

ATTITUDES TO WELFARE POLICY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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This paper discusses recent evidence on attitudes to welfare policy in the U.K., and situates changes in attitudes in relation to changes in Government policy.

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Welfare spending is the largest single area of Government activity in western countries. Education, health, social care and social security accounted for between 50 and 70 per cent of direct state spending and averaged 25 per cent of the GDP in OECD countries (excluding Japan, USA, Canada and Switzerland) in 1981 (OECD, 1985:21). In addition, welfare related reliefs in the areas of housing, family policy and pensions account for a considerable proportion of indirect tax expenditures (OECD, 1984). Questions asked about the proper role of the State in the British Social Attitudes survey for 1986, indicate support from the mass of the population for welfare-related interventionism (Table 1).

The role of the State in welfare provision is central to political debate in the UK at present, as a result of Government enthusiasm for constraints in spending, expansion of the private sector, family rather than State-centered provision, the targeting of State spending more accurately on defined needs and the fostering of a culture of independence among the population. Consumer and producer interests are extremely active in welfare areas. Similar issues arise in some other countries (Ringen, 1987; Mishra, 1984; OECD, 1981).

In theoretical work on the development of people's ideas about the role of Government in interventionist democracies, the notion that welfare statism faces a 'crisis' of legitimacy, overload, motivation or citizen allegiance (Habermas, 1975; Douglas, 1976), has been replaced by the view that active democratic citizenship is being supplanted by a 'privatisation' of social consciousness in the snug nest of the family home. This is variously explained in terms of the growing importance of consumption in defining identity (Dunleavy and Husbands, 1985), the development of social divisions, especially on a spatial basis (Halsey, 1987), disillusion with the 'failure' of State services to deliver what people want (Saunders, 1987) and the significance of domestic division of labour in social consciousness (Pahl, 1984). Writers from both the political left and right have been concerned to develop theories of local, market or 'civil' society socialism, on the one hand, or of mixed economy of welfare or free market welfare capitalism, on the other (Keane, 1988; Harris and Seldon, 1987).

Citizen's ideas about the proper role of the State in welfare are a major item in their thinking about the Government as a whole, and of interest in relation to both the development of practical policy and for theoretical reasons. The potential for cross-national comparative work is illustrated by Coughlin (1980); Ringen (1987); Johnson (1987); and George and Wilding (1984).

Evidence from a Recent Survey

The development of welfare attitudes in the UK may usefully be discussed in the light of recent survey findings. The data given below derive from a study of attitudes to public and private provision carried out in 1985/6. This survey used a precoded questionnaire on a stratified random sample of 2000 (1341 interviews achieved). 100 discursive follow-up interviews were carried out with individuals who had substantial experience of the use of state and private services in the areas of health care and education (Papadakis and Taylor-Gooby, 1986).

The main findings from this work concern the debate about the extent to which there has been a shift in recent years away from collectivism towards privatism in popular ideology (Rose et al., 1984), and whether such sentiments are associated with the use of private services (Dunleavy and Husbands, 1985). Since my work does not provide time-series data, any conclusions must be tentative. Arguments about changes are based on (a) comparison with previous surveys using similar questions and (b) the size of the proportion of the population holding a particular pattern of attitudes, which indicates that a substantial shift away from the position indicated has not occurred.

Table 1

AREAS OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY BY VOTING INTENTION (1986, %).

	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Alliance</i>	<i>Labour</i>
It should definitely/probably be the government's responsibility to:			
Provide a job for everyone who wants one:	42	62	81
Keep prices under control:	85	88	94
Provide health care for the sick:	97	98	99
Provide a decent standard of living for the old:	97	99	98
Provide industry with the help it needs to grow:	84	88	92
Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed:	74	85	91
Reduce income differences between the rich and poor:	53	74	88
N	451	225	468

Source: Taylor-Gooby, 1987.

Table 1 shows the high level of support for the view that Government has a responsibility to meet welfare needs. At the same time, most people regard existing private services as superior to State-provided alternatives (Table 2). Nonetheless, tax-financed State welfare is highly popular and of growing popularity among the population at large, among members of the main parties and among users of private services (Table 3). This is despite the fact that official policy and policy debate among both Government and opposition parties have moved in the reverse direction, towards the diminution, rather than the expansion of State interventionism.

Table 2

PERCEPTIONS OF STATE AND PRIVATE PROVISION (% , 1986, N=1341)

<i>Perceptions About</i>	<i>Private Sector Better</i>	<i>Both Equal</i>	<i>State Sector Better</i>
<i>1. Medical Care</i>			
Aspects of the Service			
Choice of doctor:	33	60	7
Standards of treatment:	55	42	3
Enough staff:	22	67	12
Equal care for all:	50	32	19
Waiting time too long:			
Good for day-to-day care:	26	61	14
Good for <i>emergency care</i> :	17	65	18
<i>2. Education</i>			
Enough teachers:	53	40	7
Enough books and equipment:	59	38	4
Keeps parents informed:	36	59	5
Discipline adequate:	54	43	4
Encourages girls to do as well as boys:	18	71	12
Meets the needs of:- able pupils:	51	46	3
Those with learning difficulties:	45	44	11
Prepares pupils for work:	38	51	10

Source: Taylor-Gooby, 1987

The prevalence among academics, and among some sections of the mass media, of the view that State provision is becoming less popular, may be explained by two aspects of the structure of attitudes, as well as by political and prudential considerations: first,

Table 3

CHANGES IN ATTITUDE TO STATE WELFARE SPENDING BY VOTING INTENTION, 1983 AND 1986 (%)

	<i>Conservative</i>		<i>Alliance</i>		<i>Labour</i>	
	'83	'86	'83	'86	'83	'86
<i>Preferred Policy:</i>						
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits:	10	5	6	3	8	5
Keep taxes and spending at same level as now:	63	54	54	37	46	36
Increase taxes and spending:	24	36	36	55	42	55
N	664	1035	252	535	565	1072

Source : Taylor-Gooby, 1982

there is a strong moralistic disapproval of some minority groups (single parents, unemployed people) among the general population and attitudes to services for these groups, may be interpreted broadly as if they referred to the more expensive mass services used by the population at large (Golding and Middleton, 1982). Secondly, the freedom of consumers to use and of practitioners to provide private services, alongside State provision, is widely supported (Table 4).

Table 4

ATTITUDES TO PRIVATE AND STATE WELFARE BY VOTING INTENTION (1986, %)

	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Alliance</i>	<i>Labour</i>
<i>Private Medical Treatment Should Be</i>			
Abolished:	3	9	19
Allowed in private but not NHS hospitals:	38	48	53
Allowed in both:	58	40	26
<i>Producer Freedom</i>			
Percentage agreeing that:			
NHS GPs should be free to take private patients:	68	62	44
NHS dentists should be free to give private treatment:	73	66	49
<i>Selectivity</i>			
The NHS should be available only to those on low incomes:	33	26	23
<i>Private Schooling</i>			
How many private schools should there be ?			
More:	23	11	6
Same as now:	68	67	58
Fewer:	3	10	15
<i>Access To Services</i>			
Should those who can afford it be able to pay for better:			
Health care:	66	53	43
Education:	69	51	37
Pensions:	74	65	47
N	1035	535	1072

Source: Taylor-Gooby, 1987

This may be interpreted as contradicting support for State provision by those who make rigid conceptual distinctions between State and market, or State and civil society (Harris and Seldon, 1979). In fact, support for state and market provision seems to co-exist.

This general structure of attitudes to the State, seems to be relatively long-lasting (Klein, 1974; Jowell *et al.*, British Social Attitudes Survey Reports, 1984 to 1987). Similar ambivalences in attitudes are reported in work in other countries (Carter *et al.* 1973; Coughlin, R. 1980; Cooke, 1979; Hankiss *et al.* 1983; Pontinen and Uusitalo, 1986; Navarro, 1988; Lipsett and Schneider, 1983). These findings indicate that there has not been a substantial move in popular consciousness against the State as a major provider of welfare.

It is also clear that welfare attitudes, in the UK as elsewhere, are not good predictors of political support or of voting behaviour. There is sufficient ambivalence in popular attitudes and sufficient confusion in most media discussions of welfare issues, for politicians to direct attention to the imagery of State provision as concerned with disreputable minorities, or with the legitimate needs of the mass, in order to secure the approval of spending increase or restraint. It is also possible to use the ambivalence in support for State and private provision to the benefit of either form of provision. An important issue from the point of view of policy is the extent to which attitudes follow self-interest or ideology, when the direction of these two potential bases for ideas can be distinguished satisfactorily. This is difficult in the UK context, because the balance of interest of different social group in relation to State welfare is itself a matter of dispute. However, if welfare attitudes follow self-interest, and if current policies designed to expand the State-subsidised private sector in pensions, housing, social care and possibly health care at the expense of the State sector, are pursued energetically, the level of support for mass State provision in corresponding areas may decline over the next decade.

Conclusion

British social policy over the past decade has been marked by an abrupt shift to the right. The Conservative Government of Mrs. Thatcher has repeatedly announced its intention to reduce the scope of State welfare. This is justified both in order to cut back a presumed burden on 'productive' sectors of the economy, and in order to remoralize a populace whose enterprise and self-reliance are allegedly undermined by over-generous support from the welfare state.

At first sight, the programme of cutting the State and expanding private services flies in the face of public opinion. There is strong support for the big-spending universal State services which account for most of the welfare state spending. However, alongside this pattern of attitudes, there is a division between endorsement of these services and concern about provision directed at the poor. There is also strong support for the rights of both practitioners and consumers to use the private sector. This opens the way for policies that attempt to attack the welfare state not directly, but by encirclement, focusing attention on the ill-supported services for the poor, and building up the private sector by subsidies alongside the State. The recent policies of the Thatcher Government—large tax subsidies for private pensions, support for private schooling and health care, attempts to introduce further selectivity into the State sector—follow this pattern. Whether they will be successful remains to be seen.

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