Key Findings

Five years of coalition government: public reactions and future consequences

2010 saw the formation of Britain's first coalition government since 1945. This summary of NatCen's 32nd British Social Attitudes report takes stock of the public's reactions to the last five years. How have the public responded to the Coalition's radical programme of public service reform and spending cuts? Has the political upheaval associated with the rise of UKIP coincided with an increase in Euroscepticism? And as we enter another general election campaign, how is the political health of the nation?

Muted reaction to reform

In spite of cuts in public spending and radical reforms to public services during the past five years, changes in public opinion across a number of areas have been limited.

- The proportion favouring more taxation and more spending on health, education and social benefits has increased by just five percentage points, from 32% in 2010 to 37% in 2014.
- Satisfaction with the NHS remains high. At 65% it is almost identical to 2009 levels.
- Public support for the principle of university tuition fees has changed little over the last decade.

A changing political landscape

The rise of UKIP does not appear to be a simple reflection of increased Euroscepticism among the British public.

- While Euroscepticism is more prevalent now than it was before the Coalition was formed, and while a majority want either to leave the EU (24%) or for its powers to be reduced (38%), this majority is no bigger now than it was before UKIP's vote began to increase in 2012.
- UKIP supporters are not straightforwardly 'right wing' – on issues of economic inequality, their views are more consistent with a left wing perspective.
- However, they are particularly suspicious of government, a mood that is not uncommon among the public as a whole: over half of us (53%) think the government does not much care "what people like me think".

Pressures on the next government

Our data point to at least three major pressures with which the next government will need to deal, whatever its colour.

- NHS funding: while most people accept the NHS faces a funding crisis, there is little public consensus about how to address it.
- The welfare bill: lack of support for more spending on welfare benefits suggests that the next government will remain under pressure to curb welfare spending.
- UK-EU relations: the current level of Euroscepticism among the public suggests that managing our relationship with the EU will continue to be challenging for any future government.

Authors

John Curtice, Research Consultant, NatCen Social Research, and Professor of Politics, University of Strathclyde
Rachel Ormston, NatCen Social Research

Five years of coalition government

The 2010 general election saw the formation of the UK's first coalition government since 1945. In the ensuing five years, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition has pursued its central goal – reducing the budget deficit that arose in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis – via a programme of tax increases, public sector reform and spending cuts. The scale of the cuts to public spending (amounting to 9.5% of overall departmental spending between 2010-11 and 2015-16 (IFS, 2015)) sparked a wave of protest groups, such as 'UK Uncut', which argue that the cuts are unnecessary and that they penalise the poor and vulnerable for the mistakes of bankers and governments. The necessity and efficacy of the Coalition's policies on public spending and public service reform have been a source of controversy throughout the last five years.

The government has also faced increasing controversy over Britain's membership of the European Union, prompted in large part by another major political development – the rising electoral fortunes of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). From 2012 onwards, UKIP mounted the most substantial independent fourth-party challenge in post-war English politics. In what was undoubtedly, at least in part, an attempt to stem this rising tide of UKIP support, the Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, promised that, if the Conservatives secured a majority in the 2015 general election, they would 'renegotiate' Britain's relationship with the EU with a view to reducing the EU's power. In 2017, a Conservative government would then hold a referendum on whether or not Britain should remain within the EU (on these renegotiated terms).

The principal aim of this, NatCen's 32nd British Social Attitudes report, is to assess how the public has reacted to the unique political and economic experiences of the last five years. Have they railed against the cuts, or have they accepted the argument – made by both the Coalition and the opposition Labour Party (Miliband, 2013) – that reductions in public spending are necessary given the economic circumstances? Is the rise of UKIP and David Cameron's promise to hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU a reflection of an increased mood of Eurosceptism among the public over the past five years? What indeed are the views of those who are now supporting UKIP? At the same time, we reflect on the political health of the nation and look at whether or not there is any evidence that the Coalition's various attempts to reengage the British public with politics have had any success.

Muted reaction to reform

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the last five years is the limited nature of the public's response to what has been an extensive and deep programme of public spending cuts since 2010. Previous research has suggested that when government turns off the public spending tap the public reacts by showing increased support for more spending (Curtice, 2010; Wlezien, 1995). Moreover, analysis

of British Social Attitudes and other data suggests that, overall, the public mood has begun to move back towards the political left since 2010 (Bartle, 2015). However, on the key issue of the appropriate balance between taxation and public spending on health, education and social benefits, the most common position remains that taxes and spending should stay at the same level as they are now. Despite the cuts in public spending of the last five years, as many as 52% still take this view. There has been no more than a marginal shift in favour of more spending – from 32% in 2010 to 37% in 2014, still far below the proportion that was of that view in the late eighties and throughout the nineties.

The response to the Coalition's policy programme appears equally muted when we look in more detail at the specific areas of welfare spending, the NHS and higher education, which are the subject of three of the papers in this year's British Social Attitudes Report.

Welfare spending

Reform of the benefits system has been central to the Coalition's programme of public service reform and spending cuts. Changes have included: the abolition of the spare-room subsidy (referred to by critics as 'the bedroom tax') for those living in social housing; the introduction of a benefit cap that means that no one can receive more in benefits than the average household income (after tax); changes to the uprating of benefits that have effectively cut the real value of many benefits; and the introduction of measures to limit migrants' access to benefits, including limiting the time that EU jobseekers can claim a number of benefits to three months.

British Social Attitudes has previously reported that public support for welfare spending has been in long-term decline (Clery, 2012). In 1989, 61% agreed that "Government should spend more money on welfare benefits". By 2009, this figure was just 27%. But since then not only have benefits been cut, but for at least three years the country continued to experience the depressing effects of the financial crisis on economic growth – both considerations that might have been expected to instigate an increase in support for welfare. Yet in 2014 support for more spending on welfare remained just 30%. So while the long-term decline in support for further welfare spending may have stopped, it has not reversed in response to either the tough economic climate or tighter government policies on benefits.

That said, some benefits are clearly more popular than others – pensions remain the public's top priority for additional government spending, in spite of the fact that the state pension has already been relatively protected during the last five years (via the government's 'triple lock', which guarantees that it will rise by a minimum of 2.5%). However, although pensions remain a top priority, the proportion that think this has fallen from 78% in 2007 to 67% now. At the other end of the scale, just 13% mention unemployment benefits as their first or second priority for additional welfare spending. Although this was a little higher than the 7% who did so in 2007, it is clear that the public remains relatively unsympathetic to spending on benefits for those of working age, including not least the unemployed. The predominant

view (shared by 52% of the public) is still that benefits for the unemployed are "too high and discourage work".

Meanwhile, the government's flagship 'benefit cap' appears popular – 73% agree that "no household should receive more in benefits than the national average income". Most also support time limits on benefits for migrant jobseekers from both within and outside the EU, although it is less clear whether or not they support the current three month limit on many benefits for EU jobseekers.

The NHS

The health budget has been protected by the Coalition from explicit cuts. However, the NHS (in England at least) has undergone radical reform. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 instigated a new structure for commissioning NHS services that created a renewed focus on competition as a way of achieving improvements in quality and efficiency.

Despite the political rows that accompanied these reforms, satisfaction with the NHS remains relatively high – reversing an initial sharp fall early in the lifetime of the Coalition (Appleby and Lee, 2012). As many as 65% now say they are satisfied "with the way in which the NHS runs nowadays", almost identical to the 64% that were of that view in 2009, and actually up five percentage points from 2013 (60%). However, a closer look at these figures reveals that much of the increase in satisfaction between 2013 and 2014 occurred among Labour party supporters – a group that we might expect to be more critical of the consequences of the current government's health policies. This suggests that the relatively high level of satisfaction recorded in 2014 may not necessarily be a straightforward vote of confidence in the performance of the NHS, but may also reflect a desire to express support for the NHS at a time when the challenges it faces, not least in respect of waiting times in A&E departments, have been widely documented by the media. A more sober assessment of the NHS emerges from the finding that the proportion who believe that the standard of the NHS has got better in the last five years has fallen from 40% in 2010 to 26% in 2014. Even so, the high level of satisfaction recorded in 2014 – the second highest level recorded since we began monitoring satisfaction back in 1983 – suggests that at the very least the Coalition's reforms have not been met with the kind of backlash in public opinion that the government's critics might have hoped for.

Higher Education

Higher education finance has been a politically charged issue ever since Labour decided to introduce tuition fees in 1998. This political controversy intensified again in the wake of the Coalition's decision in the autumn of 2010 to increase fees from just over £3,000 to a maximum of £9,000. However, in spite of the heated political debate (and the apparent impact of the decision on the Liberal Democrats' electoral support in particular), public support for the principle of fees has remained relatively stable during the last decade. Around one in ten people in England feel that all students should pay fees,

while around two thirds say that some should, figures that are little different from those that pertained in 2010 just before the new policy was announced. Even in Scotland, where upfront fees were scrapped in 2000 and all fees were subsequently abolished in 2008, around three quarters believe that at least some students should in fact pay towards their tuition costs. Meanwhile, support for another key plank of the current package of student finance – requiring students to take out loans to cover their living costs rather than paying them a grant for that purpose – actually appears to have increased since 2010. Indeed, for the first time, the proportion who believe students should be expected to take out loans (46%) now significantly outweighs the proportion who think they should not (37%).

In short, once again radical change seems to have been met with a limited response. However, there is one caveat. Despite the Coalition's assurances that the new regime would not dissuade students from less well-off backgrounds from attending university (assurances that have some basis in the statistics on entry into higher education) no fewer than 57% believe that a young person from a well-off background would be more likely than someone from a less well-off background to take up an offer of a university place. Here, at least, is one battle in the court of public opinion that the Coalition seems not to have won.

A changing political landscape

The relatively muted reaction to key elements of the Coalition's programme of reform might be thought to have been accompanied by a relatively quiet political mood (at least in England – following the intense public debate and an 85% turnout in the independence referendum of 2014, few would characterise the political mood in Scotland as quiet). Yet the rise of UKIP since 2012 has meant that nothing has been further from the truth. UKIP's original raison d'être, of course, was to campaign for Britain's exit from the European Union. We might expect that their rise in popularity would have coincided with an increased level of Euroscepticism among the British public.

Most people in Britain can, indeed, be characterised as 'Eurosceptic' in that they either want Britain to leave the EU (24%) or else to see the powers of the EU reduced (38%). However, Euroscepticism has been widespread since the late 1990s and while it appears to have increased further during the early life of the Coalition it has, if anything, declined slightly since 2012. Meanwhile, some aspects of the EU appear relatively popular – 69% feel it is "very" or "quite important" that people in Britain are free to get jobs in other European countries, for example. The rise of UKIP reflects a long-standing mood on Europe rather than the development of a new one.

Moreover, in spite of the party's apparent ability to attract votes from those who voted Conservative at the 2010 general election, UKIP's support base cannot simply be characterised as 'right wing'. It is true that UKIP supporters are both Eurosceptic and generally tough in their attitudes to immigrants. They are also relatively more socially

conservative in their attitudes to crime and punishment as well as relationships – although those UKIP supporters who agree that same sex couples should have the right to marry (48%) now outnumber those who disagree (31%). But at the same time, UKIP supporters express a level of concern about the degree of economic inequality in British society that puts them on the left on that issue. However, they are less convinced by the traditional left-wing response to such inequality – involving the government in redistributing wealth. Indeed, they are far more sceptical than the general public about government in general – they are less likely to trust government or Parliament, and more likely to feel that people like them "don't have any say about what the government does". Thus UKIP appears to have been successful in bringing together a group of voters who are not only anti-Europe and socially conservative in outlook (including not least in their attitudes to immigration), but who are also concerned about economic inequality and at the same time are deeply suspicious of government.

In fact, a level of scepticism about government and politicians is relatively widespread among the public as a whole too. As a result, this is another area where the public mood seems to have changed little in the last five years, despite the hope expressed by the Deputy Prime Minister shortly after the 2010 election that the Coalition would persuade people to put their "faith in politics once again" (Clegg, 2010). Trust in British governments of whatever party "to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party" remains low. In 2013 just 17% said that they trusted governments "just about always" or "most of the time" – little different from the figures for most (non-election) years since the turn of the century. Equally, 53% agree that "I don't think the government cares much what people like me think", a proportion that has changed little from a decade ago. Meanwhile, one undoubted casualty of the last five years is public support for the idea of having a coalition government. Just 29% now say that they prefer coalition to single-party government, well down on the 45% that were of that view in 2007, before the 2010-15 Coalition was formed.

Mind you, that does not mean that the level of public interest in politics has declined – 32% express "quite a lot" or "a great deal of interest" in politics, little different from the 29% who expressed that view as long ago as 1986. Many also continue to follow political news (with the internet yet to replace newspapers or television as the main source of such news). But the public is sceptical that politicians would take any notice if they turned this interest into action: only 16% believe that, if they made an effort to do something about an unjust law, parliament would give serious attention to their demands. As long they remain distrustful and disbelieving that politicians will act on their concerns, most people are perhaps more likely to remain a political 'spectator' than get involved in some more active way.

Pressures on the next government

Our data not only give us an indication of how the public has (and has not) reacted to the five years of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition, they also contain potential lessons for the next administration, irrespective of its partisan colour. This administration, after all, will have to deal with the legacy the last five years have left. We can identify at least three important pressures for the next government so far as public opinion is concerned.

The future of the NHS

The first involves the NHS, a service that is likely to face increasing cost pressures as a result of an ageing population as well as the tendency for the cost of new drugs and other medical interventions to outstrip general inflation. Although the public may be relatively satisfied with the service as it currently stands, people also appear to accept that it is short of money. Nearly three-quarters believe it faces either a "major" or a "severe"' funding problem. Only around a half (48%) believe the NHS "will still be paid for by taxes" and be "free to all" in ten years' time. However, there is no consensus about how the issue should be resolved. Many seem to hope that it can be tackled by making the NHS more efficient rather than by pumping more money into it.

Given a set of options as to how the service might be cut back if its budget proves inadequate in future, nearly half (48%) say that it should "stop providing treatments that are poor value for money", though whether our respondents could ever agree on what constituted "poor value for money" is perhaps a moot point. When presented with a set of options on how more money might be raised to spend on the NHS, over a quarter (27%) rejected all of the possibilities that were offered and said that the service "needs to live within its budget".

Meanwhile, only a minority in each case expressed support for any of the possible ways of increasing the NHS's budget. The most popular idea, backed by around a quarter (24%) was for a tax whose proceeds were dedicated to the NHS, rather more than the 17% who preferred to pay more tax through the existing system. Still, both options are at least more popular than introducing charges for visits to a GP or to A&E (14%), or charging people for the cost of their food and laundry while they are a hospital inpatient (12%). These possibilities still look as though they are lines that would pose severe political risk to any government that attempted to cross them.

So also, for the moment at least, would be the idea of restricting the NHS to those on lower incomes, thereby requiring most people to take out medical insurance to pay for their care. Although the level of support for going down this path is higher now than it has been at any previous stage during the last twenty years, at 32% this figure still represents only a third of the population. Conservative supporters are no keener on the idea than those who back Labour, not least perhaps because those who are most likely to be affected

– those on higher incomes – are less likely to back the idea. An NHS that is free at the point of use for all is a principle for which support is to be found across the political spectrum – though that does not necessarily mean that it is a principle that it will be easy for the next government to keep on delivering.

Keeping the welfare bill down

One topic on which Conservative and Labour supporters are not entirely in agreement, and certainly are rather less so now than they were five years ago, is welfare. On the question of whether the government should spend more on welfare benefits in general, or on the unemployed in particular, the difference between the views of Labour and Conservative supporters has widened. Even so, that does not necessarily mean that a Labour led administration is going to find itself under pressure to reverse the broad thrust of the Coalition's attempts to reduce spending on welfare for those of working age. For not even Labour supporters are particularly sympathetic to the plight of the unemployed or to calls for more welfare spending. Around a half (50%) agree that "around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted to", while rather less than half (44%) agree that "the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor". Over two-thirds of Labour supporters back the 'benefit cap', under which benefit claimants cannot receive more than the average household income. At the same time, Labour supporters largely share in the consensus that the priorities for more spending are retirement pensions (61%) and benefits for people with disabilities (62%) rather than benefits for single parents (20%) or the unemployed (16%).

Maybe the rhetoric of a Labour-led administration on welfare would be different from that of a Conservative-led one, but it seems unlikely that it would have much scope for radically changing the substantive direction of policy without risking an adverse public reaction. 'Curbing the welfare' bill is likely to remain a preoccupation of whatever government next faces the task of improving the health of the public finances. Perhaps the real difficulty that will face the next administration is whether it will still be able to meet the public's expectations in respect of pensions, the one area where welfare still seems to be relatively popular (albeit less popular than perhaps it once was).

Managing our relationship with Europe

One topic on which the parties themselves have rather different views is in respect of the approach that we should adopt towards Europe. As we noted earlier, UKIP want a referendum on Britain's membership to be held as soon as possible, while the Conservatives want to hold one in 2017 after having renegotiated Britain's terms of membership. In contrast, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats only favour a referendum in the event of Britain being asked to sign up to significant further transfers of powers to the European Union.

Yet it seems that whatever the outcome of the election and its aftermath, the government will be under pressure to adopt a 'tough'

approach to Britain's relationship with the EU and to be seen to be defending Britain's interests within the institution. Although only a minority may be committed to the idea of leaving the EU, most voters would like the EU to have fewer powers. Given that this mood has been in evidence among at least half the public since the late 1990s, it seems unlikely to be reversed any time soon, not least thanks to public concern about the level of immigration that has been facilitated by the EU's freedom of movement provisions. The next administration would seem destined to keep Britain in the 'slow lane' in Europe, assuming that it stays in Europe at all.

Conclusions

The formation of the Coalition represented a radical departure from the post-war norms of British politics. Yet apart from seemingly casting doubt on the value of coalition as a form of government, the last five years during which the Coalition has been responsible for running Britain have had relatively little impact on public opinion. The Britain of 2010 was doubtful about increasing public expenditure, tough on welfare, accepting of the principle of tuition fees, sceptical about Europe and distrustful of politics and politicians. Britain today looks much the same. But far from suggesting that the last five years have left little imprint, this stability suggests that what five years ago might still have been regarded as exceptional trends are in fact now part of the fabric of British public opinion. As such, they are trends of which the next government will have to take due notice.

References

Appleby, J. and Lee, L. (2012), 'Health care in Britain: is there a problem and what needs to change?', in in Park, A., Clery, E., Curtice, J., Phillips, M. and Utting, D. (eds), *British Social Attitudes: the 29th report*. Available at www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk

Bartle, J (2015) *The policy mood and the moving centre*, NatCen/ University of Essex, available at: http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/843224/politicalcentre.pdf (accessed 20 March 2015)

Clegg, N. (2010) Speech on political reform, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8691753.stm

Clery, E. (2012), 'Are tough times affecting attitudes to welfare?' in Park, A., Clery, E., Curtice, J., Phillips, M. and Utting, D. (eds), *British Social Attitudes: the 29th report*. Available at www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk

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

Institute for Fiscal Studies, (2015), IFS Green Budget 2015, available at: http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/7530, accessed 15/03/2015

Miliband, E. (22 June 2013) Speech to Labour Policy Forum, available at: http://labourlist.org/2013/06/the-discipline-to-make-a-difference-ed-milibands-national-policy-forum-speech/, accessed 15/03/2015

Wlezien, C. (1995), 'The Public as Thermostat: Dynamics of Preferences for Spending', *American Journal of Political Science*, 39: 981-1000