electoral* poll, there is no predictive or self-fulfilling element to cast doubt on. Second, the authors are aware of the difficulties of trying to be 'representative' in a small sample (about 1700 people). Third, it is presented as an initial poll only, requiring comparison over time and amongst different sample populations. Above all, the pollsters see it as part of their task to question the idea of a single, undifferentiated 'public opinion' and 'the man in the street'. They have tried to show how class, gender, and age differences modulate general impressions. In other words, the report is technically modest and sociologically intelligent. Its results can in no sense be definitive, but it does give a broad

indication of the main directions of social concerns.

Political attitudes

This section of the survey reviews support for some key British institutions (see Table 1), and confirms the now-standard view of trends of political allegiance. On any reading, the Labour Party faces a historical crisis. 60% of those who consider themselves to be working class do not identify with Labour, and more than one third clearly align themselves to the Tories. A significant change in allegiance has occurred especially amongst skilled workers (38% Labour, 34% Conservative), but in the unskilled working class barely half now identify with Labour, which we must suspect represents a major decline from the postwar heyday. (It might be observed hopefully, though, that these proportions are slightly *less* than the numbers amongst the working class overall which actually *voted* Tory in 1983.)

There are very low levels of commitment to all parties amongst young electors, and political participation in Britain generally is pretty low: there is a widespread sense of powerlessness, and the system seems to survive on pragmatic acquiescence.

Table 1: British Institutions²

Institution	Well run	Not Well run
Banks	85%	5%
BBC	67	22
Press	49	40
Prisons	46	41
Industry	40	47
Civil service	40	48
Local government	33	56
Trade unions	27	62
Nationalised industries	20	69

Monarchy: important 86%
Not important 11%
Should be abolished 3%

¹ *Social Attitudes: the 1984 Report* edited by Roger Jowell and Colin Airey, Gower Publishing Co Aldershot Hants.

² Derived from pp29,30.

ence rather than normative agreement. Those who mount *any* political protest of a personal or collective kind add up to one in five, and the bulk of these listed petitions as their only form of political expression.

As to the issue of nuclear weapons, the firm expectation of a third world war seems to have risen considerably (to 25%). 48% as against 38% do not think that American arsenals make Britain safer, though two thirds hold that an independent nuclear deterrent *does*. Women and

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young people are significantly more opposed to nuclear arms than are men. Remaining in Nato is a popular option at the present time. On the other major international organisation affecting Britain - the EEC - opinion remains fairly evenly divided: 42% favoured withdrawal. One rather surprising political result is that many more are for the reunification of Ireland (58%) and the withdrawal of troops (38%) than are for separation and an armed British presence.

Economic policy

Twice as many people think that unemployment rather than inflation is the central economic issue facing the country. This proportion rises to 80% in the ranks of the unskilled and unemployed. 90% support more job creation by the government, who are nevertheless not held to be responsible for the economic situation. Most of the relatively rich feel they've become relatively richer under Thatcher, whilst, unsurprisingly, the low paid think they've become poorer. Again, nearly 90% of the poll supported 'classical Keynesian' economic remedies (though one wonders about the exact framing of this question), and 72% would back some form of import controls. Indeed, as many as 44% said they would accept defence cuts in order to buoy up either industry or social services.

The figures given for those who thought that the gap between high and low incomes was too wide, and who were in favour of progressive taxation is 72:22. But there are less clear-cut issues on the economic front. 60-70% held that British workers did not work hard enough, yet paradoxically this is the same figure as reckoned that there was a serious lack of investment in industry. These views are not necessarily contradictory, but they tend to belong to different

causal stories. In concluding this section, the pollsters say: 'It seems that the Government's economic policies during the period 1979-83 commanded little public support at the end of their [first] term of office' (p62). This is clearly quite an important generalisation for the Left, though it carries with it the worrying implication that many people must vote for Margaret on 'charismatic' and traditionalist grounds rather than because of the logic of monetarism.

Social policy and education

The main results in these areas are more mixed, and in the case of education, rather less work seems to have been done in the actual polling. This confirms the essentially provisional character of the enterprise. One half of the respondents declared satisfaction with the health service (though this number goes up sharply amongst Scots, as do most indications of 'radical' attitudes). Whilst there was considerable dissatisfaction with the NHS also, this doesn't amount to a wish for reversing the postwar structure of the welfare state. Only one in ten, for example, desired a reduction in taxation *and* less social spending. Those who definitely wanted *more* taxation and *more* social spending (I suppose we could think of them as 'core' supporters of welfare) amounted to 32%. A clear minority thought that the existence of private

one half of respondents declared satisfaction with the health service

health schemes actively damaged the NHS. A parallel result in education is that most people felt a reduction in private schools would have little impact on the quality of the state sector.

A view that is shared by middle and working-class people is that the NHS has over the years benefited the poorer classes most. According to most serious analyses of the effects of the welfare state, however, this widely held view is an illusion, though an interesting one. A more adequate general perception is that real poverty in the UK is widespread and becoming endemic. On housing, a mere one in ten of council tenants are specifically *against* having the right to buy their own house, though fully three-quarters could not see themselves ever wanting or being able to do so.

More people cited large class sizes and inadequate resources as the principal factors which prevent improvement in prim-

ary schools. In the secondary area, however, discipline and vocational skills had a higher priority than more finance *per se*, or lack of crowdedness, as the preferred means of bettering education in this sector.

Social and moral values

This is the last category in the report, embracing several important issues. As indicated in Table 2, the belief that there is clear racial prejudice across British society is very strong. There is, though, some- Table 2: Racial attitudes³.

Race	prejudice exists:	90%
	has increased:	45
	will get worse:	42
	people who see themselves as biased:	35
	support anti-discrimination laws:	69
	favour less settlement by blacks:	62
	by Asians:	67

thing of a hiatus between respondents' ideas of other people's bias and their estimation of their own. The absence of a direct question linked to repatriation proposals means that it is difficult to calculate the extent of comprehensively racist opinion, but the overall results on wishing to prevent further immigration into Britain are not encouraging. (One wonders, in fact, whether this last question is a matter of racism, directly: nearly half the black people in the sample, for example, probably thought it wasn't a good idea to let further immigration proceed unregulated.) A further tempering of the impression of British racism is that 69% indicated that they supported laws *against* racial discrimination. Prejudice appears to be higher (or perhaps it's just more honestly admitted) amongst manual workers than in non-manual groups.

As to class, the figures (see Table 3) hold out little hope for the SDP's idea that it is withering away. Of course, when surveys like this use the term 'class' it tends to apply mainly to heads of families (ie, men) and can refer to a whole number of slightly different things: background, occupation, housing, status, income, and so on. So a

Table 3: Attitudes to class⁴

Class division exists:	70%
has important effects:	58
will continue to be important:	49
optimism about classlessness:	32

strict Marxist concept of class might pose rather different questions. Nevertheless, perhaps the Marxist criterion is *too* tight in some ways to catch hold of general atti-

tudes on the issue. It is interesting, therefore, that with a jumbo notion of social class, two-thirds described themselves as working class. And the higher the respondent's own class was thought to be, the less

the most equally shared event is the shopping

important class considerations became in their view of social behaviour. On the other hand, fully one-half of professional and managerial groups reckoned themselves to be working class or at least upper working class. This is perhaps an unexpected result. It would tend to confirm the appropriateness of the idea that the working class (very broadly conceived) embraces the vast majority of working people, excluding all but top capitalists. But equally, it may point to the considerable social diversity and political consciousness within the broad proletariat! Only 1% unreservedly describe themselves as upper class, and this clarity of class consciousness ties in nicely with recent sociological studies of the core capitalist and landlord fraction.⁵

A final point about class is that chapter 2 of the report supports the current orthodoxy that class is no longer an important predictor of voting behaviour. Yet from chapter 5 it can be seen that perceptions of class and its significance have not massively declined. It therefore remains an issue and experience of considerable *potential* in politics. Presumably fresh connections have to be added to longstanding ones.

The estimates of actual gender division of household labour are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Estimated domestic labour*

Activity	Mainly men	Mainly women	Shared
cleaning	3%	72%	24%
cooking	5	77	17
washing & ironing	1	89	10
money & bills	29	39	32
household repairs	82	6	10

The most equally shared event is the shopping (44%). Some indication of future expectations (though a rather inadequate one) is attempted by showing the opinions of unmarried women on who should do what in the home. Here, equal sharing in cooking, cleaning, shopping, and washing is thought desirable by, respectively, 60/61/79 and 40%. Of course, this cannot be thought to govern actual outcomes. Three-quarters supported laws against sexual

discrimination, but this liberalism does not appear to stretch to homosexuals since half the sample would deny gays access to posts of responsibility in the public and educational spheres.

Implications

These 'findings' are no more than my selections from the survey's own explorations. Fuller questions could certainly have been asked and other trends winkled out of the data collected. The issue of law and order, for example, reveals important if unsurprising attitudes. There is considerable fear of personally-directed crime and violence, though no particular escalation of riot is expected. 69% would never think of a law as unjust or harmful, and 72% believe the police are doing a fine job. Other historical indications however would suggest that both these percentages have decreased slightly in recent decades, and certainly police 'respect' for the public is thought to have diminished.⁷

This patchwork of apparently contradictory responses arises partly from the piecemeal character of all questionnaires and the way they are inevitably conducted. But it is also a feature which Gramsci in particular noted about 'common sense'. He argued that there were elements of 'good sense' in popular consciousness, but that it tended to lack overall coherence. His conclusion was that from numerous areas of personal experience came a range of rather different judgements and demands. For the most part, people would resolve any antagonisms pragmatically, in the course of their everyday lives and work. Alternatively, greater coherence can be given to popular culture and attitudes by a more general - 'philosophical' - body of thought.

Such a perspective is worth recalling in this context, for the lessons of the survey for the Left are certainly mixed. The answers on nuclear weapons and economic policy are surely encouraging. Clearly, it is easy to exaggerate the effect of Thatcherite ideology on these fronts. That is an important plus. And despite the deep reservoir of racism and sexism, - the evidence is that most people are now aware of the criticisms and alternatives to these traditional modes. Across these issues, the impact, however limited, of CND, feminism, the Left and anti-racist campaigns can be felt. And there is enough in popular experience to suggest that ruling class ideologies do not completely take hold of the ideas of subordinate groups and classes. In that sense, even widespread apathy could be considered to have a positive dimension, in

that there is a vast pool of poor and alienated people to whom the Left must urgently begin to relate.

On the other hand, there is extensive support for the central British institutions, for a distinctly disciplinarian approach to social questions, for the industrial and banking system, for keeping nuclear weapons, for gender and sexual traditionalism, and so on. It is the changing balance of these contrary pulls that will give the clearest indication of the longterm future for a re-vamped alternative socialist politics. As it is, no uncontroversial picture of a widening of conservative hegemony can be presented. The survey would not seem to endorse the view that there has been a full-scale shift to the right in popular attitudes. But the stark absence of belief in the programmatic and positive aspects of socialism and the labour movement, indicates the considerable 'negative' achievement of Thatcherism over the last decade. ^D

³Derived from pp 123-5.


⁴Derived from pp 130-2.

⁵cf John Scott *The Upper Classes* Macmillan London 1982.

⁶Derived from page 134.

⁷*British Crime Survey* Home Office Research Study No 76 1983 pp 29-30.

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