

**Embargo: 00.01 hours Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2013**

## **One Queen, Three Recessions, Five Prime Ministers: 30 years of insight into a changing Britain**

NatCen Social Research has today released its 30th British Social Attitudes Report, charting three decades of public views on British society, politics and morality.

### **RISE IN SUPPORT FOR WELFARE STATE RAISES POLITICAL STAKES**

#### **A long-term decline could be reversed**

NatCen's 30<sup>th</sup> annual report into British Social Attitudes reveals a swing in public attitudes to welfare. Following a long-term decline, the latest report shows a rise in support for state benefits. The report also finds a public that feels it has more influence over politics at a time when faith in politicians and the establishment is at a low ebb, and details how Britons have become increasingly open-minded about personal relationships and lifestyles.

#### **Welfare: Are public attitudes softening?**

Since the 1990s the British Social Attitudes survey has documented a hardening of attitudes towards welfare provision that has continued in recent years, seemingly unaffected by the tough economic climate. The latest report reveals, however, that at a time when the welfare state is undergoing major reform, there are signs of a shift in sentiment, with considerable public division on some key issues:

- **Scroungers or strivers:** The view that benefits for unemployed people are "too high and discourage work" fell from a high of 62% in 2011 to 51% in 2012.
- **Cut less, spend more:** There has been a five percentage point increase since 2011 in the view that cutting benefits "would damage too many people's lives"; close to half (47%) now hold this view. In addition, 34% of people support more spending on benefits, even if it means higher taxes, up from 28% in 2011.
- **Sympathy for the unemployed:** This report's findings reveal that hard times may also be softening people's views about unemployment. In the five years prior to the financial crisis and subsequent recession around two-thirds of people felt that the unemployed could find a job if they really wanted one. This fell from 68% in 2008 to 55% in 2009, and stood at 54% in 2012.

While we might be seeing the first signs of softening attitudes, against a 30 year backdrop, support for the benefits system remains comparatively low.

- In 1987, more than half the population (55%) supported more spending on benefits; despite the recent increase this now stands at around a third (34%).
- 81% of the public believe that large numbers of people falsely claim benefits compared with 67% in 1987.

Alison Park, Head of Society and Social Change, NatCen Social Research said: "30 years of NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey shows that the nation has become much more cynical about the welfare state and benefit recipients, but austerity seems to be beginning to soften the public mood. It's also clear that on some issues the public are very divided in their views.

"It remains to be seen what impact the coalition government's welfare reform agenda will have on public attitudes, and whether the small recent upturn in sympathy marks the beginning of a longer term trend."

## Politics: We like politics, just not politicians

With less than two years to go to the General Election and no clear front runner among the main political parties, NatCen's survey hints at an awakening of public interest in politics among some and an upturn in the belief that people can influence decision makers.

- **Awakening political interest?:** In spite of the popular perception that the public are less interested in politics now than they were in the past, levels of interest are higher now than they were in the 1980s. In 2012, just over a third (36%) had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of interest in politics, 32% had some interest and another 32% had not much or no interest at all. In 1987, the largest group (39%) were those with not much or no interest in politics, and 29% had a great deal or quite a lot of interest.
- **Power to the people:** NatCen's survey reveals a long-term upward trend in people's belief that they both understand politics and that they can influence government. The proportion saying they have "no say" in what government does fell from 71% in 1986 to 59% in 2012. And the proportion who say sometimes they "cannot really understand what is going on" in politics fell from 69% to 57%.
- **Practical politics:** In 1986, 76% of people felt they had a duty to vote, but after two decades of fairly consistent decline, this reached a low point of 56% in 2008. In the last few years, however, there has been a recovery in the public's belief in the political process with 62% of the public saying "it is everyone's duty to vote" in 2011.

But a growing feeling of empowerment hasn't translated into good news for the political classes, and public opinion about both government and politicians remains low:

- **Party first, people second:** Fewer than one in five (18%) of the population trust government to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party "just about always" or "most of the time", down from around two in five (38%) in 1987. People's opinion of individual politicians is lower still. Asked whether they trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner, 93% say "almost never" or "only some of the time".
- **Weaker party tribalism:** There has been a long-term decline in people's identification with political parties. In 1983, 87% said they supported one political party or another, compared with 76% now. And 21% now say they support no particular party, up from 8% in 1983.

British Social Attitudes demonstrates that Parliament and politicians aren't the only institutions in which the public has lost faith. The survey reveals that the public has also lost confidence in some of what were formerly thought of as our most lauded institutions:

- **Institutional atheism:** Unsurprisingly British banking has witnessed a huge loss in confidence. Around 90% of the public viewed banks as well run during the 1980s, but this has now fallen to 19%, showing no upturn from the collapse first witnessed in 2009. Opinions of the press have also taken a hit; only 27% believe the press is well run compared with 53% in 1983 and those with confidence in the running of the police has fallen from 77% to 65% over the same period.

There is one institution that is bucking this trend and that is the Royal Family:

- **For Queen and country:** In 1983, 65% said it was “very important” for Britain to continue to have a monarchy. Little more than 10 years later that figure had slumped to 32% (1994) and by 2006 was just 27%. In just six years, and before the arrival of the Prince George, it has risen back up to 45%. Only 4% think keeping the monarch is “not at all important”, while only 5% would like to see the monarchy abolished.

Penny Young, Chief Executive, NatCen Social Research: “The public is taking an increasing interest in politics, feels a greater sense of political understanding and is more determined to have its say, yet has lost faith in the institutions that are essential in a functioning democracy. Meanwhile the popularity of the most undemocratic British institution of all, the Royal Family, is on the rise.

“Even with the more recent increase in enthusiasm, the majority of the population still show little interest in politics. If politicians want to try to build public trust they should consider ways of giving the public a greater stake in the political process; British Social Attitudes tells us moves to direct democracy like referenda or the power of recall would be almost universally popular.

“New technology might hold some answers as well. The ability to debate the big issues of the day in real time and with politicians and ordinary people alike through social media may, for some people at least, lie behind this feeling of greater political influence.”

## Changing Britain: Live and let live

This loss of faith in institutions and politicians coincides with a desire for less interference in our own lives and an increasing open-mindedness about others. One of the most striking and apparently inexorable trends over the past 30 years has been a liberalisation of attitudes to personal relationships and lifestyles.

- **Acceptance of same-sex relationships:** In 1983 it would have been impossible to imagine a Conservative Prime Minister advocating same-sex marriage, but attitudes to same-sex couples have seen a quite remarkable shift and politicians have moved with the times. The view that same-sex relationships are “always wrong” peaked in 1987 at 64%, but has steadily declined since, standing at 22% now.
- **Role of marriage:** In 2012, an all-time high of 65% thought there was nothing wrong at all with sex outside marriage, compared with 42% back in 1983. People are also much less likely to see marriage as a prerequisite for having children; in 1989, 70% agreed people who want children ought to get married, compared with 42% now. However, the public still does not tolerate extra-marital affairs; eight in ten have consistently said this behaviour is wrong over the past 30 years.

**ENDS**

### For more information, contact:

Leigh Marshall, Head of Press and Public Affairs: 0207 569 8506/07828 031 850  
[leigh.marshall@natcen.ac.uk](mailto:leigh.marshall@natcen.ac.uk) or Blue Rubicon: [NatCen@bluerubicon.com](mailto:NatCen@bluerubicon.com) 0207 260 2700

NOTES TO EDITORS

- **British Social Attitudes: the 30<sup>th</sup> Report** is published on 10 September 2013 and is freely available at : [www.bsa-30.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.bsa-30.natcen.ac.uk)
- **The editors** are Alison Park, Caroline Bryson, Elizabeth Clery, John Curtice and Miranda Phillips.
- **History** –The British Social Attitudes survey has been conducted annually since 1983. Since then around 90,000 people have taken part in the survey.
- **Sample and approach** –The 2012 survey consisted of 3,248 interviews with a representative, random sample of adults in Britain. Addresses are randomly selected and visited by one of NatCen Social Research’s interviewers. After selecting one adult at the address (again at random), the interviewer carries out an hour long interview. Most questions are answered by the participant selecting an answer from a set of cards.
- **Topics** – the topics covered by the survey change from year to year, depending on the identities and interests of its funders. Some questions are asked every year, others every couple of years, and others less frequently.
- **Funding** – The survey is funded by a range of charitable and government sources, which change from year to year. Questions in the 2012 survey were funded by the following: The Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Transport, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, The King’s Fund, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Nuffield Foundation, the National Council for Palliative Care and the Hera Trust.
- The **views expressed** in this report are those of the report authors and editors alone.
- **NatCen Social Research**, Britain’s largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research ([www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk)).
- The 30<sup>th</sup> Report includes the following **chapters**:
  - **Key findings** How and why Britain’s attitudes and values are changing
  - **Personal relationships** Changing attitudes towards sex, marriage and parenthood (Alison Park and Rebecca Rhead)
  - **Government spending and welfare** Changing attitudes towards the role of the state (Nick Pearce and Eleanor Taylor)
  - **Politics** A disengaged Britain? Political interest and participation over 30 years (Lucy Lee and Penny Young)
  - **Health** How have the public’s views of the NHS changed over the last 30 years? (John Appleby and Caireen Roberts)
  - **Gender roles** An incomplete revolution? (Jacqueline Scott and Elizabeth Clery)
  - **Devolution** Identities and constitutional preferences across the UK (John Curtice, Paula Devine and Rachel Ormston)
  - **Social class** The role of class in shaping social attitudes (Anthony Heath, Mike Savage and Nicki Senior)
- Data on **NHS satisfaction** was released in March 2013 by The King’s Fund.
- The following two chapters from the 30<sup>th</sup> Report were published by NatCen earlier in 2013:
  - **Child maintenance** How much the state should require fathers to pay when families separate (Caroline Bryson, Ira Mark Ellman, Stephen McKay and Joanna Miles)
  - **Dying** Discussing and planning for end of life (Janet Shucksmith, Sarit Carlebach and Vicki Whittaker)