

PUBLIC SWING AWAY FROM 'TAX AND SPEND', AND TOWARDS THE RIGHT

Public support for 'tax and spend' is now at its lowest level since the early 1980s, according to the latest NatCen British Social Attitudes report. At the same time, the public has become markedly less sympathetic towards attempts to reduce inequality and help the less well-off.

After an initial slowdown, spending on services like health and education has grown markedly under a Labour government. The public, however, appear increasingly inclined to say that 'enough is enough'.

- Only two in five people (39%) now support increased taxes and spending on health and education, the lowest level since 1984 and down from 62% in 1997.
- Half (50%) now say that taxes and spending should remain as they are – the highest level since 1984.
- Nevertheless, the proportion willing to say that taxes and spending on health and education should be cut is still less than one in ten (8%).

John Curtice, author, comments:

'Labour's increased spending on health and education was an astute if delayed recognition of the public mood in the late 1990s. But now that spending has been increased, the public's thirst has been satisfied. Unless the financial crisis has persuaded the public to change its mind once again, this new mood could well prove a blessing for whichever party wins the general election.'

At the same time, public attitudes towards inequality and paying welfare benefits to the less well-off have shifted to the right since the rebranding of Labour as 'New Labour' in 1994.

- Support for redistribution from the better off to those who are less well off has dropped markedly. Fewer than two in five (38%) now think the government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off, down from half (51%) in 1994.
- A minority of one in five (21%) think unemployment benefits are too low and cause hardship, compared with over half (53%) in 1994.
- The shift to the right has occurred mainly among Labour supporters in the wake of the changed stance taken by their party. For example, since 1994, the belief that government should redistribute income has fallen among Labour supporters from two thirds (68%) to half (49%). Among Conservative supporters, in contrast, attitudes have barely shifted at all (from 26% to 24%).

John Curtice, author, comments:

'The public, including Labour supporters, no longer believe so strongly in the importance of equality and redistribution by the government. In repositioning itself ideologically, New Labour has helped ensure that British public opinion now has a more conservative character.'

The survey also finds that more people now identify themselves as Conservative supporters (32%) than say they are Labour (27%) for the first time since 1989.

ENDS

This summarises 'Thermostat or weathervane? Public reactions to spending and redistribution under New Labour' by John Curtice, in British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report, published by Sage for NatCen.

Notes to Editors

- 1 **British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report** is published on Tuesday 26th January, 2010 by SAGE, price £50.00. It is edited by Alison Park, John Curtice, Katarina Thomson, Miranda Phillips, Elizabeth Clery and Sarah Butt. SAGE is at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book234304&series=Series30&>.
- 2 The report includes two additional chapters not covered by this press release. Findings from these chapters, on religion, were released earlier in the year.
- 3 British findings are from the British Social Attitudes survey, with the exception of the chapter by Andy Ross and Amanda Sacker, which also uses data from the British Household Panel Study, and the chapter by Rossy Bailey, Elizabeth Fuller and Rachel Ormston, which also uses data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey and the Health Survey for England. Findings that compare Britain with other countries are taken from the European Social Survey (www.europeansocialsurvey.org) or the International Social Survey Programme (www.issp.org).
- 4 The British Social Attitudes survey series has been conducted annually since 1983. The 2008 survey consisted of 4,486 interviews with a representative, random sample of people in Britain.
- 5 The survey is funded by charitable and government sources. The questions in the 2008 survey were funded by the following government Departments: Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (now Business, Innovation and Skills); Children, Schools and Families; Health; Transport; and Work and Pensions. Other funders came from: the Economic and Social Research Council; the Food Standards Agency; the Gatsby Charitable Foundation; the Hera Trust; the John Templeton Foundation; the Leverhulme Trust; and NORFACE.
- 6 NatCen, Britain's largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research (www.natcen.ac.uk).

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