

6 A tale of two crises: banks, MPs' expenses and public opinion

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The final two years of the last Labour government were particularly turbulent. First of all, in the autumn of 2008, there was a serious banking crisis. The government was forced to nationalise two small banks that had got into difficulties, Northern Rock and Bradford & Bingley, to facilitate a merger between two large ones, Lloyds TSB and the Halifax Bank of Scotland, and then buy large stakes in both the newly merged bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland in order to enable them to stay afloat. Meanwhile, a coincident collapse in the stock market, the housing market, and in bank lending meant that the economy went into recession. It was not just the first recession since Labour had come to power in 1997, but the worst economic reverse since the great depression of the 1930s. Tax revenues inevitably fell, forcing the government to begin borrowing on an unprecedented scale.

No sooner had the immediate drama of the banking crisis subsided, than another crisis gripped the country. Following long-running attempts to force their publication using freedom of information legislation, the House of Commons had finally agreed to publish details of the expenses claims that had been made in recent years by MPs – but with some information, such as MPs' addresses, 'redacted'. However, shortly before publication was finally set to occur, full 'unredacted' details of the claims were acquired by the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, which began publishing extracts in May 2009. A vivid picture was painted of MPs arranging their affairs to maximise their personal financial advantage (including avoiding taxes), and relying unduly on the taxpayer to finance a comfortable lifestyle. The public reacted with fury at what became known as the 'MPs expenses scandal', one illustration being BBC1's 2009 May 14th *Question Time* which saw audience members roundly jeering the politicians on the panel and was watched by an estimated million more viewers

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than usual.¹ The scandal set in motion events that led, *inter alia*, to the resignation of the incumbent Speaker of the House of Commons, Michael Martin, and an acceptance by the House of Commons that it could no longer be a self-regulating institution.

Both events dominated the news agenda for weeks. They had palpable consequences for the nation's financial and political systems, and can be expected to merit a place in the history books long after the immediate headlines are forgotten. But we might also wonder what impact they might have had on public opinion. This chapter provides an initial assessment by examining whether there are discernible differences between the public attitudes uncovered in our 2009 survey, conducted after the banking crisis and in the immediate wake of the MPs' expenses scandal, and the public's outlook in the years prior to the two events. Where there are differences, we consider whether these are likely to reflect recent events or longer-term trends. Clearly the world has changed both politically and economically in the wake of these crises; but is the same true of the public mood?

The legacy of the financial crisis

How might we expect the financial crisis to affect public attitudes? We focus here on four broad areas. The first concerns *job security*, our desire being to examine what signs there are that employees have felt the chill of the economic slowdown. Secondly, we examine the extent to which the recession has had an impact upon people's attitudes towards *welfare and inequality*. One possible expectation here is that people's views about welfare payments and welfare recipients have become more generous as times have got harder; after all, for those who do lose their jobs, their immediate financial well-being is likely to depend on the generosity of the state, through the provisions it makes for paying unemployment and other benefits. It is also possible that the financial crisis has resulted in a heightened concern about inequality in society and a wish that it be reduced. So we will also examine public attitudes towards inequality and the role that government should have in intervening to reduce it. We then, thirdly, focus on attitudes towards *the role of government* more widely. After all, the recession of 2008–9 was no ordinary recession. It saw the government intervene in an unprecedented fashion in the financial system. So we will explore whether the revelation that the state might properly have a greater role to play in the economy (and even in running some nationalised industries) may have caused some to reassess their attitudes towards the proper role of the state. Fourthly, and finally, we focus on two issues of immediate and direct relevance to the banking crisis: the extent of the *reputational damage* suffered by the banks in its wake; and whether public attitudes towards *personal credit* have become more restrictive, reflecting a view that credit should not be used as freely as it has been in the recent past.

Job insecurity

One immediate consequence of the onset of the recession was an increase in unemployment. The repercussions for those who actually lost their jobs were immediate and obvious. But the remainder of the workforce who did not lose their jobs might still wonder whether their own job was under threat, too. Thus their sense of job security might be diminished.

Certainly people's perceptions of what has been happening in their own workplace in recent months would seem to have given them some cause for concern. As many as 29 per cent of employees report that someone at their workplace has been made redundant in the last 12 months, a 10-point increase on the proportion in 2005. Similarly, 42 per cent say that there has been a reduction in the number of people employed at their workforce during the previous 12 months, a six-point increase on 2008.

Table 6.1 shows responses to the question "how secure do you feel your employment is with your present employer", and compares these with those obtained in 2005 when the question was previously asked. Fewer people do indeed feel "very secure" in their jobs nowadays as compared with four years ago – 37 per cent as compared with 30 per cent. But it would, perhaps, be more accurate to describe the change as the emergence of a sense of unease rather than a strong fear that jobs are at risk. In fact, there has not been any increase at all in the proportion feeling that their job is actually insecure. Instead there simply has been an increase in those who say their job is "secure" rather than "very secure", or else now proffering the response, "neither secure nor insecure".²

Table 6.1 Perceived security of employment with current employer, 2005 and 2009

| | 2005 | 2009 |
|-----------------------------|------|------|
| | % | % |
| Very secure | 37 | 30 |
| Secure | 40 | 46 |
| Neither secure nor insecure | 13 | 16 |
| Insecure | 7 | 6 |
| Very insecure | 2 | 2 |
| <i>Base</i> | 1477 | 1595 |

That emergence of a sense of unease is also reflected in the answers to a further question (Table 6.2). When asked "how difficult or easy would it be for you to get a similar or better job with another employer if you wanted" over half now feel that they would have some difficulty. In contrast only just over one in three

(37 per cent) felt that way in 2005.³ Here, though, there is a hint that the growth in a sense of unease had already begun to set in before the banking crisis, perhaps because unemployment had already been increasing, albeit slowly, since the beginning of 2008. In that year's survey, for which most of our interviews were conducted before the onset of the banking crisis in September, the proportion who felt that it might be difficult to find a similar job had already increased to 43 per cent.

Table 6.2 Perceived difficulty of finding a similar job, 2005, 2008 and 2009

| | 2005 | 2008 | 2009 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % |
| Very difficult | 10 | 12 | 15 |
| Difficult | 26 | 31 | 38 |
| Neither difficult nor easy | 21 | 27 | 21 |
| Easy | 32 | 22 | 20 |
| Very easy | 9 | 7 | 4 |
| Base | 1477 | 1569 | 1595 |

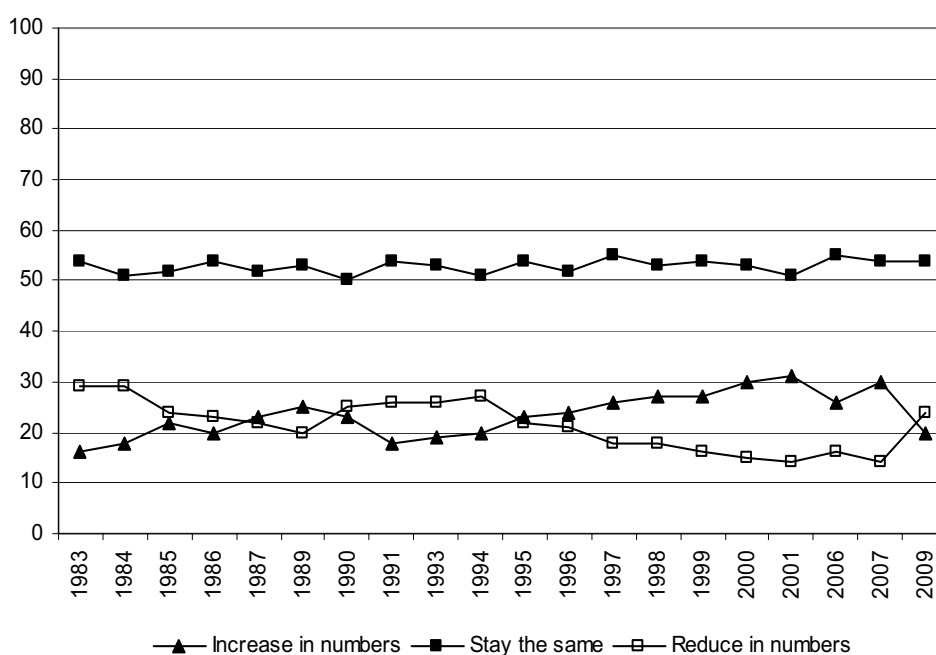
One limitation of the survey questions that we have been examining so far, however, is that they have only been asked in recent years. In particular, they were not asked during the course of previous recessions, such as those that occurred in the early 1980s and early 1990s. So they cannot tell us whether people's sense of unease or insecurity about their jobs is any greater or less than it was during previous recessions, and thus whether the banking crisis has had any particularly marked impact on people's sense of job security. Longer-term attitudes towards job security are discussed in greater detail in the chapter in this report by Bryson and Forth; for our purposes here, we can look at the answers to one particular question asked of employees in most years since the *British Social Attitudes* survey started in 1983. This asks:

Over the coming year do you expect your workplace to be increasing its number of employees, reducing its number of employees, or, will the number of employees stay about the same?

The results are shown in Figure 6.1. Here, too, we see that people are apparently less likely to feel safe and secure in their jobs now than before the crisis.⁴ In particular, it is notable that the proportion anticipating a reduction in the number of employees at their workplace increased from 14 per cent in 2007 to 24 per cent now. That 10-point increase is the sharpest rise or fall ever recorded on this measure between adjacent *British Social Attitudes* surveys. So the banking crisis would appear to have had an unusually sharp impact on the public mood so far as employment prospects are concerned. However, at 24 per cent, it is notable that the proportion who anticipate a reduction in the number of employees at

their workplace is still not as high as it was during the previous recessions of the early 1980s and early 1990s, while a clear majority (74 per cent) expect numbers to stay the same or even increase. This, perhaps, is a reflection of a distinctive character of the most recent recession. Although it has had a more severe impact on economic growth than those two previous recessions, to date it has occasioned less of an increase in unemployment (Gregg and Wadsworth, 2010). Thus, perhaps, the reason why it has apparently generated unease rather than widespread fear.⁵

Figure 6.1 Perceptions of future employment levels in workplace, 1983–2009



The data on which Figure 6.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

In summary, therefore, there is clear evidence that the financial crisis has affected the extent to which people feel secure in relation to their jobs, even though insecurity is not (to date) as widespread as it was during previous recessions.

Welfare and inequality

We turn now to attitudes towards welfare. In economic good times, voters might feel that those who fail to work are ‘scroungers’ whom they have to support through their hard-earned taxes. But when the economic climate becomes less benign, they might begin to reassess their view. After all, perhaps they

themselves will be in need of the safety net provided by the state. If not, there will be a greater likelihood that they know somebody else who needs support. Certainly, *British Social Attitudes* surveys conducted during previous recessions in the 1980s and early 1990s lend credence to such an expectation (Taylor-Gooby, 2004).

We might also expect to find that the financial crisis has affected attitudes towards inequality in society and resulted in a heightened wish that it be reduced. After all, one particular feature of the banking system that attracted critical attention in the wake of the financial crisis was the payment of large bonuses to senior employees. It seemed that those who had caused the financial crisis were still being rewarded at a level few could ever hope to emulate, even though their institution had had to be bailed out at the taxpayers' expense.⁶ So we will also examine public attitudes towards inequality and the role that government should have in intervening to reduce it.

We begin by considering attitudes to welfare benefits and recipients. Figure 6.2 shows responses to three questions that have been asked regularly on the *British Social Attitudes* survey during the course of the last three decades. In the first of these, respondents are asked which of two options comes closer to their 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?

The line towards the top of the figure shows the proportion who say that unemployment benefits are too low. In the case of the remaining two items⁷ respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that:

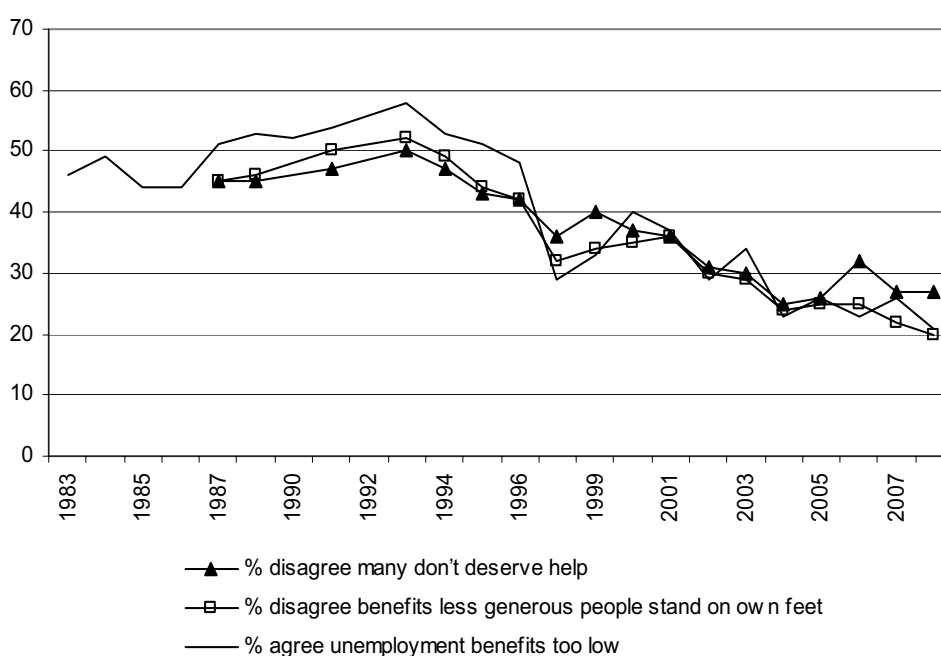
Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help

If welfare benefits weren't so generous people would learn to stand on their own two feet

The two remaining lines show the proportion who *disagreed* with these statements and who thus might be regarded as relatively sympathetic towards welfare benefits and their recipients. This suggests that the onset of recession has had some impact on attitudes towards welfare, albeit more so in respect of unemployment benefits in particular than welfare in general.⁸ Compared with 2008 there has been an eight-point increase (to 29 per cent) in the proportion who feel that unemployment benefits are too low, and a five-point increase (to 32 per cent) in the proportion who disagree that many social security recipients are undeserving, together with a more modest (and statistically insignificant) two-point increase (to 22 per cent) in the proportion who disagree that people would be more likely to stand on their own feet if welfare benefits were not so generous.⁹

However, if we adopt a longer-term perspective, attitudes towards unemployment and welfare benefits still appear relatively harsh. For example, the 29 per cent who state that unemployment benefits are too low is well below the levels that were obtained in the wake of previous recessions – as many as 53 per cent took that view in 1993, as did just under half (49 per cent) in 1984. Equally, at 32 per cent and 22 per cent respectively, the proportions who disagree with our two statements about welfare benefits are well below the levels obtained in the early 1990s, when around a half disagreed with both statements. Overall, there has been a considerable change in the public mood since the 1980s and early 1990s, partly reflecting New Labour's ideological repositioning on issues such as equality and government action (Curtice, 2010).

Figure 6.2 Attitudes towards unemployment and welfare benefits, 1983–2009



The data on which Figure 6.2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

We also speculated earlier that, in addition to increasing sympathy for the unemployed and those on benefits (something for which we have found some limited evidence), the financial crisis might have resulted in a heightened concern about inequality in society and a wish that it be reduced. We can examine this by looking at responses to the following long-running question:

Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off

The first row of Table 6.3 shows the proportion who agree with this proposition. This is actually one of five items that the survey asks each year and which between them are designed to form a scale measuring where people stand on a ‘socialism versus laissez-faire’ spectrum that captures people’s underlying attitudes towards inequality and the role that government should play in trying to reduce it. (Full details of these items are to be found in Appendix 1.) The second row of Table 6.3 shows the proportion who can be regarded as being on the ‘socialist’ or ‘left-wing’ end of this spectrum.¹⁰

Previously, we have argued that one of the key trends in public opinion following the advent of New Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair has been a marked drift in attitudes towards the ‘right’ (Curtice, 2010). Indeed, one feature of Table 6.3 that is immediately apparent is a decline from 1994 onwards (the year in which Tony Blair became Labour’s leader) in the proportion agreeing that the government should redistribute income and who more generally might be regarded as left-of-centre. This falls further still from 1998, after New Labour took office. There is no sign that the decline has been reversed significantly in the wake of the banking crisis; at 36 per cent, the proportion favouring redistribution in particular is actually (a statistically insignificant) two points below the previous reading in 2008 and is much the same as it has been in most years since 1998. Moreover, at 48 per cent, the proportion of people who can be classified as left-of-centre is exactly the same as it was 12 months earlier, and is still lower than it had been as recently as 2003. The attention paid to bankers’ bonuses in the wake of the banking crisis may have aroused much public anger, but it seems it did little to shift the public’s underlying attitudes.

Table 6.3 Attitudes towards reducing inequality, 1986–2009¹¹

| | 86 | 87 | 89 | 90 | 91 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 98 | 99 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 08 | 09 |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| % agree govt should redistribute income | 43 | 45 | 51 | 51 | 49 | 48 | 51 | 47 | 44 | 39 | 36 | 39 | 38 | 39 | 42 | 32 | 32 | 34 | 32 | 38 | 36 |
| % left-of-centre | 52 | 55 | 58 | 59 | 54 | 59 | 64 | 61 | 58 | 52 | 50 | 52 | 49 | 53 | 51 | 42 | 44 | 44 | 44 | 48 | 48 |

In summary, we have seen that support for government having an active role in reducing material inequality is lower now than in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and – while sympathy for those dependent on welfare benefits has increased a little over the last year – it remains far lower than was the case in earlier decades.

The role of government

Despite the fairly limited changes we have seen in attitudes to welfare and inequality, we might expect to find that the financial crisis has affected attitudes towards the role of government more widely. After all, the recession of 2008–9 saw the government intervene in an unprecedented fashion in the financial system. It had even nationalised some banks, a move that not only contradicted a trend during the last 30 years for government to divest itself of commercial activities but one that would hitherto have been regarded as one that only an ‘extreme’ socialist government would take. At the same time, the government argued that public spending needed to be maintained, despite falling tax revenues, in order to counteract the impact of the recession the crisis had induced. There was also a change of tone in the pronouncements of Labour ministers, who were now more willing to criticise markets and extol the need for government action to correct their excesses and failures, as demonstrated by the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s speech at the 2009 Labour conference.¹² So, perhaps, the revelation that the state might properly have a greater role to play in the economy may have caused some to reassess their attitudes towards the proper role of the state.

We begin by looking at attitudes towards nationalisation. In Table 6.4 we show the pattern of responses to a question about state ownership of major public services and industries that had been asked on three previous *British Social Attitudes* surveys in the 1990s:

Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership

The results suggest that while the idea of state ownership is more popular than might be anticipated from the drift of public policy for much of the last three decades – as many as 41 per cent agree that major services and industries ought to be owned by the state – there is no evidence that support for nationalisation has become markedly higher in the wake of the banking crisis.¹³

Table 6.4 Attitudes towards nationalisation, 1994–2009

| | 1994 | 1996 | 1997 | 2009 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % |
| Strongly agree | 11 | 13 | 10 | 13 |
| Agree | 34 | 30 | 28 | 28 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 27 | 32 | 34 | 35 |
| Disagree | 22 | 19 | 22 | 18 |
| Strongly disagree | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| <i>Base</i> | 2929 | 3085 | 1080 | 1017 |

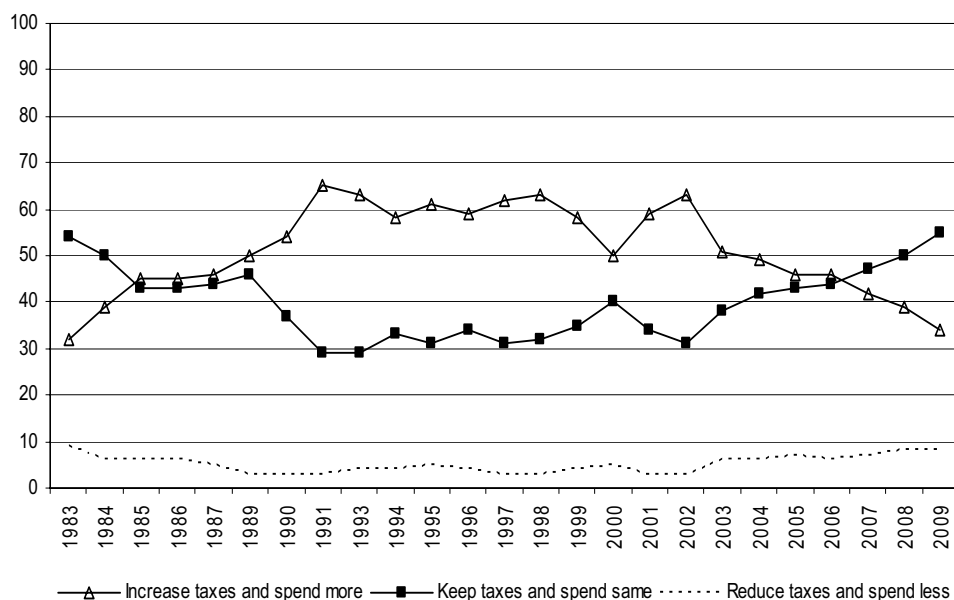
Nevertheless, perhaps the recession had an impact on people's attitudes towards the amount spent by government on public services? To assess this, we ask:

Suppose the government had to choose between the three options on this card. Which do you think it should choose?

*Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits*

As Figure 6.3 shows, support for increased taxation and spending has been in decline since 2002, with the public's appetite for more spending seeming gradually to have been satisfied by the substantial increases in actual spending that occurred from 1999 onwards (Curtice, 2010). This trend has not been reversed by the banking crisis. Instead, support for more taxation and spending has fallen by a further five points (to 34 per cent) between 2008 and 2009, and is now lower than it has been at any time since 1983. Of course, it may be that the latest drop is a reflection of concern about the size of government deficit that emerged in the wake of the recession rather than simply a continuation of the trend that was already under way. Either way, it is now apparent why the public did not warm to Labour's argument in the 2010 General Election that the deficit should not be cut too quickly, and that taxes should be used to achieve that aim to a greater extent than was envisaged by the Conservatives.

Figure 6.3 Attitudes towards taxation and spending, 1983–2009.



The data on which Figure 6.3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

So it appears that the banking crisis and the recession which followed it has not yet given rise to a reassessment by the public of their attitudes towards the role of government. Despite the furore about bankers' bonuses and the need for the government to nationalise some banks, there is no sign of a renewed enthusiasm for greater government intervention in the economy. However, a pre-existing trend away from a desire for more government spending has continued, perhaps aided by concern about the government deficit.

Banking and credit

We conclude this section by focusing on two issues of immediate and direct relevance to banking. First, we assess the extent of the reputational damage that banks in particular have suffered in the wake of the crisis. Then we examine attitudes towards personal credit. After all, it was not just the banks that were implicated in the banking crisis. It had originated in a willingness of people in the United States to take out mortgages whose repayments they proved unable to maintain. Meanwhile, in the UK personal indebtedness had reached an all-time high, standing at £1,444 billion (£232 billion of which was unsecured debt, including credit cards) in June 2008 (Bank of England, 2008). This meant that the country's banks were particularly vulnerable to bad debts when unemployment started to increase and house prices fell. So we might wonder whether one lesson people might draw from the crisis is that credit should not be used as freely as it has been in the recent past. Certainly the level of indebtedness did start to fall in the wake of the banking crisis, as people opted to pay off some of the debt that they owed (Bank of England, 2010).

It is here that we find our first – but probably our least surprising – example of a sea change in the public mood. Table 6.5 shows the responses to a question that asks people whether they consider various institutions to be well run or not. The question was included on the first ever *British Social Attitudes* survey in 1983 and has been asked on a number of occasions since:

Listed below are some of Britain's institutions. From what you know or have heard about each one, can you say whether, on the whole, you think it is well run or not well run?

Table 6.5 reveals an enormous change in view so far as banks are concerned. In 1983 no less than 90 per cent believed that banks were well run, and their reputation for being well managed was higher than that of a variety of other institutions including the police and the BBC. But now just 19 per cent believe that banks are well run, and their reputation for good management is now even worse than that of the press and trade unions. True, some of that drop was in evidence before the banking crisis; by 1994 only 63 per cent felt that banks were well run, and, perhaps, the banks' reputation had fallen yet further before the banking crisis broke. Even so, this is probably the biggest change in public attitudes ever recorded by the *British Social Attitudes* series, and indicates that

Britain's banking industry now has a poor reputation indeed. On this evidence, it would seem that tighter regulation of the banking industry is one example of greater government intervention that the public would now welcome.

Table 6.5 Perceptions of how well major institutions are run, 1983–2009

| | 1983 | 1986 | 1987 | 1994 | 2009 | Change 1983– 2009 | Change 1994– 2009 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| % saying institution is well run | | | | | | | |
| The police | 77 | 74 | 66 | 68 | 62 | -15 | -6 |
| National Health Service | 52 | 36 | 35 | 33 | 54 | +2 | +21 |
| BBC | 72 | 70 | 67 | 62 | 49 | -23 | -13 |
| The press | 53 | 48 | 39 | 47 | 39 | -14 | -8 |
| Trade unions | 29 | 27 | 27 | 47 | 35 | +6 | -12 |
| Banks | 90 | 92 | 91 | 63 | 19 | -71 | -44 |
| <i>Base</i> | 1650 | 1321 | 1212 | 970 | 1017 | | |

We turn now to examine people's attitudes towards one of the key areas of bank activity – lending money. Table 6.6 looks at responses to three questions about credit and borrowing money that have been asked regularly by *British Social Attitudes* during the course of the last 10 years. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that:

Credit makes it easier for people to plan their finances

It should be made much harder to borrow money even if this means more people can't get credit

Credit encourages people to spend far more than they can really afford to

Table 6.6 demonstrates that we are indeed rather more sceptical about credit now than we were at the beginning of the 21st century. For example, 43 per cent now *disagree* that credit makes it easier for people to plan their finances, up nine points on 2001. The other two items in the table exhibit a similar trend. However, it appears that this shift of opinion occurred before the banking crisis. Thus, by 2007, already as many as 61 per cent agreed that it should be harder to borrow money, almost identical to the figure in the most recent survey, and a picture that again is mirrored by the other two items. It seems that the growth in

personal indebtedness had already given rise to some concern about the amount of lending by banks to individuals even before the banking crisis hit home, but that the crisis itself has not resulted in that concern being heightened.

Table 6.6 Attitudes towards credit, 2001–9

| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2007 | 2009 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| % disagree credit makes it easier to plan finances | 34 | 37 | 34 | 42 | 43 |
| % agree should be harder to borrow money | 47 | 50 | 51 | 61 | 60 |
| % strongly agree credit encourages people to spend more than can afford | 32 | 32 | 36 | 43 | 41 |
| <i>Base</i> | 2795 | 2900 | 2649 | 2672 | 2942 |

The legacy

Overall, attitudes towards the banking industry apart, we have found little evidence that the banking crisis and the recession which followed it has, in the first instance at least, brought about a dramatic change in the public mood. True, more people now feel insecure about their job than did so before the turmoil began in 2008, while there has been some change in attitudes to welfare, in line with trends during previous recessions. There is, perhaps, also a little more readiness now to spend money on unemployment benefits. However, this is matched by a yet further decline in enthusiasm for government spending in general. Meanwhile, despite the furore about bankers' bonuses and the need for the government to nationalise some banks, there is neither any sign of a renewed enthusiasm for greater government intervention in the economy, nor any indication of an increased desire to do more to reduce inequality. And, although our appetite for credit has been restricted somewhat, this process seemed to begin before the events of 2008/09. On these matters, the underlying values of the British public seem to have been little affected by the crisis at all.

The fallout from the expenses scandal

We turn now to an examination of the impact of the events that dominated the news agenda in 2009; the MPs' expenses scandal. We begin by considering its impact on *political trust*. An apparent breach of trust was, after all, at the heart of the MPs' expenses scandal. Politicians are expected by voters to run the nation's affairs for the good of society as a whole, not to use their privileged position for personal gain. So we might anticipate that trust in politicians has declined as a result of the impressions conveyed by the expenses scandal. Secondly, we examine whether the revelations affected a wider range of *political values and attitudes* that might have more profound implications for the health of the country's politics. Has, for instance, the expenses affair undermined people's sense of 'political efficacy'; that is, the degree to which

the political system is able and willing to meet the needs of its citizens. Thirdly, we examine *political engagement and interest*; were people so disenchanted by the scandal that they lost interest in politics and wondered whether it was worthwhile turning out and voting at election time. Finally, we assess whether the fallout from the expenses scandal has stretched beyond the world of politics and affected people's faith not only in politicians but also in their fellow human beings. So we will conclude by examining *social trust* and whether it has declined in the wake of the scandal.

Trust in politics

Politicians are expected by voters to run the nation's affairs for the good of society as a whole, but the practices and behaviours uncovered by the *Daily Telegraph* suggested that many a politician was, in fact, making questionable claims on the taxpayers' purse with an eye to making a personal profit. We thus might anticipate that trust in politicians to act in the country's interests rather than in their own may well have declined as a consequence of the impressions conveyed by the expenses scandal. People might even be moved to wonder whether the country's political system was 'corrupt'.

Political trust is measured by a question that has been asked on a regular basis by *British Social Attitudes* in recent years. Respondents are asked:

How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?

This question thus taps directly into the issue of whether governments (and by implication politicians) in general can be trusted to put the wider public interest first. At the same time, the expenses scandal also raised questions about whether MPs had always been honest – or at least straightforward – in the expense claims they had submitted (and in their associated dealings with the tax authorities). We might expect this aspect of trust to be tapped by responses to a further question that respondents have been asked on a regular basis in recent years:

And how much do you trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner?

Table 6.7 summarises the pattern of responses to both questions. It shows that trust in politicians has never been particularly high in Britain; in most years, well under a half (and often well under a third) say they trust governments or politicians "just about always" or "most of the time". Moreover trust was clearly in decline long before the MPs' expenses scandal broke. For example, whereas in 1991 as many as one in three said that they trusted governments to put the national interest first "just about always" or "most of the time", by 2006 that figure had fallen to less than one in five (19 per cent). Previous revelations about 'sleaze' that engulfed the 1992–7 Conservative government appear to

have caused particular harm. True, trust appears consistently to have recovered in the immediate wake of a general election, but in each case this revival has proved temporary (Bromley and Curtice, 2002). The picture portrayed by the *Daily Telegraph* perhaps occasioned such a strong public reaction because it confirmed the doubts that many people already had about the trustworthiness of their politicians.

Nevertheless, the expenses scandal appears to have helped erode trust yet further. Now no less than two in five say that they “never” trust governments to put the national interest first, six points above the previous all-time high of 34 per cent recorded in 2006 – and around four times as high as the readings that obtained in the late 1980s. Equally, as many as three in five now say they “never” trust politicians to tell the truth, although this is only three points higher than the previous high of 57 per cent in 2006.

These findings might lead one to suggest that a public that has long had its doubts about the trustworthiness of its political class is now on the verge of being straightforwardly cynical in its attitude towards government and politicians.

Table 6.7 Trends in political trust, 1987–2009

| | 87 (1) | 87 ⁺ (2) | 91 | 94 | 96 | 97 (1) | 97 ⁺ (2) | 98 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 09 |
|--|-----------|------------------------|------|------|------|-----------|------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----|------|
| Trust government | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Just about always/ most of the time | 37 | 47 | 33 | 24 | 22 | 25 | 33 | 28 | 16 | 28 | 26 | 18 | 26 | 19 | 29 | 16 |
| Some of the time | 46 | 43 | 50 | 53 | 53 | 48 | 52 | 52 | 58 | 50 | 47 | 49 | 47 | 46 | 45 | 42 |
| Almost never | 11 | 9 | 14 | 21 | 23 | 23 | 12 | 17 | 24 | 20 | 24 | 31 | 26 | 34 | 23 | 40 |
| | 87 (1) | 87 ⁺ (2) | 91 | 94 | 96 | 97 (1) | 97 ⁺ (2) | 98 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 09 |
| Trust politicians | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Just about always/ most of the time | n/a | n/a | n/a | 9 | 9 | 8 | n/a | 9 | 11 | n/a | 7 | 6 | 8 | 7 | 9 | 6 |
| Some of the time | n/a | n/a | n/a | 40 | 38 | 40 | n/a | 43 | 42 | n/a | 37 | 39 | 39 | 35 | 39 | 39 |
| Almost never | n/a | n/a | n/a | 49 | 49 | 50 | n/a | 46 | 46 | n/a | 55 | 54 | 52 | 57 | 49 | 60 |
| Base | 1410 | 3413 | 1445 | 1137 | 1180 | 1355 | 3615 | 2071 | 2293 | 1099 | 2287 | 3299 | 3167 | 1077 | 992 | 1143 |

n/a = not asked

⁺ Source: British Election Study

Political efficacy

The immediate impact of the MPs' expenses scandal on levels of political trust might be considered both unsurprising and of little longer-term consequence. More interesting, perhaps, is whether the revelations affected a wider range of values and attitudes that could have more profound implications for the health of the country's politics. For example, faced with a picture of politicians pursuing personal advantage, perhaps people have come to question what good, if any, Britain's political system can do for the country as a whole? Maybe the affair has undermined their sense of 'political efficacy', the extent to which they feel the political system is able and willing to meet its citizens' needs (Almond and Verba, 1965).

We start by considering the impact of the expenses scandal on the degree to which the public feel that the public good is being subverted by the country's politicians. In 2002 we asked respondents how often they felt Labour "does favours for people or companies who give the party large sums of money", and then went on to ask the same question about the Conservatives. In Labour's case 24 per cent said they felt this happened "very often", while 26 per cent said the same of the Conservatives. Now the figure is 24 per cent in respect for both parties. Here, perhaps, is an indication that the impact of the expenses scandal on public attitudes may have been limited in its scope.

A second indication that this might be the case comes when we look at 'political efficacy'. There are three widely used indicators of this concept, with respondents being asked the extent to which they agree or disagree with each:

Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions

Generally speaking, those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly

It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same

The results are shown in Table 6.8, which shows trends in the proportion that "strongly agree" with the proposition in question.¹⁴ As each of these propositions expresses doubts about the ability or willingness of the political system to be responsive to the needs and wishes of the country's citizens, the *higher* this proportion, the *lower* the level of political efficacy.

In many respects past trends in political efficacy have been similar to those we saw for political trust. Levels of efficacy have tended to be lower since 1994 than they were previously. Equally, this has been tempered by a tendency (on occasions at least) for levels of efficacy to be restored temporarily in the immediate wake of a general election. Thus, for example, the proportion who strongly agreed that parties are only interested in votes rose from 16 to 25 per cent between 1991 and 1994, but subsequently fell back in the survey conducted shortly after the 1997 General Election. However, in contrast to political trust,

there is no evidence that feelings of efficacy have been eroded further in the wake of the expenses scandal. Thus, for example, 24 per cent now strongly agree that parties are only interested in votes, in line with most readings taken since 1994. Much the same can be said of the other two indicators included in the table.

Table 6.8 Trends in system efficacy, 1987–2009

| % strongly agree | 87 | 87 ⁺ | 91 | 94 | 96 | 97 ⁺ | 98 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 05 | 09 |
|-------------------------------------|------|-----------------|------|------|------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Parties only interested in votes | 15 | 16 | 16 | 25 | 28 | 16 | 21 | 26 | 27 | 29 | 25 | 17 | 24 |
| MPs lose touch quickly | 16 | n/a | 16 | 25 | 26 | n/a | 20 | 23 | 25 | 28 | 23 | 16 | 22 |
| Doesn't matter which party in power | n/a | 7 | 11 | 16 | 16 | 8 | 17 | 19 | 18 | 22 | 20 | 12 | 21 |
| Base | 1410 | 3826 | 1445 | 1137 | 1180 | 2906 | 2071 | 2293 | 1099 | 2287 | 4432 | 3167 | 1143 |

n/a = not asked

⁺Source: 1987 and 1997 British Election Study

Interest in politics

We turn now to examine whether the expenses scandal has had any apparent impact upon political interest and engagement. Might people have begun to ask whether it is worth their while dealing with, or being interested in, politics and politicians at all? In particular, might people have begun to question whether they should feel any obligation to turn out and vote at election time? A sense of civic duty has been shown to be particularly important in motivating people to make the journey to the polling station (Butt and Curtice, 2010); any erosion of that sense could have deleterious consequences for levels of electoral participation and ultimately the perceived legitimacy of the electoral process.

As Table 6.9 shows, there seems to be little sign that the expenses scandal has eroded people's interest in politics. As we have noted before, the level of such interest has proved remarkably constant in previous years (Butt and Curtice, 2010) and this continues to be the case. At 31 per cent, the proportion of people in our most recent survey who say they have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of interest in politics is much the same as it has been throughout the period since 1991.

Table 6.9 Trends in interest in politics, 1991–2009

| | 1991 | 1994 | 1997 | 2000 | 2003 | 2005 | 2007 | 2009 |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| How much interest in politics | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Great deal/quite a lot | 32 | 32 | 30 | 32 | 30 | 34 | 30 | 31 |
| Some | 31 | 35 | 33 | 35 | 33 | 34 | 37 | 36 |
| Not much/none at all | 36 | 33 | 37 | 35 | 37 | 32 | 32 | 33 |
| <i>Base</i> | 1445 | 2302 | 1355 | 2293 | 4432 | 4268 | 2022 | 1143 |

On the other hand, we noted in *The 26th Report* that there had been a notable decline in the proportion of people who feel that they have a duty to vote at election time. To assess this, we ask:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view about general elections? In a general election ...
 ... *it's not really worth voting*
 ... *people should vote only if they care who wins*
 ... *it's everyone's duty to vote*

Table 6.10 indicates that the fall uncovered then by our 2008 survey has largely been maintained; at 58 per cent, the proportion who say that 'it is everyone's duty to vote' is still lower than it has been in any survey before 2008. At the same time, however, it seems that the MPs' expenses scandal has not occasioned any further decline in people's sense of duty to vote; our latest reading is, in fact, two points higher than it was in 2008.

Table 6.10 Trends in civic duty, 1991–2009

| | 1987 ⁺ | 1991 | 1994 | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 | 2001 | 2004 | 2005 | 2008 | 2009 |
|-------------------------|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Not really worth voting | 3 | 8 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 11 | 11 | 12 | 12 | 18 | 17 |
| Vote if care who wins | 21 | 24 | 21 | 26 | 26 | 24 | 23 | 27 | 23 | 23 | 23 |
| Everyone's duty to vote | 76 | 68 | 68 | 64 | 65 | 64 | 65 | 60 | 64 | 56 | 58 |
| <i>Base</i> | 3413 | 1224 | 970 | 989 | 1654 | 2008 | 2795 | 2609 | 1732 | 990 | 1017 |

⁺ Source: *British Election Study*

Social trust

So it would appear that while the MPs' expenses scandal did indeed have an immediate impact on the degree to which the British public felt able to trust its politicians, it did not occasion an erosion of some of the deeper values and attitudes that might be thought essential to the health of Britain's political system. In particular it appears not to have brought about a decline in political efficacy, interest in politics or in the feeling that people have a duty to vote. Even so, the scandal might, perhaps, have still had wider implications. Maybe as well as undermining trust in politicians, it has helped undermine people's willingness to trust their fellow citizens in general. It has been argued that a reasonable level of such 'social trust' is essential to the health of society as well as to efficiency and effectiveness of its economy and its politics (Putnam, 2000). But if the lesson that people took from the revelations is that their politicians cannot be trusted, then maybe their faith in their fellow human beings in general has been undermined, too. If so, the revelations may indeed have had important long-term implications for Britain's future.

Our measure of 'social trust' is one that has been used widely in previous research. Respondents are asked:

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?

The more who say that "most people can be trusted", the greater the degree of social trust that would appear to exist in a society.

Table 6.11 shows that there is no sign at all that social trust has been eroded in the wake of the expenses scandal. In fact, at 47 per cent, a higher proportion now think "most people can be trusted" than have done at any point during the last 30 years. Indeed it would seem more generally that the concern that has been expressed in the past about the decline of social trust in the United States in particular (Putnam, 2000), is not justified so far as Britain is concerned at all.

Table 6.11 Trends in social trust, 1981–2009

| | 1981 ⁺ | 1990 ⁺ | 1997 | 1998 | 2000 | 2002 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Most people can be trusted | 43 | 42 | 42 | 44 | 45 | 39 | 45 | 41 | 41 | 40 | 47 |
| Can't be too careful | 54 | 55 | 57 | 54 | 54 | 59 | 53 | 57 | 57 | 55 | 51 |
| Base | 1167 | 1484 | 1355 | 2071 | 2293 | 2287 | 3167 | 1077 | 4124 | 2236 | 1143 |

⁺ Source: *World Values Survey*

Conclusions

The British public has clearly noticed our two crises. The financial crisis has made it feel a little less secure about its jobs and appears to have made it question the effectiveness and efficiency of the nation's banks. And the expenses scandal has served to undermine much of the remaining trust that public had in the probity of politicians. In short, the reputations of those who were thought to be implicated most closely in the two crises took a tumble.

But it seems that neither crisis persuaded people to change their attitudes in any more fundamental fashion. The sight of governments rescuing banks or the stories of bankers' bonuses did not appear to make them question their views about the role that government should play in the marketplace. There has been no renewal of enthusiasm for more active government. Equally, stories about MPs allegedly exploiting the expenses system for personal gain did not increase people's doubts about the efficacy of the country's political system or undermine their willingness to become involved in its political process. People may have been shocked by the two crises, but it seems they see little reason why eventually Britain should not return to business as usual. Of course, it remains to be seen whether it will.

Notes

1. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/mps-expenses/5330495/MPs-expenses-story-leads-to-biggest-ever-viewing-figures-for-Question-Time.html>
2. Although it had primarily been jobs in the private sector rather than those in the public sector that had been lost during the previous 12 months, the decline in the proportion stating that their job was "very secure" was, at six points, almost as big among public sector employees as it was among those working for a private sector organisation (eight points). Those working in the public sector may, of course, have been aware of the cuts that were yet to come as the government attempted to reduce its deficit.
3. We might note that at the same time the proportion who thought that it would be difficult for their employer to replace them has fallen from 44 per cent in 2005 to 37 per cent now.
4. Clearly, if people anticipate a reduction in the number of people employed at their workplace, there is good reason to believe that they are more likely to be concerned about the security of their job. And in practice, in our most recent survey only 16 per cent of those who anticipated a drop in the number of people employed at their workplace said that they felt "very secure" in their job, a little less than half the proportion among those who did not anticipate any reduction.
5. Further evidence also points to this conclusion. Among those who think that they might leave their job over the next 12 months (a group that in most years represents about one in four employees and rarely departs significantly from that figure), 13 per cent now say they think this might happen because they will be made redundant. This is five points above the equivalent figure for 2008, but is still below the 18–20

- per cent figure that pertained between 1984 and 1986 or the 18 per cent in 1991 or 17 per cent in 1994.
6. The outrage during the expenses scandal directed at the 'unfair' perks and payments enjoyed by some MPs might also be expected to have some impact on attitudes in this area.
 7. These are two items that form part of a scale of attitudes towards welfare, full details of which are to be found in Appendix 1. They are used here to illustrate trends that are similar across all the items in the scale.
 8. Even so, the degree to which this has been occasioned by the decline in job security should not be exaggerated. The link between perceptions of job security and, for example, attitudes towards unemployment benefits is only a modest one. While just 19 per cent of those who feel that their job is very secure say that unemployment benefits are too low, the figure only increases to 24 per cent among those who say the job is just "secure" and to 28 per cent among those who say it is neither secure nor insecure (and actually falls to 21 per cent among those who say their job is either insecure or very insecure).
 9. We also asked people to agree or disagree with the statement "the government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes". Here we found a *decrease* in sympathy between 2008 and 2009, with the proportion agreeing falling from 35 to 27 per cent.
 10. The scale runs from a score of 1, meaning that the respondent has given the most socialist or left-wing response to all five items, to 5, indicating that the most laissez-faire or right-wing response has been given on each occasion. We define as left-of-centre those with a score of less than 2.5.
 11. Bases for Table 6.3 are as follows:

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 86 | 87 | 89 | 90 | 91 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 98 | 99 |
| 1321 | 2493 | 2604 | 2430 | 2702 | 1306 | 2929 | 3135 | 3085 | 2531 | 2450 |
| 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 08 | 09 | |
| 2980 | 2795 | 2900 | 3621 | 2609 | 3559 | 3748 | 3578 | 3990 | 2942 | |

12. The full text of Gordon Brown's speech can be found at <http://www2.labour.org.uk/gordon-brown-speech-conference,2009-09-29>
13. One possible objection to this analysis is that attitudes towards nationalisation might have become less favourable in the intervening period between 1997 and 2008 (a period for which we have no readings), and then become more favourable as a consequence of the banking crisis.
14. We focus on the proportion that "strongly agree" rather than all those that "agree" because clear majorities have always agreed with these propositions. Consequently, any erosion in political efficacy is primarily reflected in an increase in those saying "strongly agree" rather than in an increase in all those saying "agree".

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Acknowledgements

The *National Centre for Social Research* is grateful to the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills for the financial support which enabled us to ask some of the questions reported in this chapter (on welfare and job security respectively). The views expressed are those of the authors alone.

Appendix

The data for Figures 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 are shown below.

Table A.1 Perceptions of future employment levels in workplace, 1983–2009

| | 83 | 84 | 85 | 86 | 87 | 89 | 90 | 91 | 93 | 94 |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Increase in numbers | 16 | 18 | 22 | 20 | 23 | 25 | 23 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
| Stay the same | 54 | 51 | 52 | 54 | 52 | 53 | 50 | 54 | 53 | 51 |
| Reduce in numbers | 29 | 29 | 24 | 23 | 22 | 20 | 25 | 26 | 26 | 27 |
| <i>Base</i> | 817 | 778 | 857 | 1532 | 1381 | 1462 | 1307 | 1236 | 1144 | 1447 |
| | 95 | 96 | 97 | 98 | 99 | 00 | 01 | 06 | 07 | 09 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Increase in numbers | 23 | 24 | 26 | 27 | 27 | 30 | 31 | 26 | 30 | 20 |
| Stay the same | 54 | 52 | 55 | 53 | 54 | 53 | 51 | 55 | 54 | 54 |
| Reduce in numbers | 22 | 21 | 18 | 18 | 16 | 15 | 14 | 16 | 14 | 24 |
| <i>Base</i> | 1449 | 1535 | 546 | 1428 | 1365 | 1527 | 1538 | 1504 | 1428 | 1595 |

Table A.2 Attitudes towards unemployment and welfare benefits, 1983–2009

| | 83 | 84 | 85 | 86 | 87 | 89 | 90 | 91 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| % disagree many don't deserve help | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | 45 | 45 | n/a | 47 | 50 | 47 | 43 | 42 |
| % disagree if benefits less generous, people stand on own feet | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | 45 | 46 | n/a | 50 | 52 | 49 | 44 | 42 |
| <i>Base</i> | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | 1281 | 2604 | n/a | 2481 | 2567 | 2929 | 3135 | 3119 |
| % agree unemployment benefits too low | 46 | 49 | 44 | 44 | 51 | 53 | 52 | 54 | 58 | 53 | 51 | 48 |
| <i>Base</i> | 1761 | 1675 | 2797 | 3100 | 2847 | 3029 | 2797 | 2918 | 2945 | 3469 | 3633 | 3662 |
| | 98 | 99 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 08 | 09 |
| % disagree many don't deserve help | 36 | 40 | 37 | 36 | 31 | 30 | 25 | 26 | 32 | 27 | 27 | 32 |
| % disagree if benefits less generous, people stand on own feet | 32 | 34 | 35 | 36 | 30 | 29 | 24 | 25 | 25 | 22 | 20 | 22 |
| <i>Base</i> | 2531 | 2450 | 2980 | 2795 | 2900 | 873 | 2609 | 2699 | 2822 | 2672 | 3000 | 967 |
| % agree unemployment benefits too low | 29 | 33 | 40 | 37 | 29 | 34 | 23 | 26 | 23 | 26 | 21 | 29 |
| <i>Base</i> | 3146 | 3143 | 3426 | 3287 | 3435 | 3272 | 3199 | 3193 | 3240 | 3094 | 3358 | 1139 |

n/a = not asked

Table A.3 Attitudes towards taxation and spending, 1983–2009

| | 83 | 84 | 85 | 86 | 87 | 89 | 90 | 91 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Reduce taxes/spend less | 9 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 |
| Keep taxes/spend same | 54 | 50 | 43 | 43 | 44 | 46 | 37 | 29 | 29 | 33 | 31 | 34 | 31 |
| Increase taxes/spend more | 32 | 39 | 45 | 45 | 46 | 50 | 54 | 65 | 63 | 58 | 61 | 59 | 62 |
| <i>Base</i> | <i>1761</i> | <i>1675</i> | <i>1804</i> | <i>3100</i> | <i>2847</i> | <i>3029</i> | <i>2797</i> | <i>2918</i> | <i>2945</i> | <i>3469</i> | <i>3633</i> | <i>3662</i> | <i>1355</i> |
| | 98 | 99 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 08 | 09 | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | |
| Reduce taxes/spend less | 3 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 8 | |
| Keep taxes/spend same | 32 | 35 | 40 | 34 | 31 | 38 | 42 | 43 | 44 | 47 | 50 | 55 | |
| Increase taxes/spend more | 63 | 58 | 50 | 59 | 63 | 51 | 49 | 46 | 46 | 42 | 39 | 34 | |
| <i>Base</i> | <i>3146</i> | <i>3143</i> | <i>2292</i> | <i>3287</i> | <i>3435</i> | <i>3272</i> | <i>2146</i> | <i>2166</i> | <i>3240</i> | <i>3094</i> | <i>2229</i> | <i>1139</i> | |