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ANXIETY BRITAIN: WORRIES ON CUTS AND PUBLIC SERVICES PRESENT BIG CHALLENGES FOR CAMERON'S COALITION

New data also reveals strong support for action on welfare and immigration

NatCen Social Research today released the latest British Social Attitudes report, its landmark study of how people's lives are changing and their views on how Britain is run. Drawing on three decades of data, and spanning three recessions and seven elections, the report assesses how the public is reacting to economic difficulty and the toughest cuts in public spending since the Second World War.

The findings have clear implications for the coalition government. With less than half the Parliamentary term having passed, the number of people wanting to see more public spending is already on the increase and satisfaction with the NHS has fallen for the first time in a decade.

In contrast, there is much evidence of support for the Coalition's pledges to control welfare spending and immigration. With Ed Miliband and Labour also pledging action in both areas, these will clearly become battlegrounds in any upcoming general election, and all parties will be keen to ensure they are in tune with public concern on these key issues.

Spending cuts: initial signs of concern about impact on public services

There are initial signs of concern about the impact that cuts in public spending might have on services like education and health.

- After falling for nearly a decade from a high point of 63% in 2002, the proportion of people who want to see more public spending, even if this means higher taxes, rose between 2010 and 2011, from 31% to 36%. Over half (55%) would like spending levels to stay where they are.
- More worryingly for the Coalition's plans to reform the Health Service, satisfaction with the NHS has fallen from an all time high of 70% in 2010 to 58% in 2011. This represents the first drop in NHS satisfaction levels for a decade.

Welfare: a sharp contrast to previous times of economic difficulty

Despite signs of concern about public services, the tough economic climate has not halted a long-term decline in support of government provision for the unemployed. More now than ever, our welfare system is viewed as encouraging dependence.

Indeed, support for welfare provision continues to fall as economic hardship continues. These findings are in sharp contrast with the recession of the early-1990s, which saw an increase in concern that benefit levels were too low and causing hardship.

- In 2001, 88% agreed that government should be mainly responsible for ensuring unemployed people have enough to live on; 59% think this now. The proportion thinking this about those who have retired has fallen from 62% to 52% between 2001 and 2010.
- In 1991, 26% agreed that, if benefits were less generous people would stand on their own two feet. This proportion had doubled to 52% in 2007 and now stands at 54%.

- Again, in 1991, nearly six in ten (58%) wanted to see more spending on welfare benefits. In contrast, 35% thought this at the time of the onset of recession in 2008 and only three in ten (28%) do so now.
- The previous recession of the early-1990s saw an increase in concern that benefit levels were too low and caused hardship, peaking at 55% in 1993. In contrast, at the onset of recession in 2008, 21% thought this, compared to 19% in 2011.
- Support for spending has fallen even for groups traditionally seen as the most 'deserving', and this fall has not been negated by the onset of recession. In 1998, three quarters (74%) wanted to see more spending on benefits for disabled people, compared to 63% in 2008 and 53% by 2011. This trend is not just a cyclical response to the ups and downs of economic activity; it suggests a fundamental long-term change in attitudes towards welfare and benefit recipients.

Immigration: a demand for fewer, but better

The last 15 years has seen the largest inflow of immigrants into Britain in its history. Over the same period, opposition to immigration has increased, as has concern about its economic and cultural impact.

That said, people are not opposed to migration across the board; they strongly favour migrants they see to be socially beneficial. More than anything, what sways British voters in favour of migration is the perception that migrants are highly qualified.

- A half (51%) would like to see immigration levels reduce a lot, up from 39% in 1995. A further 24% would like to see levels reduce a little.
- Over half (52%) think migrants are generally bad for Britain's economy, up from 43% in 2002. A similar proportion (48%) think migration undermines Britain's cultural life, up from 33% in 2002. The sharpest rise in concern has been among those without qualifications and with lower skills.
- The characteristics of different types of migrant, particularly their qualification levels, are strongly linked to people's attitudes towards them. For example, we asked about migrants from Eastern Europe who come to Britain to seek work. In cases where the migrants are highly skilled professionals, 59% think this is good for Britain; if they are unskilled labourers, support falls to 19%.
- People are generally positive about student migration to Britain, although this does depend on qualifications. Students with good qualifications are regarded favourably, while students with poor grades are strongly opposed. The British clearly accept the case for student migration, though only when academic standards are maintained.

Penny Young, Chief Executive of NatCen Social Research, comments:

"These findings uncover tough challenges ahead for the coalition government. Less than half way through the Parliament, there is already concern about cuts and their effect on public services. However, more encouragingly for Ministers, there is clear support for welfare and immigration reform – two areas we are already seeing emerge as key battlegrounds for the next general election."

The latest British Social Attitudes report is freely available at www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk. For more information, contact:

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NOTES TO EDITORS

- **British Social Attitudes: the 29th Report** is published on 17 September 2012 and is freely available at www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk.
- **The editors** are Alison Park, Elizabeth Clery, John Curtice, Miranda Phillips and David Utting.
- **History** –The British Social Attitudes survey has been conducted annually since 1983. Since then over 85,000 people have taken part in the survey.
- **Sample and approach** –The 2011 survey consisted of 3,311 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 2011 survey were funded by the following: the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Transport, The King's Fund, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Nuffield Foundation, Unbound Philanthropy, the Trust for London, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.
- 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).
- The 29th Report includes the following **chapters**:
 - **Introduction**
 - **Welfare** Are tough times affecting attitudes to welfare? (Elizabeth Clery)
 - **Immigration** "Fewer but better"? Public views about immigration (Robert Ford, Gareth Morrell and Anthony Heath)
 - **Constitutional reform** Constitutional reform: a recipe for restoring faith in our democracy? (John Curtice and Ben Seyd)
 - **Transport** How far will people go to tackle climate change? (Alun Humphrey and Andrew Scott)
 - **Health** Health care in Britain: is there a problem and what needs to change? (John Appleby and Lucy Lee)
 - **Work and wellbeing** Hard work? Employment, work-life balance and wellbeing in a changing economy (Sally McManus and Jane Perry)
 - **Scottish independence** The state of the Union: public opinion and the Scottish question (John Curtice and Rachel Ormston)
 - **Armed Forces** The UK's Armed Forces: public support for the troops but not their missions? (Rachael Gribble, Simon Wessely, Susan Klein, David A. Alexander, Christopher Dandeker and Nicola T. Fear)

- Data on **NHS satisfaction** was released in June 2012 by the King's Fund.