

# Attitudes to social justice

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# Attitudes to Social Justice

Peter Taylor-Gooby<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In his contribution to ippr's social justice project, David Miller identifies four principles of social justice:

1. **Equal Citizenship.** Every citizen is entitled to an equal set of civil, political and social rights, including the means to exercise these rights effectively.
2. **The Social Minimum.** All citizens must have access to resources that adequately meet their essential needs, and allow them to live a secure and dignified life in today's society.
3. **Equality of Opportunity.** A person's life-chances, and especially their access to jobs and educational opportunities, should depend only on their own motivation and aptitudes, and not on irrelevant features such as gender, class or ethnicity.
4. **Fair Distribution.** Resources that do not form part of equal citizenship or the social minimum may be distributed unequally, but the distribution must reflect relevant factors such as personal desert and personal choice.<sup>2</sup>

But understanding what the goals of the centre-left should be is only half the battle. It is also vital to understand public attitudes, how policy can work with the grain of these views, and where they may need to be challenged.

This chapter outlines what we know about the public's views on some elements of David Miller's four principles. We focus on the social minimum (which is understood mainly primarily in terms of attitudes to income poverty), fair distribution and on the emerging policy debate about childcare as it relates to a concern for equality of opportunity, particularly in relation to gender equality. Fair distribution is a key issue given the increase in income inequalities, particularly at the top end in recent years. To what extent do people find these inequalities acceptable?

The analysis is based mainly on the annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey; the leading survey of public attitudes in the UK. We reinforced this data with some findings from recent qualitative work carried out by Alan Hedges and Peter Dwyer, which uses focus groups to explore ideas about tax, the role of government in welfare and the circumstances under which different groups merit help. We also draw on the European Social Survey (ESS), which allows us to compare public opinion in the UK to that across Europe<sup>3</sup>.

The chapter shows that most people support the principles of social justice, but have reservations when it comes to paying more tax, particularly if it is intended primarily to help the poor. Views are complex, and support for greater fairness, a social minimum and more equal opportunities appears to be much stronger in relation to some groups than others. The extent of need is relevant – those with children are more likely to be supported – but, at the same time, groups which are seen to be contributing to society in some way, rather than just being passive recipients of welfare are also likely to be favoured. In other words, there are indications in the data that, while most

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<sup>1</sup> The author and ippr would like to thank Tom Sefton, whose presentation at an ippr seminar contributes to this chapter, MORI for providing analysis of the European Social Survey and NATCEN for contributing original analyses of the BSA regarding attitudes towards child care and work-life balance.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from David Miller's chapter for ippr's forthcoming book *Social Justice*, to be published in 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The British Social Attitudes survey is the leading survey of public attitudes in the UK. It has run on an annual basis since 1983 (see Park *et al.*, 2001, Appendix I). The European Social Survey provides high quality data on social attitudes across EU member states and some associated countries. The 2001 and 2002 rounds of the survey are now available (see [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org) for details and access to the data).

people support the four principles outlined above, in practice they may add a fifth, a principle of reciprocity or entitlement through social contribution.

The chapter is structured as follows: initially the public’s views on inequality and poverty are assessed. We then discuss what people may want done about poverty and unjustified inequalities, with particular reference to the importance attached to a sense of reciprocity. After discussing attitudes towards tax, we conclude by suggesting three challenges government face when thinking about public opinion and social justice.

**Income inequality and a fair distribution**

A clear majority of the British public see income inequalities as too large and believe they should be reduced. A considerable and increasing majority of those interviewed in the BSA survey (now about 80 per cent) say that ‘the gap between those with high and low incomes is too wide’ (Sefton, 2003, see also Hills 2004, Bromley, 2003). Looking more specifically at market or *wage* inequality (as opposed to *income* inequality which takes account of tax and benefits) most people also believe these to be too great, especially at the top end. When people’s *perceptions* of the general pattern of inequalities between occupations are compared with their views on what inequalities *should be* (see table 1), it is clear that people would prefer the groups that they see as low paid to receive more and the higher paid to receive less. Looking at the ratio of bottom to top in table 1, we see that people, starting from what they perceive wage levels to be, would like to compress the earnings distribution by over half; from 1:14 to 1:6. Most people greatly underestimate the spread of incomes. The actual earnings ratio is 1:55, four times the 1:14 of popular perception. In short, people appear to want differentials reduced by increasing income at the bottom and reducing it at the top.

**Table 1: Perceptions of annual earnings before tax, 1999**

	Perceptions (£K)	What they should earn (£K)	Actual earnings (£K)
Shop assistant	9	12	10.3
Unskilled factory worker	10	12	13.1
Skilled factory worker	15	18	18
G.P.	35	40	50.8
Appeal court judge	80	50	139.9
Chair of large corporation	125	75	555
Ratio, bottom to top	1:14	1:6	1:55

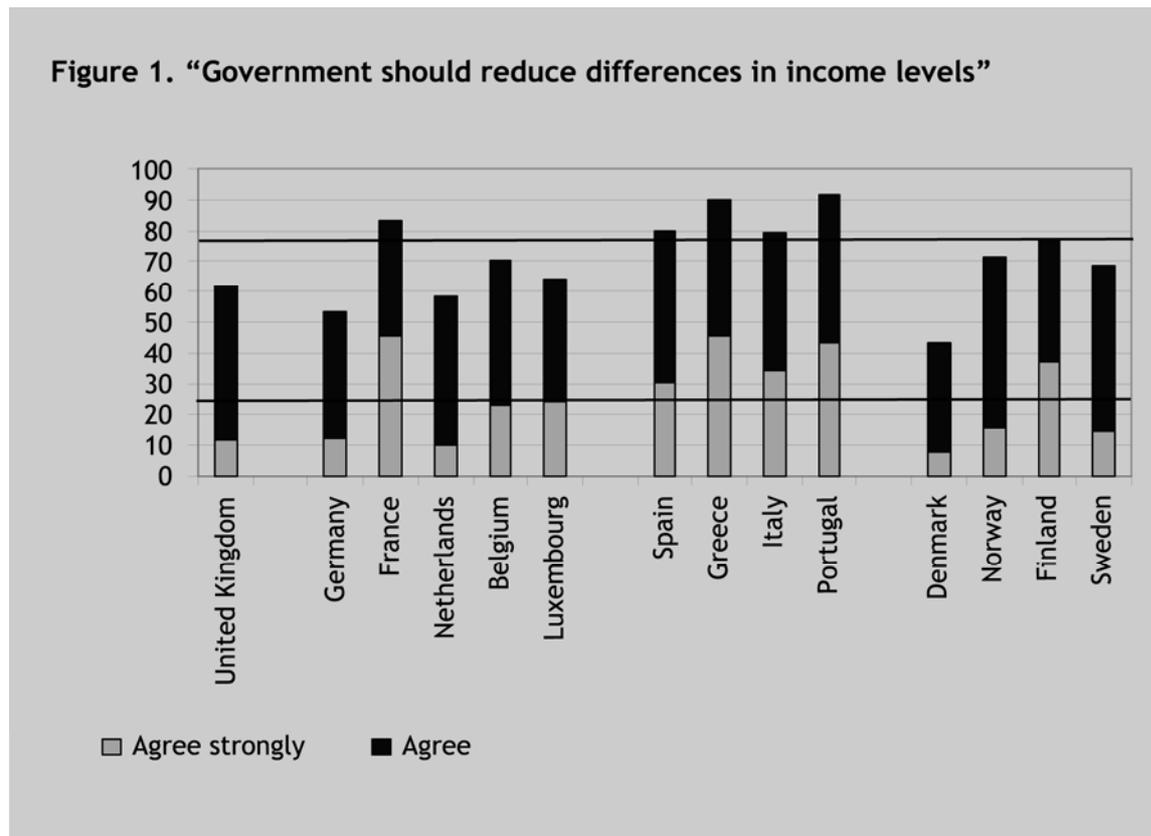
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Source: adapted from Hills, 2004, table 2.9

How strongly do people feel about this? Levels of income inequality are not at the forefront of people’s minds when they are asked about the most important issues facing the government and the country. The public continue to put public services, particularly the NHS and the education system, at the top of their list. Indeed one policy area, which was a major issue a decade ago, and is related to inequality, is unemployment. MORI data shows that in October 1994, when the Commission on Social Justice reported, 62 per cent of people thought that unemployment was an ‘important issue facing Britain today’. By August 2004 this figure had fallen to just seven per cent

(MORI, 2004). Hedges' qualitative research for the BSA survey also suggests that, while people do care about income inequality, it is their views on and often their dissatisfaction with, public services that comes uppermost in their minds.

The argument that the UK public do care about income and wage inequality, but without great conviction, is reflected in the international data from the European Social Survey. Some care needs to be taken with the relevant survey question – it asks whether people agree with the statement: 'Government should reduce differences in income'. This may mix people's views on the justice or otherwise of income differentials, with opinion on whether government has a role to play in reducing them. That said, some interesting patterns do emerge from the data. In the chart countries are arranged into 'welfare-state regimes': one conservative, one southern European and one social democratic, with the UK as a liberal outlier<sup>4</sup>. Both the percentage of people who 'agree strongly' and 'agree' with the statement, are shown.<sup>5</sup>



Source: Authors own analysis of European Social Survey data.

Though there are differences between countries within each of the welfare state regimes, there is generally higher support for government redistributive action in southern Europe than in social democratic and conservative countries. This pattern is likely, at least in part, to be affected by differences in existing levels of inequality. The views expressed in response to this question are influenced by two factors: support for redistributive intervention and perceptions of how severe the inequality gap is. The social democratic countries are most equal followed by the established European core conservative countries – Germany, France and Benelux. Mediterranean countries

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion see, Esping-Andersen, 1990, and Ferrera, 1996, who deals with Southern Europe as a separate category of welfare state. Data are also available for Eastern Europe, but differences in recent national experience especially in relation to the role of government make direct comparisons with the UK difficult.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper we make straightforward comparisons between different countries. Such cross-national comparisons, though, should be approached with caution, since cultural factors may influence response. While answers may be influenced by national dispositions (for example, social democratic countries have more egalitarian views), they can also be influenced by different characteristics – people in one country may be less prone to telling researchers they have strong views on issues than they are in another.

are more unequal and the level of inequality in the UK is slightly higher than for this group (Luxembourg Income Study 2004; see Blekesaune and Quadagno, 2003, for further discussion).

Support for government redistribution is slightly lower in Britain than elsewhere, but the most striking feature is weaker level of conviction. 62 per cent of respondents in the UK ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ with the statement, against an average for all countries shown of 76 per cent (as shown on Figure 1). However, the UK, along with Germany, the Netherlands, and somewhat surprisingly, Denmark and Sweden, has under 15 per cent ‘definitely agreeing’ that government should reduce differences in income inequality. All other countries have significantly more ‘definitely agreeing’. Taking into account the fact that inequality in the UK is greater than elsewhere, this indicates that people in this country do care about income inequalities, but do not necessarily feel strongly, and may be less inclined to think it is the government’s job to reduce them.

**Poverty and the social minimum**

Public attitudes to poverty are similar to those regarding income inequality. People do think that it is an issue, but not one they feel strongly about<sup>6</sup>. In 2003 a majority of those interviewed believed ‘there is quite a lot of real poverty in Britain today’. However, as table 2 shows, the proportion holding this view has declined since the early 1990s. Likewise, the proportion of people who think that poverty is growing has fallen, from 68 per cent in the early 1990s to 35 per cent by 2003. MORI includes a standard question on ‘the important issues facing Britain’ in its monthly omnibus survey. In 1997–8 the percentage who identified poverty and inequality as a priority was located in the band between seven and ten per cent. By 2004, the range had fallen to between three and six per cent (MORI, 2004). In some ways the public attitudes accurately match officially measured trends. The government has been successful in reducing poverty since 1997, most notably among children, a group seen as deserving across a wide range of opinions. The attitude data imply that it may be difficult to ensure continuing public support for policies to achieve further reductions in the level of child poverty, either because people have become less concerned, or because they believe that the problem is already addressed.

**Table 2: Perceptions of poverty in Britain, 1986-2003**

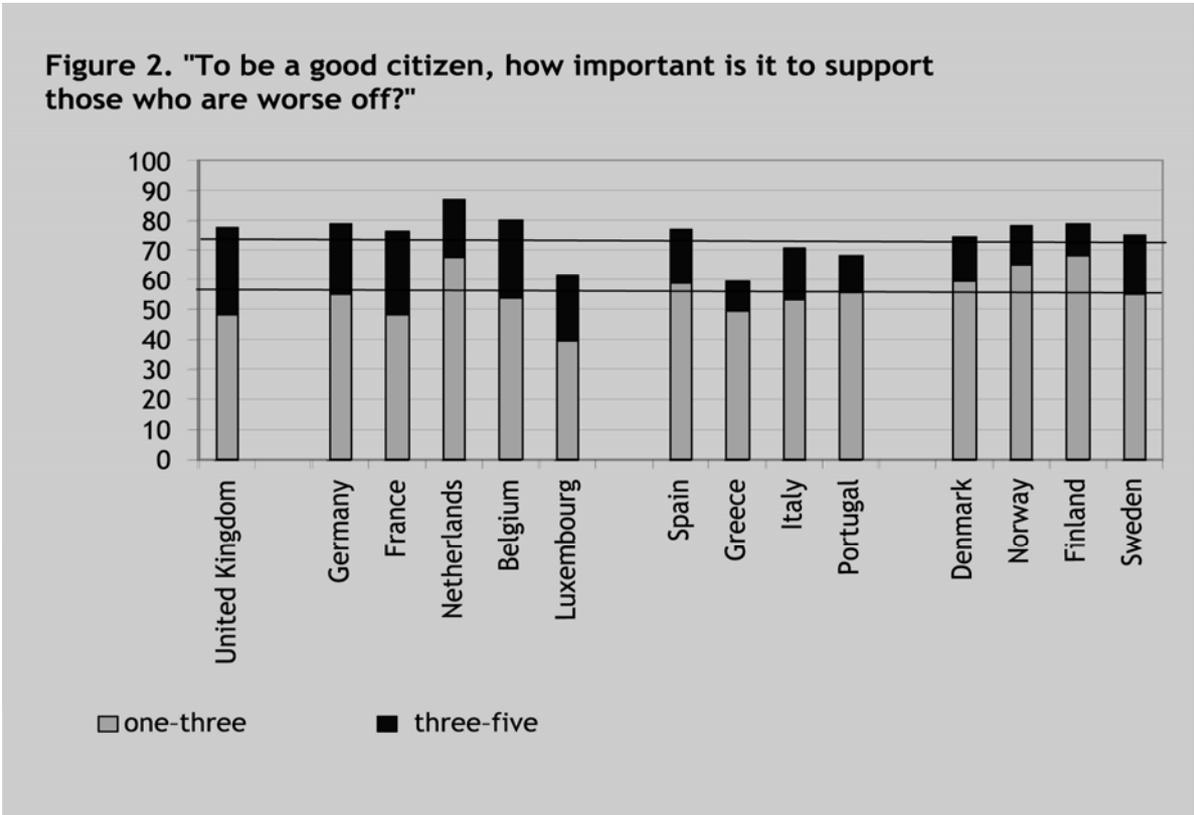
	1986	1989	1994	2000	2003
Quite a lot	55	63	71	62	54
Very little real poverty	41	34	28	35	41

Source: British Social Attitudes

Turning to international comparisons we rely on an ESS question asking people what they think of the statement; ‘to be a good citizen, how important is it to support those who are worse off?’ Though this does not necessarily translate into views on poverty, the findings are again interesting. In figure 2, we again seek to show overall differences in attitudes, but at the same time to assess the salience with which people hold views. People were asked to rank on a scale of one to ten how strongly they agreed with the statement, with a score of one representing the strongest approval. The chart shows the respective percentages for people answering one to three, and percentages for those answering either four or five.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth considering what the public understand when they talk about ‘poverty’. Though officially rates of poverty are measured by counting the number of people or households that fall short of a particular level of income, in the last decade academic and policy debate has emphasised wider measures of deprivation and exclusion (NPI/Rowntree, 2002). The close relation between views on inequality and poverty and the equivalent concern about both areas strengthens the case for poverty measures that reflect social inequalities more broadly, rather than simply assessing the number falling below a particular income threshold.

The cumulative percentage of people who answered one to five in the UK is not significantly different from other countries. The average for the countries shown is 74.7 (as shown on Figure 2) and the percentage in the UK is 77.8. Only two countries have higher levels of support. But taking the more stringent measure of agreement, we see a different picture. The UK figure for people answering between one and three is 48 per cent, considerably lower than the European mean of 55.5.



Source: Authors own analysis of European Social Survey data.

People think that income inequalities in the UK are too great, that the distribution should be narrowed, and that there is a significant amount of poverty, although perhaps rather less than in the past. However, at present they do not hold these views strongly. In addition, there is some evidence that people feel less strongly about these issues than they did seven years ago.

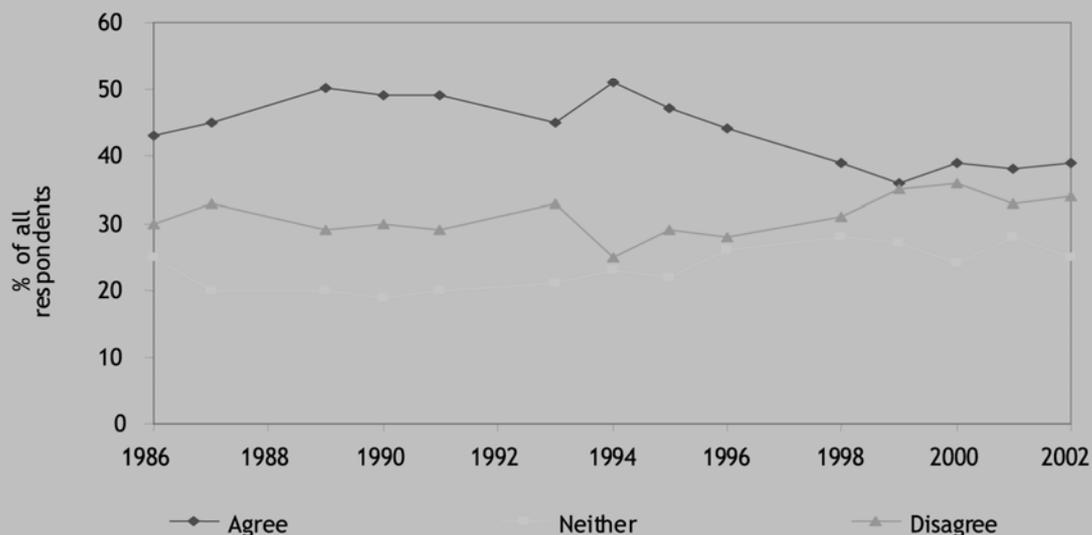
**The government’s responsibility**

Notwithstanding the weakness of people’s views in this area, the fact remains that majorities, when asked, do support core elements of social justice. Figure 1 has already touched on people’s views on the role of government. Figure 3 shows BSA data on a similar question. Given the level of government caution about raising the question of redistribution in public debate, support is surprisingly high. In 2003, 42 per cent agreed that ‘the government should redistribute income to the less well off’ and that only 26 per cent disagreed.<sup>7</sup> The remainder, a significant proportion, were undecided. The percentage of people agreeing that government has a role to play in redistribution has increased only slowly since 1999. Indeed, support is still lower than in the late 1980s and early 1990s when around 50 per cent of people agreed. In other words, while opinions have not

<sup>7</sup> Redistribution is complex. It may involve redistributing income horizontally, over the lifecycle; from working age to pensioners or to children, or it may involve vertical redistribution from rich to poor (with no temporal aspect). Hedges (forthcoming), suggests that people tend to think in terms of the latter.

hardened against redistribution under Labour, neither have they been turned around to support a greater measure of equality.

**Figure 3. “Government should redistribute incomes from better off to less well off . . .”**



Source: British Social Attitudes data

The gap between the 80 per cent of the population who think that income differences are too large and the 42 per cent who would support government action is striking. As we shall see below, support for higher taxes to improve welfare is also relatively low. There remains an important disjunction between support for the highly valued mass services like the NHS, and the lower level of support for services directed at specific minorities such as unemployed people, lone parents and the poor. A number of factors may contribute to this pattern of views.

#### *Misconceptions about levels of spending*

Most people are able to judge the rough relative cost of most areas of state provision reasonably accurately, and to rank services correctly in order of the cost to the exchequer (Taylor-Gooby and Hastie, 2002). When the questions turn to the detail of specific components of social security and, in particular, benefits directed at the poorest groups, however, widespread misconceptions emerge. In 2001 more than two-thirds of those interviewed saw the cost of benefits for the unemployed as the largest or the second largest item in the social security budget, whereas in fact they account for about six per cent.

#### *Distinctions between different groups*

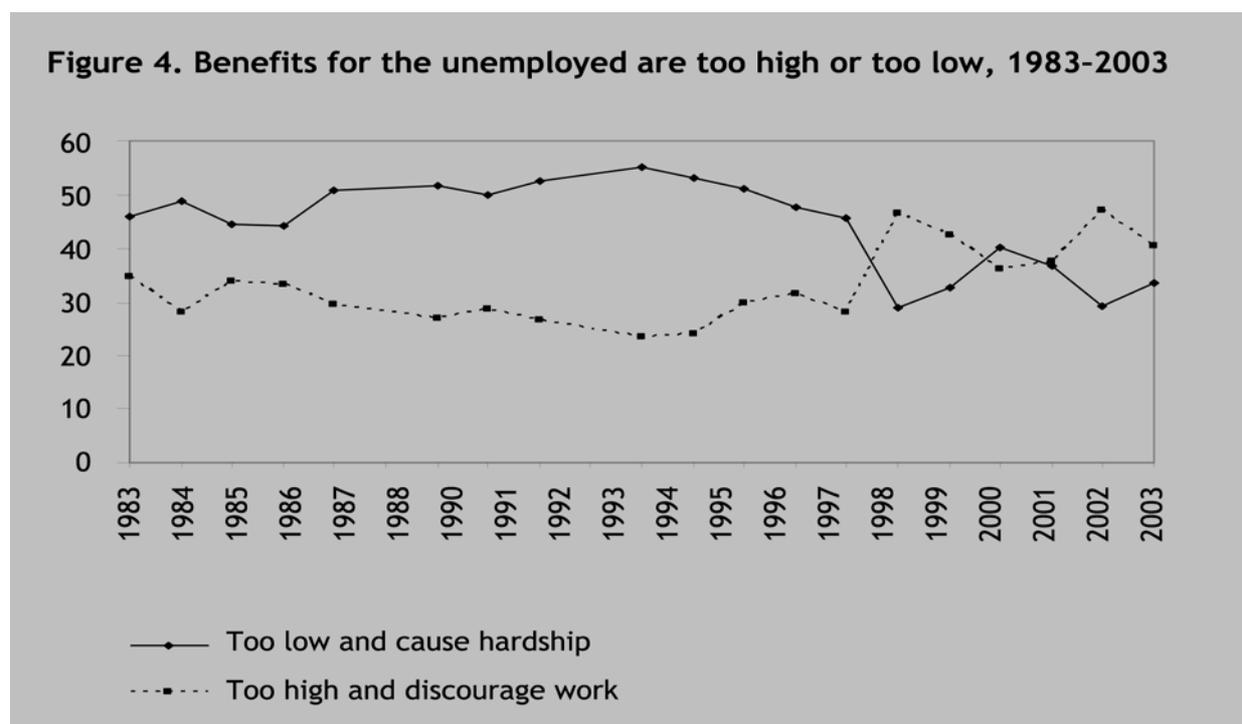
‘The poor’ are not universally regarded as a needy group. Attitudes are affected strongly by the level of need a person experiences. If people are asked whose wages they think government should supplement, support is much stronger for helping those with children than it is for either single adults or couples without children. In 2003, 66 and 59 per cent respectively thought that government should top up the wages of lone parents and couples with children. Only 26 per cent thought the same policies should be applied to couples with no children.

Existing government policy could be seen as going with the grain of public opinion. Benefit increases have been significantly more generous for the groups that stand high in public favour and that are judged deserving. The central theme in provision remains ‘Work for those who can, security for those who can’t’ as the DSS analysis of the *Changing Welfare State* (DSS, 2000:v) succinctly puts it. This implies ‘selective universalism and patchwork redistribution’ (Hills, 1999).

One recent change is that, since April 2003, support for low wage earners has been extended to adults without children through the Working Tax Credit. This is one instance where policy is potentially pushing ahead of public opinion.

*People worry about the effects of benefits on behaviour*

The moralistic concerns about the impact of welfare benefits on work incentives have grown stronger since 1997. Figure 4 shows that between 1983 and 1996, between 40 and 55 per cent of people thought that benefits for the unemployed were too low and caused hardship and between 35 and 28 per cent thought the contrary – that they were too high and discouraged work. After 1997, there is no clear trend, but it does appear that rather more people have taken the view that benefits are too generous and discourage work. This is supported by answers to other questions. In 2003, 39 per cent of people also felt that ‘many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help’, an increase from 26 per cent in 1994. The next section explores views on this central issue more thoroughly.



Source: Taylor-Gooby, P (2004) 'The work-centred welfare state' in Park, A et al. (2004) *British Social Attitudes: The 21<sup>st</sup> Report*, Sage

### Welfare conditionality and reciprocity

The welfare state, in the minds of most people, is not simply an engine of redistribution from better to worse off and of universal public provision. Similarly, most people do not think of social justice simply in terms of redistribution. Instead views are more complex, containing only elements of traditional centre-left egalitarian concerns, and might be better summed up in terms of a strong sense of fairness shaped by a valuing of *reciprocity* or *mutuality* (Hedges, 2003:5; Mau, 2004:53; Dwyer, 2002:293–4). Such a view suggests that policies which reinforce reciprocity might provide a source of social cohesion and offer a way of building social capital in a virtuous dynamic (see for example Putnam, 2000).

The data suggests people believe the welfare state should not be simply a funnel to direct resources downwards, but should also be a system of reciprocity, which provides good opportunities and support for those who participate, but does not waste resources on those who fail to do so. People should share a basic set of rights and responsibilities, which can mean recipients of welfare should abide by certain rules (Hedges, forthcoming; Dwyer, 2004). To gain public support, policies on

welfare spending need to be linked to the way people behave, and in particular the extent to which they actively pursue paid work or other socially valued activities.

Table 3 looks beyond the able-bodied and childless at other groups. Substantial numbers, though not majorities, believe sick people or carers should not have benefits cut, regardless of whether they report to job centres, and very few people think they should suffer major benefit cuts. However, views with regards to single-parents, whom (as we saw earlier) most people see as meriting supplements if they earn poverty wages, are more authoritarian. 79 per cent think their benefits should be affected in some way if they do not visit a job centre when asked.

**Table 3: Benefit sanctions for those failing to visit the job centre, when asked, to talk about ways of finding work (2003, %)**

% who say	Benefits for people failing to attend job centre interviews should be...			
	...not affected	...reduced a little	...reduced a lot	...stopped
Lone parent	17	38	14	27
Sick or disabled person	41	32	9	13
Carer on benefits	48	28	7	13

Source: Taylor-Gooby, P (2004) 'The work-centred welfare state' in Park, A *et al.* (2004) *British Social Attitudes: The 21<sup>st</sup> Report*, Sage

At present government policy seems to match opinion closely. Currently sanctions are being implemented for lone parents and for some (very small) groups of the sick and disabled, but are not anticipated for carers. Divisions arise in the public mind in relation to lone parents and the age which children should attain before mothers are expected to seek paid work. Table 4 shows the public's views on the 'duty' of different women to look for work. In all situations there was some reluctance to prescribe what the mother should do, but the most telling comparison is that between the single mother with a child under school age and the single mother with a child over school age. A significantly greater number of people (but not a majority) believe that a single parent in the latter situation has a responsibility to work. At present this is out of step with government policy, and indeed the situation in most other European countries, where there are stronger requirements to attend work focused interviews and to take work (Stanley and Lohde, 2004). The pattern of attitudes display a division between an obligation to pursue paid work and freedom of choice on this issue for lone mothers with children of school age.

**Table 4: What are the responsibilities of mothers in different circumstances?**

	Duty to work	Duty to stay at home	Do as she chooses	Base
Single mother, child under school age	14.3	23.1	51.7	2900
Single mother, child at school age	45.3	4.0	43.7	2900
Married mother, child under school age	6.4	30.6	56.0	2900

Source: British Social Attitudes data, provided for this paper by the National Centre for Social Research

The link between welfare payments and some form of valued social participation or reciprocity appears to act as a source of legitimacy for welfare spending. The next section considers the potential of a progressive tax system for tackling unfair income disparities.

### Progressive taxation to reduce inequality?

The issue of tax and tax increases is addressed below. Willingness to pay and potentially to accept increases in taxes is essential to maintaining good public services, but the structure of the taxation system is also important, since it can be used to promote greater equality.

An important aspect of inequality is the growing gap between those at the top and the mass of the population. Even if we accept that it is difficult to gain widespread support for policies which will tax the better off to pay for benefits for those at the bottom, it may still be possible to enlist popular enthusiasm for progressive taxation, which may at least help contain trends towards greater market inequality. This could be done by directing tax cuts towards the poor, taking proportionately more from the better off, or by combining the two policies. There are difficulties with all these strategies.

The current structure of taxation does not fit neatly with current opinions. At present, the combined impact of all taxes, including direct taxation (on income) and indirect taxation (on spending), is roughly proportional across the greater part of the income distribution. Almost all income groups pay between 32 and 37 per cent of income in tax. Perversely, it is only in the very bottom tenth of the population that people pay a significantly greater percentage of their income in tax – 53 per cent (Hills, 2004). Table 5 shows that most people believe this to be unfair. In 2001, 11 per cent thought that those on higher incomes should pay a ‘much larger’ share of their incomes in tax, and over half thought they should pay a ‘larger’ amount. This suggests that, within limits and contrary to the current situation, people do agree in principle that the taxation system should be progressive.

**Table 5: Share of income that should be paid in tax by those with high incomes, compared to those with low incomes, 1987-2001**

	1987	1992	1999	2001
Much larger	9	20	21	11
Larger	55	58	55	55
Same	21	18	20	29
Smaller/much smaller	1	1	-	1
Base	1212	1066	804	2821

Source: British Social Attitudes data

Interestingly though, the proportion endorsing a more steeply progressive tax system has fallen sharply since 1999. This is possibly in response to the perception that the tax policies of Labour in office have taken more from high earners, though we can’t be clear. The period for which we have data does not include the 2002 announcement and 2003 implementation of an increase in National Insurance. Since this did not provoke an expression of concern in the media, it is unlikely to have produced a substantial shift in opinion. This may mean that support has fallen further, but an overall majority for a more progressive taxation is likely to continue. However popular support for such a system, does not make any policy change straightforward, for a number of reasons.

First, people have a poor intuitive understanding of the current distributive impact of taxation. They are surprised when they find out that under the current system different income groups pay broadly the same proportion of their income in tax. Eight per cent of those interviewed in the 2001 survey thought that those on higher incomes pay a much larger share of income in tax than low

income people, and 56 per cent thought they pay a larger share, roughly in line with what people thought they should pay as reported in Table 5.

Second, it is also unclear what people mean by 'those on higher incomes'. The threshold of 'high income' seems to be set in many people's minds at a level where the potential impact on inequalities is limited. The Fabian Society Commission on Taxation (2000) asked what people thought of the tax rates on those earning below £15,000, between £15,000 and £30,000, £30,000 and £70,000 and above £70,000 a year. When confronted with these figures only 29 per cent said the top band were taxed at too low a rate and only 11 per cent thought the £30,000 to £70,000 band were taxed too lightly. The largest proportion of the sample (40 and 46 per cent respectively) thought tax levels for these groups were about right. Recent qualitative work also found that it was difficult to get widespread support for tax increases on any group earning below £100,000 a year – tax as an engine of fairness was seen as only appropriate to the real fat cats (Hedges, forthcoming).

Third, as in other areas, support for tax changes presented in general terms tends to become diluted the more precisely and concretely the issues are expressed. Many of those with above average incomes do not actually count themselves as falling into the group who should pay more. While 55 per cent of those interviewed thought high income people should pay more, when asked to assign themselves to high, middle or low income categories, only four per cent chose the former as against 53 per cent 'middle-income' and 42 per cent the low-income category. The vast majority of those who endorse progressive taxes think that someone else will actually pay them. This suggests that making the tax system more progressive, though not impossible, would be extremely difficult. Raising more revenue could be more challenging still.

### **Paying for social justice?**

Altering the tax system, to make it more progressive without necessarily increasing overall tax revenue raised, is one way of reducing inequality. However, to pursue wider social justice objectives, extra resources may be required, for example to invest in education or expanded child care.

The vast majority of people do endorse tax-financed provision in most policy areas. Looking across different areas of the welfare state, there is still a widely held view that government intervention is necessary to solve a range of social problems, though people think this applies to a greater extent in some areas than others. Securing good public services for all is still regarded as a central task of government. In 2003, 87 per cent of those interviewed thought that government should be responsible for paying the cost of health care when someone is ill, when offered a choice between government, an employer or the person themselves and their family (Park *et al.*, 2003). Only in pensions has there been any significant fall in levels for support for tax financed provision (Taylor Gooby, 2004).

The main division lies not between those who favour lower overall tax and those endorsing the present situation. Rather, it is between those who favour the status quo and those who want spending and, by implication taxation, to be increased. Table 6 shows that the balance has shifted somewhat over time, with support for increased state provision rising up to 1991 and thereafter falling back. The fall in support has been quite significant between 1999 and 2003, possibly corresponding to the perception that Labour has already implemented increases.

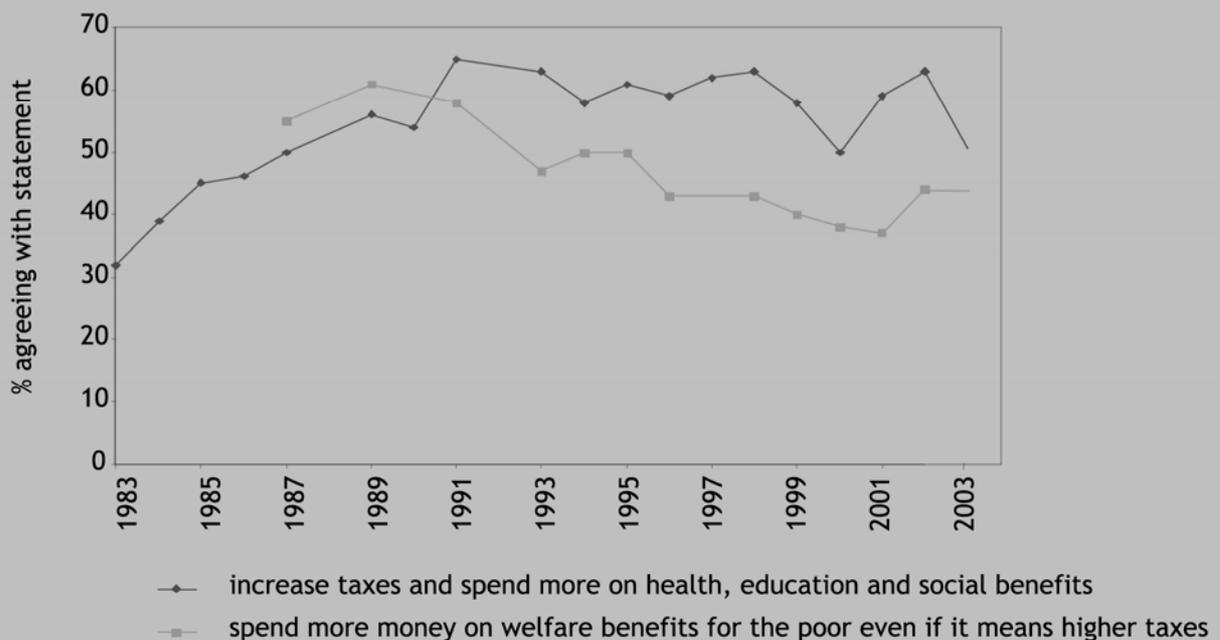
**Table 6: Attitudes to taxation and spending, 1983-2001**

<b>Government should:</b>	<b>1983</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2003</b>
Increase taxes and spend more on health, educational and social benefits	32	50	65	61	58	51
Keep tax and spending the same	54	42	29	31	35	38
Reduces tax and spending	9	3	3	5	4	6
<i>Base</i>	<i>1761</i>	<i>2847</i>	<i>2918</i>	<i>1234</i>	<i>3143</i>	<i>3276</i>

Source: Taylor-Gooby, P and Hastie, C (2004) 'Support for state spending: has New Labour got it right?' in Park, A *et al.* (2002) *British Social Attitudes: The 19<sup>th</sup> Report*, Sage

Reflecting the discussion above about what people see as priorities for government action, willingness to pay more tax still appears to be linked to specific services. There are clear differences in the services that are highly supported and in the amounts that people are willing to pay for them. The NHS, education and state pensions are consistently the highest priorities for extra resources. Figure 6 below shows that far fewer people would be willing to pay higher taxes for 'welfare benefits' directed specifically at the poor, such as income support and housing benefit. Indeed throughout much of Labour's first term, there was a fall in the percentage of people who would support such spending. This percentage has recovered since 2001, but to a level no higher than that of the mid nineties. Such attitudes tend to track the economic cycle, as higher unemployment increases the legitimacy of welfare spending.

**Figure 5. Views on public spending and taxation**



Source: British Social Attitudes data

Endorsement of higher taxation, even in the case of highly popular services like the NHS, education and pensions, is more limited than an initial reading of the data might indicate, and currently appears to be falling. Above, we highlighted the extent to which people misunderstand the current system and how views of what 'higher income' means shape whether they themselves would actually wish to pay more in tax. In addition, and perhaps more fundamentally, levels of mistrust in government present a considerable barrier.

A striking finding from qualitative research is the high level of dissatisfaction with and mistrust of the state (Hedges, forthcoming). Trust in government and politicians has remained consistently low during the past two decades. For example, no more than 23 per cent of those interviewed during the period 1983 to 2003 trust politicians and government to 'tell the truth' – only slightly above the figure for journalists and substantially below that for any other of the 16 categories of people in public life reviewed (see also Norris, 1998). At the same time, trust in government 'to put the needs of the nation above those of party' has roughly halved, from 39 to 20 per cent during the same period. The impression of an increasingly critical public is reinforced by evidence on dissatisfaction with specific services.

The latest BSA data shows that, even in the case of the most widely supported and highly valued service, the NHS, *dissatisfaction* is high and, until recently, rising. Dissatisfaction with this service had reached a peak of 49 per cent in 1996. After 1997 the new government initially enjoyed a 'honeymoon' in public opinion and dissatisfaction fell to 33 per cent by 1999. Since then it has risen, and by 2002 was at 41 per cent but then fell to 37 per cent in 2003, indicating that increased spending may be feeding through into service improvements which are acknowledged in public perceptions (Taylor-Gooby and Hastie, 2002; Sefton, 2003). Other services follow a similar pattern.

The impression that public trust has to be earned is reinforced by data on service spending. Table 7 shows that in 2002 few people trust government to spend taxpayers' money wisely 'a great deal'.

**Table 7: Do you trust government [and the specified services] to spend taxpayers'/service consumers' money wisely in the interests of service users (2002, %)?**

	A great deal	Quite a bit	N
Government	9	26	2663
Local council	9	32	2698
Police	10	46	2600
State pension	11	39	2572
Private pension	12	44	2550
NHS hospital	12	47	2688
Private hospital	16	49	2466
State school	16	54	2611
Fee-paying school	22	57	2384

Source: British Social Attitudes data

The last six rows of the table deal with 'matched pairs' – areas where there are both state and private services which are to some extent alternatives, directed at similar needs. In general, the private alternative receives slightly higher support. The pattern of responses is consonant with the general direction of recent work in sociology. This argues that, as people become generally better informed about the shortcomings of experts and officials and more self-confident in their judgements, they are less inclined to trust them (see for example, Giddens, 1994; Beck, Bonss and

Lau, 2003). Low trust may also reflect what could be labelled a sense of ‘welfare fatalism’. People want better public services, and support in principle the notion of greater equality of opportunity, reduced inequality and a strong social minimum, but are sceptical of the ability of government to make progress on these ideals (White, 2004). They also have a relatively low opinion of politicians and are much more inclined to call the services offered by government into question.

**Child care: an emerging priority?**

One area of public spending on which a link to any net increase in tax has not been tested is child care. This is an issue intricately tied up with a desire to improve women’s life chances and achieving a higher degree of gender equality. Enhancing opportunities for women has been a strong theme of recent public debate. Social and economic change in this area has been profound in recent decades. The big increase in overall levels of women’s involvement in paid work occurred during the three decades from the 1950s to the 1980s and since then participation has increased only slightly (from 71 per cent in 1990 to 72 per cent by 2001). However, the rates of participation in paid work for mothers with a child under five have changed more rapidly. Participation for this group increased from just five per cent in 1990 to 48 per cent by 2001 (Dench et al, 2002, quoted in Crompton *et al*, 2003).

Public attitudes have shifted too. The proportion believing that a woman’s primary role is to stay at home and provide domestic support for a male bread-winner has halved during the past fifteen years from about a third to a sixth. Substantial majorities now believe that mothers can establish warm relationships with their children when they work, and that family life is not undermined when women are in full-time paid work. This decline of traditionalism is slightly tempered by a widely-held view that women should interrupt careers or work part-time when children are under school age (Crompton et al, 2003, 164-6). Many people accept that women should seek work, but tend to see domestic duties and particularly care of young children as primarily a mother’s, rather than a father’s, responsibility. Public attitudes assume a high degree of gender equality in the public sphere of paid work, but not in the private sphere of the home, with sombre implications for the ‘double burden’ to be borne by some women.

As table 8 shows , it is only when children are under school age that significant numbers of people think their mothers should stay at home. Asking just mothers this question produces very similar results. 70 per cent of mothers think that women should return to work after their youngest child starts school; 57 per cent think they should work full time again when their children leave home.

**Table 8: Should women work in different circumstances? (2003)**

Should women work outside the home full-time, part-time or not at all in these circumstances	Full-time	Part-time	Stayed at home	Can’t choose	Base
...after marrying and before you had children	78.2	7.7	1.3	10.6	1960
...when a child was under school age	3.4	34.1	48.1	11.7	1960
...after the youngest child started school	15.7	65.6	5.4	11.7	1960
...after the children left home	62	19.2	1.3	15.1	1960

Source: British Social Attitudes data provided for this paper by the National Centre for Social Research

Despite higher demand among women themselves to work, gender inequalities remain persistent. Furthermore, issues such as stress at work, particularly for middle-class women, are increasing in prevalence (Compton *et al*, 2003). Demand for more equal female participation in the labour market, and for a better work-life balance raises questions about the availability, or otherwise, of high quality child care. It also raises the issue of whether people think that government should contribute to the cost of provision, assuming that women are still expected to carry the lion’s share of domestic responsibilities. Table 9 shows that in 2002 there were high levels of support for government help with the costs of child care. This view holds for all groups of mothers shown, though it is weaker in the case of married mothers where the child is under school age. It is only with regards to single mothers with children of school age that we can track attitudes over time. Contrary to the trends in many other areas, there has been a growth in the percentage who thinks the government should help meet the costs. In 1994 only 52 per cent agreed with the statement. This rose to 57 per cent by 1995 and reached 62 per cent in 1998, since when it has been roughly constant.

It is striking that the earlier question (Table 3), which asked about sanctions for lone mothers as benefit recipients who do not attend work-focused interviews, produced a punitive response. Focus on single parents as mothers and providers (Table 9) generates more positive support. The greater public backing when a role in which a parent provides care for children, rather than one in which she is presented as a passive beneficiary, is emphasized, adds to the evidence that welfare redistribution is more strongly endorsed when it is seen to go to those making a reciprocal contribution.

**Table 9: When should government provide money to help with the costs of childcare? (2002)**

	Government should provide money to help with childcare for...		
	Single mother, child under school age	Single mother, child at school age	Married mother, child under school age
Agree	73.2	60.7	49.8
Neither agree nor disagree	11.4	17.1	18.9
Disagree	10.8	16.2	24.8
Base	1614	1614	1614

Source: British Social Attitudes data provided for this paper by the National Centre for Social Research

Current policies are not successful in enabling people to achieve satisfactory work-life balance, and the impact is not confined to women. At the same time, endorsement for provision that enables women to participate in employment while also sustaining childcare is strong. The approach has the advantage that it combines the promotion of equal opportunities with meeting the needs of children, two themes both strongly supported in public opinion. This may well be an area in which tax increases would be tolerated, provided that they were linked to ensuring the availability of reliable and affordable daycare. It is noteworthy that improving the quality of life for children has been one of the strongest themes in progressive discussion of welfare policy across Europe (Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002, ch 2).

**Conclusion: three challenges**

Survey evidence shows that the core social justice ideals of a social minimum, equal opportunities and the fair distribution of rewards in society, are shared by the majority of UK citizens, at least at the level of principle, although attaining the social minimum is often valued more than equality.

Most people are concerned at inequalities and poverty and would like to see them reduced, think that the better off should pay more in tax and oppose regressive taxation of the worse off. They value the key public services highly and want them improved, and want women to have good opportunities in paid work and not to be solely responsible for childcare.

However, widely-held patterns of belief impose limitations on the relevance of these attitudes to practical support for the centre left's political programme. Most people still believe that public services offer low standards and represent poor value for money. While they support progressive taxation in principle, they set the threshold at which higher taxes should bite comfortably above their own income, typically at at least £100,000 a year. There are long-standing moralistic concerns about the impact of welfare benefits on the poor. Those with children are more deserving of help, but pursuit of paid work is also valued. While equal opportunities are supported in principle, many still believe that the mother should be the main carer for young children.

Government faces three key challenges:

#### *Changing views: challenging fatalism*

One key challenge for government is to consider where it can lead and shape public opinion. Subservience to prevailing attitudes can be unduly limiting and dangerous. Unduly limiting because it is a government responsibility to promote progressive reform, and this bears particularly heavily on the centre-left. Dangerous because by accommodating public opinion government may actually strengthen attitudes which prevent it from reaching its policy goals. There is some evidence that policy can lead opinion, for example, by presenting unemployed people as active, by stressing training and the pursuit of paid work, or by emphasizing the social contribution made by single parents and carers. The dilemma between following and leading opinion has been particularly acute since 1997. In much of the data presented there are clear trends in attitudes with a break after 1997 reflecting expectations of or assumptions about the impact of the policies of the new government.

Some of these attitude shifts may not sustain progressive policy-making. For example, a decreasing number of people think that levels of child poverty remain high. This could reflect public recognition that there have been some reductions in poverty, but may undermine attempts to reduce poverty further. The increase in the number of people who consider unemployment benefits too generous may be seen as positive and a shift in public attitudes towards welfare more in tune with the government's emphasis on rights and responsibilities. However, this may make it more difficult to press for greater fairness in the distribution of rewards in society. The proportion of people who think government should redistribute incomes from the better to the worse-off has fallen substantially since 1994, and this presents a challenge to government policy.

A further issue concerns the extent of public misinformation. The evidence on trust in politicians and government indicates that the public is always likely to view any evidence from this source as tainted. However, the same material shows that more independent experts (scientists, academics, the judiciary, civil servants) enjoy much higher (and in fact rising) levels of public confidence. A continued emphasis on the independence of agencies and the transparency of the procedures by which data is gathered on issues like tax-incidence, and the costs of services for different groups, together with reiteration of some of the widely misunderstood points made in this chapter, would, over time, improve the quality of public debate.

#### *Continuing to building reciprocity into the welfare system*

Redistribution from rich to poor is supported by people, but people's views on welfare are complex. Majorities want the welfare system to support a society where the needs of groups such as children are especially valued. Able-bodied adults are expected to contribute, typically through paid work or through the care of young children or other dependents, and are to be supported in doing so. Government policies are expected to ensure that rewards and opportunities in employment are fair and the availability of childcare is clearly important here. Benefits are valued

to the extent that they are seen to fit within this framework, not because they simply redistribute resources indiscriminately to those with low incomes.

Support appears to be much stronger in relation to some groups than others. The extent of *need* is relevant and those with children are more likely to be thought deserving. At the same time, groups which are seen to be contributing to society in some way, rather than taking a passive role as recipient of welfare are also likely to be favoured. Where there is no sense of reciprocity, public support is more limited. In other words, there are indications in the data that, while most people support the four principles outlined at the beginning of the chapter, in practice they may add a fifth, a principle of reciprocity or entitlement through social contribution.

The pattern of attitudes is complex, so policy which is to be acceptable to the mass public must also reflect this complexity. It must include elements of progressivism, to contain the trends to ever greater inequalities. However, specific benefits must be directed to favoured need groups – pre-eminently children and their mothers. The importance of work, or perhaps a wider sense of ‘participation’, in most people’s minds must be respected, which implies a wide range of supportive measures to help people into work, top-ups for low earners, schemes to address work-life balance issues and a degree of sanctioning for able-bodied people who fail to take jobs when these are available. Rewards for paid work and promotion opportunities must also be fair, so that the gender gap in pay is seriously engaged.

#### *Tax and trust*

The government is faced with a dilemma on taxation. On the one hand, the improvements in services which the public desire cannot be delivered without higher taxes. More progressive taxation is necessary to address the inequalities which are also a cause for public concern, and will contribute to a centre-left programme. On the other hand, while more people endorse higher taxes (provided they are spent on valued services) in principle, they are much less willing to pay them or to accept a more progressive system of taxation in practice.

The material discussed in this paper indicates that the case for higher taxation cannot be made through an appeal to social justice as redistribution from better to worse off. People are much more likely to accept higher taxes if they are convinced that these will pay for improvements in highly valued services, and if they believe that the emerging welfare system respects the principles of reciprocity and entitlement which are widely held. From this perspective, those on the receiving end of state welfare can be seen as reconnected with society through the contribution they make in terms of care or pursuit of work. Practical policies for implementing social justice depend on a remoralising of provision for the poor in line with the principles embodied in popular conceptions of social justice at the overall societal level. The work of writers as diverse as Fukuyama (1995), Galbraith (1992), Putnam (2000), Sennett (1998), Dayton-Johnson (2001), Le Grand (2003), Goodhart (2004) and Alesina and Glaeser (2004) points to a decline in the moral bases for social cohesion as a central problem in an increasingly diverse and individualised society. Examination of the way people think about social justice in everyday life offers a possibility for developing policies which engage with these issues and allow the centre-left to develop a feasible programme that advances fairness.

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