

Introduction

Last year's *British Social Attitudes* report saw Britain at a political crossroads. A year on, events suggest we're now a nation in trouble. Three years after the global banking crisis started we're scarcely out of recession. Turbulent financial markets, falling growth forecasts, public spending cuts and rising unemployment all loom large. Playing to an often sceptical and disengaged audience, political leaders across the spectrum trumpet fairness. They do so in the context of impassioned debate on welfare, education and housing, all areas which are facing spending cuts to tackle the deficit. Only the National Health Service remains avowedly protected. Yet despite satisfaction with the NHS riding high, as we reported last year, it too is controversially on the brink of yet more organisational change.

Amid all this, in August 2011, the rules changed on the streets of several major English cities, which experienced riots of a scale and intensity not seen for 30 years. The shocking spectacle of masked rioters in running battles with police, upturned vehicles, burning buildings and mass looting prompted a bout of national soul-searching. Declarations by some that the riots were the work of a "feral underclass", resulted in a clamour of voices in every direction. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, spoke – as he had in opposition – of a need to "mend" and "strengthen" British society.

Every year since 1983, *British Social Attitudes* has given the public a voice so as to shed light on how British society looks and feels. By providing an understanding of what people really think about the issues that affect their daily lives and how their views are changing, it has created an invaluable resource for policy makers and commentators. The findings described in this report are based on interviews carried out a few months after the 2010 election that ended 13 years of Labour government and resulted in a Conservative-Liberal Democrat administration. And so this year's report sits on a cusp: reflecting people's experiences of Britain under Labour, but also informed by their hopes, fears and expectations of life under the Coalition. No one was predicting riots at the time of the survey, but the findings still provide valuable clues as to some of the key questions now confronting our society. How do people respond to prolonged economic uncertainty? Do people think we're generally cohesive and optimistic? Or are we beset by the kind of fragmentation and pessimistic inclinations that the Prime Minister has memorably decried as "can't-do sogginess"?

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Democracy under pressure

Voter turnout figures in the 2010 general election suggest democratic engagement remains under pressure. An increase in turnout to 65 per cent, following the low points of 59 per cent in 2001 and 61 per cent in 2005, offered some comfort – especially given the loss of trust in politicians we reported last year following the MPs' expenses scandal. But the stark fact is that this was the third successive election where turnout was low: after all, it did not once fall below 70 per cent in the seven preceding decades. And the 2010 election did nothing to persuade young people to return to the ballot box, an issue that has been particularly evident since 2001. Just under a half (47 per cent) of 18–34 year olds said they voted in 2010, down from nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) in 1997 (and far lower than the rate found among older groups). As our Political engagement chapter shows, neither the internet, nor television debates between the party leaders – the innovation of the 2010 campaign – did much to engage voters beyond those already interested in politics.

Education and 'educational apartheid'

Critics across the political divide have condemned "the apartheid between our private and state schools". So our Private education chapter examines how far the values and opinions of former pupils of fee-paying schools are in any way separate, or symptomatic of a divide between society's governors, who disproportionately attended private schools, and the governed. Not only do we find that distinctions exist (for example, in people's political views and how they assess their own social status), but also that they cannot only be explained by advantages conferred by family background, educational attainment or occupation and income. So differences in schooling appear to exert their own influence over attitudes, something which also emerges in our School choice chapter. This finds the privately educated to be among the most supportive of a parent's right to choose their child's secondary school. The chapter also finds strong public support for both school choice and educational equality, suggesting little apparent recognition of the tension that exists between the two.

Delving deeper into politically disputed territory we find greater acceptance over time of a shift from state funding of higher education to tuition fees and student loans. At the same time, support for the continued expansion of university places has reached an historic low, as explored in our Higher education chapter. Most interesting, is the discovery that existing graduates are more likely to oppose the continued expansion of higher education, thus protecting the value of their investment in it, while those in manual occupations and without a university degree are more likely to want to reduce barriers to participation.

A paler shade of green

Coincidentally, the views of graduates stand out in our assessment of attitudes towards the environment; but that is because, in this instance, they have proved less susceptible to increased public scepticism regarding climate change. Willingness to make financial sacrifices to protect the environment has also declined, amid indications that growing scepticism is linked to economic concerns as well as the 'climategate' row over the evidence for global warming (as explored in the Environment chapter). Our Transport chapter examines attitudes to car use and finds an accompanying ambivalence about matching green intentions with everyday behaviour.

Growing confidence and the NHS

If anyone supposed that views about the environment were symptomatic of more general public cynicism, they would be hard-pressed to draw the same conclusion from attitudes towards the National Health Service – so popular that it's been repeatedly referred to in the media as a national religion. At a time when the government is preparing to introduce service commissioning by GP consortia, our NHS chapter shows that public satisfaction with the NHS (which stood as low as 34 per cent in 1997) is running even higher than the record 65 per cent reported a year ago, at 70 per cent. We also see that expectations about waiting times for hospital treatment have risen dramatically over 25 years: people now expect to be treated promptly. As we warned last year, politicians who expect their reforms to improve efficiency as well as patient care will find that the bar for maintaining public confidence in the NHS has been set high. From the public's perspective, it is perhaps little wonder the pathway to reform has been so fraught.

Division or cohesion?

Some of the societal divisions we identify – notably private and higher education – perhaps echo traditional class differences rather than more modern manifestations of self-interest. However, the report also focuses on other topics that touch more directly on some of the concerns raised in the context of riots and Britain's economic woes, including attitudes towards childhood, child poverty and housing.

The context for our Childhood chapter is the reports from recent years suggesting that children's well-being is not safeguarded as equitably in Britain as in many other developed countries. Somewhat reassuringly, we find that most people think Britain is a good country to grow up in and that a majority agree that most young people are responsible and well-behaved. They also think children have better educational opportunities than 10 years ago. Even so, when we ask people to compare childhood today with the past, only a minority believe that children are as well behaved or are happier nowadays.

However, the Child poverty chapter shows that people are not optimistic that Britain will improve in this respect in the next decade. Eight out of ten anticipate that child poverty will actually increase (51 per cent) or stay the same (29 per cent). Most people see tackling child poverty as an important task for government. Yet it's noticeable that the explanations people most often adopt to explain why they think British children live in poverty relate to perceived poor parenting – family breakdown and parents abusing drugs and alcohol, not wanting to work or lacking education – rather than government failings. It's perhaps here where the public's views resonate with those of David Cameron when he talks of “troubled families” and a “broken society”.



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Our Housing chapter explores the implications of an increasingly acute division, between those already on the housing ladder and those who aspire to join them but cannot afford to. Here we find some confusion between self-interest and recognising wider social needs. Not only do those who oppose new housing in their locality outnumber those who support it, but opposition is strongest in the south of England, where housing shortages are most acute.

Old certainties on the wane

As policy makers extend their search for measures that might strengthen society, old certainties are in increasingly scarce supply. Low voter turnout, falling identification with political parties and a steady decline in religious affiliations all feature. As our Religion chapter describes, as many as half the public say they do not belong to any particular religion, compared with a third only a generation or so ago in the 1980s. More specifically, the proportion who identify with the Church of England has halved from 40 to 20 per cent. And the loss of certainty isn't confined to spiritual or political matters: the increased scepticism we observe regarding threats to the environment also seems to reflect some loss of faith in science and scientists too, with over a third (37 per cent) now thinking that many claims about the environment are exaggerated.

Such shifts in people's fundamental beliefs are reflected elsewhere. Examining attitudes to social morality in England and Scotland, for example, we find there have been remarkable changes of view over time on issues such as same-sex relationships and bringing up children outside marriage; all of them moving away from traditional faith doctrines.

Politically, attitudes can always be expected to fluctuate, not least with the economic cycle. Even so, our Devolution chapter describes a decline in what might broadly be considered social democratic values in the past 10 years. A modest fall in concerns about different aspects of economic inequality is accompanied by greater acceptance of the better off using their incomes to buy better health and education. More dramatically, support for government increasing taxes and spending more on health, education and social benefits has halved from a peak of 63 per cent nine years ago, to just 31 per cent in the latest survey. Views on tax and spend are 'thermostatic' – that's to say they need to be interpreted in the content of fluctuations in actual spending levels. However, it's striking that support for 'tax and spend' policies has reduced to a level last seen in 1983 in the aftermath of recession and continuing 'stagflation' in the economy.

Each to their own?

The *British Social Attitudes* survey began almost 30 years ago just a couple of years after Britain had similarly been shaken by urban riots and recession. Changing social attitudes since then mean that political leaders looking for ways to strengthen society now will find they are on much more fragile ground with fewer obvious levers to pull. The problem it seems is more complicated than 'broken' suggests – the message from this year's study is more nuanced than that. The signs are of a more fragmented society no longer underpinned by old certainties. Our democracy is under pressure with no strong signs of recovery, picking up strongly on the plummeting levels of trust in our big institutions we reported last year. For some, this will be compounded by the fact that religious belief is on the decline.

Last year we reported that continuing concern about the gap between rich and poor wasn't matched by support for welfare and redistribution. This year that trend is confirmed. The democratic and religious ties that used to bind continue to creak. We're living in a society where a sceptical public appear unconvinced by our current collective responses to key social issues like welfare, inequality, housing or the environment. And although people do see child poverty as something for government to tackle, it is seen as rooted in poor parenting. Less engaged or willing to make sacrifices for the common good during challenging times, the British public perhaps increasingly sees it as the responsibility of the individual to get through. If that's true, what hope for the Big Society?

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