

Will Covid-19 change attitudes towards the welfare state?

John Curtice

How the public might swing in favour of improved welfare provision for those of working age

Britain's welfare state has suddenly been presented with a new challenge – to keep the country afloat during the Covid-19 pandemic. The most immediate pressure is on the health service, whose ability to cope with the numbers needing hospital care is now imposing a constraint on the country's economic activity. But, after successive years of reining back the scale of welfare provision to those of working age, the government is now also providing – via the social security system – increased levels of support to those who have lost their incomes, as well as subsidising on an unprecedented scale the salaries of those in work.

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An obvious question that arises is whether and how this experience will change public attitudes towards the two arms of the welfare state: the provision of public services, such as the health service and social care; and the distribution of transfer payments to those on low incomes. Maybe voters will draw the conclusion that the Covid-19 experience has uncovered a country that lacks the resilience needed to cope with misfortune and be willing to support more generous welfare provision. Or perhaps they will prefer to forget what might prove to be a temporary interruption to the regular rhythms of economic life, and look for a return to the status quo ante.

This article assesses the possible implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for public attitudes towards the welfare state. It does so by addressing two questions.

- First, do the actions taken by the government to expand the welfare state run with the grain of public opinion, or do they represent a marked departure from what the public has hitherto been seeking? After all, the less those actions run contrary to the current public mood, the greater the likelihood they will be accepted in the short term and become embedded in the longer term.
- Second, in so far as attitudes to welfare have changed in the past, what lessons can we learn that might be relevant to how public attitudes might be affected and influenced in the longer term?

EVIDENCE

The evidence used here comes from the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA). This is a high-quality survey that has been conducted annually since 1983 by NatCen Social Research.¹ The survey is undertaken face to face with a random sample of the adult population across Great Britain. Throughout the 35 years from the first survey in 1983 to the most recent one in 2018, BSA has repeatedly asked questions about various aspects of the welfare state, including most notably the health service and various forms of social security. It thus provides us with unique insight into how public attitudes towards the welfare state have ebbed and flowed during the past four decades.

PUBLIC SERVICES

As already indicated, the term ‘welfare state’ is usually taken to encompass two different aspects of government activity: the provision of public services and the delivery of transfer payments. The provision of public services can be further divided into: services such as education and childcare, which are primarily intended to open up opportunities for parents and their children to enhance themselves and their productive potential; and the health service and social care, which are primarily aimed at those in need and thus are the parts of the welfare state on which we rely in times of difficulty.

Spending on the health service has always been popular. Every year, BSA has presented its respondents with a list of possible items of government spending, and asked them which one would be their first priority. Health

1 Curtice J, Clery E, Perry J, Phillips M and Rahim N (eds) (2019) *British Social Attitudes 36*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-36/key-findings.aspx>

has always been the most popular choice – on average running at 50 per cent across the whole period between 1983 and 2018. To that extent, at least, there has always been a widespread appetite for more. Meanwhile, there has never been much support for the idea of limiting the health service to those with lower incomes, rather than running it as a universal service. At 23 per cent, the most recently recorded level of support for that idea (in 2018) is in line with what it has been throughout the past 20 years (when it has averaged 25 per cent).

However, the popularity of more health spending has varied somewhat over time – for example, whereas in 1983 just 37 per cent picked out health as their first priority, by 1989 the figure had risen to 61 per cent. Meanwhile, more recently, health has once again been rising in the public's list of priorities. In 2011, 40 per cent felt more spending on health was the top priority. But in the most recent survey, in 2018, the figure had risen to 56 per cent – second only to the 61 per cent figure recorded in 1989. In other words, even though spending on health was protected – relatively at least – during the years of austerity following the financial crash of 2008/09, the public seems to have become increasingly concerned to see yet more spending on the NHS. Even among Conservative supporters, as many as 52 per cent say that more health spending is their top priority, only a little less than the 63 per cent of Labour identifiers who hold that view. In part, at least, the increased prioritisation of health spending appears to reflect growing dissatisfaction with the performance of the health service.² Back in 2010, as many as 70 per cent said that they were 'very' or 'quite' satisfied with the way that 'the National Health Service runs nowadays'. By 2018, the figure had slipped to 53 per cent, although this is still above any figure recorded between 1984 and 2007.

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2 Robertson R, Appleby J, Hemmings N and Evans H (2019) *Public Satisfaction with the NHS and Social Care in 2018*, The King's Fund. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/public-satisfaction-nhs-social-care-2018>

As compared with the health service, social care has long seemed to be a Cinderella service – not least because the provision made by the state is far from universal. Indeed, this position reflects the balance of public opinion. In 2018, only 44 per cent told BSA that the government should pay for social care, whereas 54 per cent said that government should only pay after the individual had contributed what they could, albeit maybe only up to a capped limit. Meanwhile, although only 26 per cent said they were satisfied with the social care provided by local authorities, only around a third (34 per cent) said they were actually dissatisfied. As many as three in 10 (31 per cent) said that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, while 9 per cent said they didn't know. At any particular point in time, many fewer people are in contact with social care services than with the NHS – and this may well mean that fewer people have a firm view on the quality of social care provision. Thus, although the Covid-19 pandemic has underlined the vulnerability of older people who need care, it has done so against the backdrop of a mood that does not seem to provide much impetus for an enhancement of what the state currently provides in terms of social care.

TRANSFER PAYMENTS

If the health service has consistently been at the top of people's spending priorities, spending on social security has regularly been at the bottom of the ladder of priorities. In the 35 years that BSA has asked its question about spending priorities, the proportion saying that more social security spending was their top choice has never been more than 7 per cent – and has not been higher than the current level of 2 per cent since Tony Blair first entered Downing Street in 1997. The transfer payment part of the welfare state is seemingly much less highly regarded.

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Yet, as in the case of public services, there are some important distinctions to be made. One is between pensioners and the rest of the population. Over half of social security spending goes to pensioners. And that proportion has increased somewhat in recent years, as the government has

sought to curb benefits for the working-age population while keeping in place the relatively generous formula that determines the annual uprate in the level of the state pension.³ It is, however, sections of the working-age population, and not pensioners, whose incomes have been primarily affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

The focus on spending on pensioners reflected what until recently appeared to be the public mood. As well as asking people their priorities for public spending in general, BSA has also regularly invited people to state what was their top priority for more spending on ‘social benefits’. Until very recently, spending on old-age pensions was the single most popular choice. Between 1983 and 1995, the relevant proportion hovered around an average of 43 per cent. But between 2000 and 2010, the figure never fell below a half (averaging 56 per cent) – though by 2014 it had returned to 44 per cent. Otherwise, the public’s empathy appeared to be focussed on disabled people (on average between 1983 and 2014, 23 per cent picked benefits for this group) and children (14 per cent). In contrast, benefits for unemployed people, which were selected on average by 16 per cent during the 1980s (when unemployment was relatively high), fell sharply down people’s list of priorities during New Labour’s time in office, with just 4 per cent regarding them as their top priority.

However, support for prioritising pensioners now seems to have waned, such that it is no longer clearly the single most popular choice for spending. In the 2018 BSA, the 32 per cent who selected retirement pensions was matched for the first time by the 33 per cent who chose benefits for disabled people. Meanwhile, some of the decline in support for more spending on benefits for unemployed people has been reversed, with 7 per cent now picking this option. It appears as though the public may have noticed the relatively favourable position enjoyed by pensioners in recent years – and switched their priorities accordingly.

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3 Gardiner L (2019) *The Shifting Shape of Social Security*, Resolution Foundation. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2019/11/The-shifting-shape-of-social-security.pdf>; Office for Budget Responsibility (2018) *An OBR Guide to Welfare Spending*, <https://obr.uk/forecasts-in-depth/brief-guides-and-explainers/an-obr-guide-to-welfare-spending>

These figures, however, simply give us an indication of the relative priority that the public gives to different social security benefits. Given that benefits for unemployed people have never been particularly popular, there is a risk that any change in attitude towards such benefits may fail to reveal itself in the responses to a question about the top priority for more spending. However, in some years, BSA respondents have been asked whether spending on benefits for unemployed people should be increased, reduced or stay the same, while also being asked separately what they think should happen to spending on benefits for retired people (see table 1).

The top half of table 1 confirms that, while still relatively popular, support for more spending on benefits for retired people fell markedly during the period from 1998 to 2017. As recently as 2008, there was still a near consensus on the desirability of more spending on benefits for retired people, with 72 per cent backing the idea. More recently, the figure has fallen to below a half. More importantly, however, the second half of the table shows that there has been a marked change in attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people. Between 1998 and 2008, there was a marked increase – from just over a third (35 per cent) to over a half (54 per cent) – in the proportion who believed that spending on benefits for unemployed people should be reduced. More recently, however, that increase has been almost wholly reversed.

However, the apparent change in attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people is even clearer in table 2, which shows how people have responded when in every year of the BSA survey they have been asked whether benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship or are too high and discourage people from finding a job. When the Conservatives were in power in the 1980s and 1990s, the predominant view was that benefits were too low, with typically around half of people expressing that view. But as soon as New Labour took over the reins of office in 1997, the balance of opinion soon tilted in the opposite direction – and remained that way until our most recent survey, when those who thought that payments were too high (39 per cent) now only slightly outnumbered the proportion who felt they were too low (35 per cent).

In part, these changes in attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people could be said to reflect trends in the level of unemployment – and that people were more generous in their attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people in the 1980s, when unemployment was high, than

Table 1. Attitudes towards spending on (a) benefits for retired people and (b) benefits for unemployed people, 1998–2017

Benefits for retired people									
	1998	1999	2002	2004	2006	2008	2011	2013	2017
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Spend more	71	70	73	73	72	72	57	48	47
Same as now	24	25	23	23	24	24	37	42	42
Spend less	2	3	2	2	2	2	3	7	8
Benefits for unemployed people									
	1998	1999	2002	2004	2006	2008	2011	2013	2017
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Spend more	22	24	21	15	16	14	15	15	20
Same as now	40	41	39	39	36	29	32	35	41
Spend less	35	32	36	44	45	54	51	49	37

Source: *British Social Attitudes survey*

they were in the first two decades of the 21st century when unemployment was relatively low (and largely remained so despite the financial crash).⁴ However, the sharpness and suddenness of the change in the balance of opinion following the change of government in 1997 suggest that this is not a sufficient explanation. Indeed, it has previously been demonstrated that the change of attitude occurred most heavily among those who identified as Labour supporters – a pattern that suggested the advent of a Labour government that, in contrast to the party's traditional outlook, was keen to reduce the welfare bill (and more broadly was seemingly less concerned about inequality) had a particular impact on the views of those who supported the party.⁵ This suggests that how parties position themselves on welfare can influence public attitudes.

4 Office for National Statistics (2020) 'Time series related to unemployment'. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment#timeseries>

5 Curtice J (2010) 'Thermostat or weathervane? Public reactions to spending and redistribution under New Labour' in Park A, Curtice J, Thomson K, Phillips M, Clery E and Butt S (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 26th report*, Sage.

Table 2. Attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people, 1983–2018

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Too low	46	49	44	44	51	52	50	53	55	53	51	
Too high	35	28	34	33	29	27	29	27	24	24	30	
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Too low	48	46	29	33	40	37	29	34	23	26	23	
Too high	32	28	46	42	36	37	47	40	54	50	54	
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Too low	26	21	29	23	19	22	22	27	24	28	27	35
Too high	54	61	51	54	62	51	57	52	59	48	50	39

Note: Question: Opinions differ about the level of benefits for unemployed people. Which of these two statements comes closest to your own view? Benefits for unemployed people are *too low* and cause hardship, or, benefits for unemployed people are *too high* and discourage them from finding jobs?

Source: British Social Attitudes survey

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A similar dynamic now seems to be in evidence, albeit in reverse. The level of unemployment was still slowly falling between 2017 and 2018, in line with the trend for the previous half a dozen years or so. Voters cannot therefore be said to have been reacting to a spike in unemployment. Meanwhile, as table 3 shows, the change in the balance of attitudes towards whether benefits for unemployed people are too high or too low has been particularly marked among those who support Labour. Compared with 10 years ago, there has been a 23-percentage-point increase in the proportion of Labour supporters who say that benefits for unemployed people are too low, whereas the increase among supporters of other parties or of none has been of the order of just six to eight percentage points.

Table 3. Attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people by party identification, 2008, 2017 and 2018

	2008		2017		2018		2008–18	
	Too low	Too high	Too low	Too high	Too low	Too high	Too low	Too high
Party identification	%	%	%	%	%	%	Change in %	
Conservative	12	73	12	67	19	55	+7	-18
Labour	28	54	36	41	51	27	+23	-27
Liberal Democrat	30	53	43	31	38	27	+8	-26
None	22	58	26	49	28	40	+6	-18

Source: *British Social Attitudes survey*

Labour’s stance in recent years has, of course, been very different from the era of New Labour. The party has engaged in repeated criticism of the Conservative government’s programme of ‘austerity’, including its reductions in welfare support for those of working age. It has also criticised the implementation of the new universal credit system. If those criticisms have proven persuasive, we would expect them to be especially so among Labour supporters – and this indeed is what seems to have happened.

Moreover, this trend fits a wider pattern of research evidence, again based on BSA data, which suggests that an increased concern among voters about poverty in recent years has been particularly in evidence among Labour supporters.⁶

IMPLICATIONS

A few years ago, a sudden increase in welfare provision to those of working age would have truly cut across the grain of public opinion. But, as it happens, the past few years have witnessed something of a change in public attitudes towards aspects of the welfare state. Although the provision of benefits for retired people remains relatively popular, voters now seem to be rather more sympathetic to the position of those of working age who find themselves in need. That may make it more likely that the public will accept the cost – in terms of taxation and/or borrowing – that will be occasioned by the government's attempt to provide relief for workers during the coronavirus public health crisis. Meanwhile, it seems unlikely that there will be much opposition to the inevitable increase in health service spending that will be occasioned by Covid-19 in the short run at least, though whether it will help bring about a change in the funding of social care is less clear.

But the more interesting question, of course, is whether the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic will have a longer-term impact on attitudes towards the welfare state. Might we see a further reversal of the critical attitude towards benefits for those of working age that was until recently clearly in evidence? Might there be an expectation that the health service should be made more resilient by running with more (but costly) spare capacity? And might such a change of outlook prove advantageous to Labour as the party that is most strongly associated with the welfare state?

Perhaps. But the crucial lesson of 35 years of BSA data is that politics matters. Voters followed Labour's lead in becoming more critical of welfare at the turn of the century, and now appear to have swung back again somewhat in the wake of the party's attacks on austerity. That suggests that an opportunity will indeed open up for the party to create a narrative that

6 Clery E and Dangerfield P (2019) 'Poverty and inequality: have attitudes moved in line with official trends or political and media discourse?' in Curtice J, Clery E, Perry J, Phillips M and Rahim N (eds) *British Social Attitudes 36*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-36/poverty-and-inequality.aspx>

persuades voters that it should be given the task of running an enhanced welfare state in post-Covid-19 Britain. But it also means that, even though it might currently find itself in an unfamiliar policy position in expanding the welfare state, it is also open to the Conservative party to develop and secure support for its story as to how the welfare state should be run in future. After all, this was already a Conservative government that was inclined to be more interventionist than the governments of Thatcher, Major and Cameron ever were – and perhaps it might yet prove capable of framing and matching a more interventionist public mood on welfare once the pandemic is over.

John Curtice is a professor of politics at Strathclyde University, and senior research fellow at NatCen Social Research and the UK in a Changing Europe.