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Press Release:

IN IT TOGETHER OR JUST FOR OURSELVES?

Government doesn't have all the answers and people must take more responsibility for themselves - opportunities and challenges for the Big Society revealed in latest study

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, published annually for almost 30 years.

This year's report arrives, like the first survey of 1983, in the wake of riots and recession – with public spending cuts and rising unemployment again causing concern. Interestingly, it finds the British people looking increasingly to themselves, not government, for solutions.

A belief that government doesn't have all the answers

Despite widespread concern about economic disparity, the public do not appear to believe that government redistribution is the way forward. Furthermore, there is an increasing belief in the importance of individual responsibility.

- While 75 per cent agree that the income gap between rich and poor is too large, only just over a third (35%) believe government should redistribute more to solve the problem.
- There is continued concern that unemployment benefits are too high and that they discourage the unemployed from finding jobs – over half (54 per cent) agree with this sentiment, up from 35 per cent in 1983.
- Although people see child poverty as an issue that government must tackle, 63 per cent believe that parents who “don't want to work” are a reason why some children live in poverty.

Common interest or self interest?

While an emphasis on individual responsibility chimes with Big Society rhetoric, there is not yet much evidence of common interest. Resistance to new housing (particularly where it is most needed) is strong, opposition to private services is in decline and people are increasingly reluctant to make personal financial sacrifices to protect the environment.

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- Despite widespread acknowledgement of housing shortages, 45 per cent oppose new development in their area. Opposition is highest where shortages are most acute, specifically the South East (50 per cent) and outer London (58 per cent).
- After hitting a peak of 63 per cent just nine years ago, support for tax increases to spend more on public services such as health care and education has dropped to 31 per cent in the latest survey.
- The British public is increasingly at ease with the idea of higher earners buying private health care. While 38 per cent thought this “wrong” in 1999, the figure has dropped to 24 per cent in the latest survey. There is a similar trend for education.
- Since 2000 the number of people prepared to pay much higher prices to safeguard the environment has fallen, from 43 to 26 per cent. So too has the proportion willing to pay much higher taxes to protect the environment, from 31 to 22 per cent.

Democracy under pressure

Politicians looking to use their influence to strengthen society may find their efforts frustrated by an increasingly uninterested electorate. Despite perceptions of a “change election” and innovations aimed at increased voter engagement, turnout in 2010 was only 65 per cent.

- Televised debates and online engagement by all parties failed to reach beyond those already interested in politics. Only 26 per cent of those with little interest in politics watched, compared with 74 per cent of the politically interested.
- Only 47 per cent of 18-34 year olds say they voted in 2010, little different to the proportion who voted in 2005 or 2001 (and far lower than their 73 per cent turnout in 1997).

Penny Young, Chief Executive of the National Centre for Social Research, comments:

“In a time of economic austerity and social unrest, the big question coming out of this year’s report is whether we really are in it together, or just in it for ourselves? An emerging sense of self-reliance may take the government some way toward its vision of a more responsible society, but an emphasis on individualism, not Big Society collectivism, may present as much of a challenge as it does an opportunity.”

Notes to Editors.

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1. **British Social Attitudes: the 28th Report** is published on 7th December 2011 and is freely available at www.natcen.ac.uk/BSA28. Hard copies can be purchased from SAGE at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/home.nav?crossRegion=eur>
2. **The editors** are Alison Park, Elizabeth Clery, John Curtice, Miranda Phillips and David Utting.
3. **History** - The British Social Attitudes survey has been conducted annually since 1983. Since then over 80,000 people have taken part in the survey.
4. **Sample and approach** - The 2010 survey consisted of 3,297 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.
5. **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.
6. **Funding** - The survey is funded by a range of charitable and government sources, which change from year to year. Questions in the 2010 survey were funded by the following government departments: the Departments of Health, Work and Pensions and Education (previously the Department for Children, Schools and Families) as well as the Departments for Business, Innovation and Skills, Communities and Local Government, and Transport. Thanks are also due to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Hera Trust.
7. The **views expressed** in this report are those of the report authors and editors alone.
8. **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).
9. The 28th Report includes the following **chapters**:
 - **Introduction**
 - **Political engagement** Bridging the gulf? Britain's democracy after the 2010 election

(John Curtice)

- **Devolution** On the road to divergence? Trends in public opinion in Scotland and England (John Curtice and Rachel Ormston)
- **Private education** Private schools and public divisions: the influence of fee-paying education on social attitudes (Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley)
- **School choice** Parental freedom to choose and educational equality (Sonia Exley)
- **Higher education** A limit to expansion? Attitudes to university funding, fees and opportunities (Anna Zimdars, Alice Sullivan and Anthony Heath)
- **Environment** Concern about climate change: a paler shade of green? (Eleanor Taylor)
- **Transport** Congested Britain? Public attitudes to car use (Eleanor Taylor)
- **Housing** Homes, planning and changing policies (Glen Bramley)
- **NHS** Taking the pulse: attitudes to the health service (Elizabeth Clery)
- **Childhood** Growing up in Britain (Elizabeth Clery)
- **Child poverty** Fewer children in poverty: is it a public priority? (Elizabeth Clery)
- **Religion** Losing faith? (Lucy Lee)

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