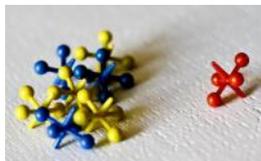


[The British Social Attitudes Survey makes for miserable reading](#) [1]

Written by [Whig](#) [2] | Thursday 8 December 2011



The 28th [British Social Attitudes Survey](#) [3] was released yesterday. Whilst it is important not to read too much into survey data they do reflect many interesting attitudes and changes in attitudes. [Commentators](#) [4] have been quick to suggest that the results show 'the public' (i.e. the respondents) are less willing to pay more taxes to support the welfare state. Unfortunately, I am not convinced that classical liberals and libertarians should be too hopeful about the results.

The data suggest that although many respondents are concerned about income inequality (74%* believe the gap between rich and poor is too large, which has slightly decreased from 82%* in 2000), they are increasingly unwilling for the state to redistribute more income in order to narrow it. Only 34%* agree that 'government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off?' with 37%* disagreeing 'these figures have not varied substantially over the past decade. The number of respondents who agree that taxes and spending on education, health and social benefits should increase has fallen to 30%* from 58%* in 1999 and it is important to note that this trend was occurring before 2008 and thus was not simply a consequence of recession. Libertarians should not be too cheered, however, as 57%* believed taxes and spending should remain the same and only 9%* thought that they should be reduced.

Given that we have highly redistributive tax policies in the UK, at least in theory, the data are rather contradictory as some of those who disagreed that government should redistribute income must at the same time, bizarrely, believe that levels of taxation should remain the same! My reading of the data suggest that the UK is not becoming more libertarian; whilst there is a growing resistance to higher taxes and more government spending, there is an overwhelming level of support for the status quo which represents a level of taxation I would deem oppressive. The only positive picture I could draw is that respondents are becoming markedly more socially liberal on issues like homosexuality. Even here, however, we must recognise that socially liberal attitudes are often embodied in illiberal laws such as equality legislation.

Respondents' attitudes to education were similarly depressing. Despite a high level of support for a 'basic right' to choose a school, 63% believed parents should send their child to the nearest state school and only 38% believed that parents who could afford to should be able to pay for private education. This shows how far the state has gone in destroying support for private education and choice.

Naturally, [The Guardian](#) [5] saw this as an opportunity to suggest that it was private schools which were responsible for 'dividing society?' whereas in reality it was the state's occupation of the education sector which has [caused the problems](#) [6] and destroyed choice and quality. The report concludes that 'there is stronger support for prioritising equality than for prioritising parental freedom?'. On a brighter note, the numbers supporting higher education tuition fees and loans have increased as 70% believed that some

students should pay fees ?depending on their circumstances? and only 16% believed that no student should pay them (down from 25% in 2007). That said, only 13% believed that all students should pay.

These broadly statist attitudes are mirrored in health and social policy. As if we needed reminding, the NHS continues to be treated as the national religion with 70% of respondents ?very? or ?quite? satisfied with the service overall and satisfaction at an all-time high, albeit plateauing. There is no question of a huge and increased level of endowment-effect support for a free-at-the-point-of-delivery service. Worryingly, 79% of respondents agreed that Central Government should be responsible for reducing child poverty. This is in spite of any clear consensus on what the levels of child poverty actually were and what might cause it.

Interestingly, the data reveal a degree of scepticism regarding environmental issues. Most importantly 50% stated that they were unwilling to pay higher taxes for environmental protection, up from 38% in 2000. It is clear that, whatever their attitudes towards climate change and the environment, many of those polled are reluctant to see the state taking action.

Whilst the BSAS might suggest that there is little support for the state to become more redistributive or ?greener?, from a classical liberal perspective I found it depressing reading. It served as a reminder of just how far government has stretched its tentacles into every aspect of social and economic life in the UK and how much support there is for it to do so. In many cases, classical liberals have not merely lost the battle, there is no battle whatsoever.

**Data quoted are for England only*

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