

Poor Britain

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Chapter 7: The Will to Act

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PART II

Attitudes to Anti-Poverty Measures

7

The Will to Act?

Public attitudes to the poor and to equality

You get people saying people are scroungers on SB. Well they can't be because nobody wants to live like that. I mean, I surely don't, not for the rest of my life anyway. There's no way. It's very difficult to manage from day to day. [A single parent on supplementary benefit]

In Part I it was argued that around 1 in 7 people are living in poverty in Britain. But how far is there the will to do anything about it? The extent to which the public will back the policies necessary to tackle poverty and inequality depends on many factors: how they view poverty, why they think people are in need, and how they balance social justice against their own self-interest. Each of these is examined in this chapter.

At the outset, it is important to note that public attitudes on these questions are highly complex and not always easy to interpret. Indeed this is highlighted by the often contradictory and inconsistent nature of research in this area. Such views are also unstable, changing through time and with different social and economic circumstances. Moreover, public opinion is only one of the factors determining the policy decisions of successive governments. It is, none the less, unquestionably an important influence, helping to set political agendas and imposing constraints on action. With these provisos, we begin by looking at how the context of the debate has shifted.

The persistence of poverty

Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, it became widely assumed that poverty had been largely eliminated. The post-war

social reforms and the emergence of near full employment led to a growing confidence of a newly affluent, secure and more equal Britain, rid of the insecurity, inequalities and harsh social conditions that disfigured the interwar years. This view was reinforced by Rowntree's third and last survey in York in 1951, which showed a sharp fall in poverty among the working class from nearly one-third in 1936 to less than 3 per cent in 1951 (Rowntree and Lavers, 1951).

Subsequent research has revealed that this confidence, or complacency, was little more than a comfortable myth. Yet the problem of poverty did not reappear as a political issue until the mid-1960s. During the 1950s, academics such as Richard Titmuss and Peter Townsend had been arguing for a new relativist approach to the measurement of poverty. (Rowntree, as seen in Chapter 2, had adopted an essentially subsistence approach, although he did update his poverty line over the course of his three surveys to make some allowance for social developments.) In the early 1960s Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend, using a contemporary relative poverty line, found that there was widespread poverty - affecting up to 14 per cent of the population (Abel-Smith and Townsend, 1965).

Combined with the emergence of new pressure groups such as the Child Poverty Action Group and Shelter and the showing of social documentaries such as *Cathy Come Home*, public concern about poverty was rekindled. Such concern, however, seemed shortlived and did not generate changes in policy sufficient to make a noticeable impact. The Wilson government of 1966 - 70 was too preoccupied with economic crises to give priority to the social and wider reforms that would have been needed. Indeed, despite rising welfare expenditure, there has been little if any significant change in the extent of income inequality and relative poverty over most of the postwar period (Fiegehen *et al.*, 1977; Lansley, 1980). Looking at trends in the distribution of income over a longer period of time, Rudolf Klein has argued that 'the major shifts in income distribution took place *before* the major expansion of the welfare state in Britain and elsewhere' (Klein, 1980, p. 26).

In the last few years, interest in and anxiety about poverty have been revived. The emergence of mass unemployment on a greater scale than even in the depths of the 1930s' depression, the rising number of families dependent on state benefits and the re-questioning of the role of state intervention and high levels of public expenditure have led to a new concern about poverty and its roots. Against this background of persistent, if partially hidden, and then rising poverty, what stance has the public taken?

Attitudes to the causes of poverty

When asked about the broad objective of tackling poverty, the public have tended to show overwhelming support. In the British Election Survey of 1974, as many as 86.9 per cent thought it very or fairly important to increase government spending on getting rid of poverty (Table 7.1), roughly the same

Table 7.1 *Attitudes to tackling poverty and the redistribution of wealth (percentages)*

<i>Respondent's attitude to increased government spending on getting rid of poverty</i>	1974	1979
Government spending on poverty:		
Very important it should	51.8	47.8
Fairly important it should	35.1	35.7
Doesn't matter	6.4	7.9
Fairly important it should not	4.5	6.6
Very important it should not	2.1	2.0
<i>Respondent's attitude to government redistribution of wealth</i>		
Government redistribution:		
Very important it should	23.9	26.1
Fairly important it should	32.4	29.2
Doesn't matter	15.7	16.5
Fairly important it should not	18.0	17.4
Very important it should not	10.1	10.8

Sources: Whiteley (1981), Table 1; British Election Survey, 1979.

proportion that supported increased spending on the National Health Service (see Table 9.1). Even in 1979, despite the growth of antipathy towards some aspects of welfare spending and towards some claimants, this figure still stood at 83.5 per cent.

When it comes to particular groups of the poor and to detailed policies, however, public opinion has been more discriminating and changeable. Partly, this is explained by differences in why people are thought to be poor. Those who think poverty is mainly or wholly the fault of the individual are more likely to show hostility than those who blame it on wider social and structural factors. Over time, attitudes to the causes of poverty have tended to fluctuate.

In an EEC survey of poverty in 1976, respondents were asked why people live in need. This revealed that the UK public were the most unsympathetic in the European community in their attitudes to the poor (Table 7.2): 43 per cent of the UK sample attributed living in need to 'laziness and lack of willpower', whereas the EEC average was 25 per cent and the nation with the next highest figure was Luxembourg with 31 per cent.

A similar question was asked in the *Breadline Britain* survey.

Table 7.2 *The public's view in the 1970s of why people live in need (percentages)*

<i>'Why in your opinion are there people who live in need? Here are four opinions - which is closest to yours?'</i>	EEC, 1976		Breadline Britain 1983
	EEC	UK	GB
Because they have been unlucky	16	10	13
Because of laziness and lack of willpower	25	43	22
Because there is much injustice in our society	26	16	32
It's an inevitable part of modern progress	14	17	25
None of these	6	4	5
Don't know	13	10	3
All	100	100	100

Source: EEC (1977), Table 29; LWT/MORI survey, 1983.

This showed a remarkable shift in public opinion towards much greater sympathy for the poor (Table 7.2). By 1983, the public were much more inclined to blame wider social factors than the individual: the proportion identifying 'laziness and lack of willpower' halved from 43 per cent in 1976 to 22 per cent in 1983, while the proportion blaming injustice doubled from 16 per cent to 32 per cent.

Table 7.3 shows that people's own living standards are an important influence on their views. In 1983, the poor themselves, whether defined as those with the lowest incomes or those lacking necessities, were more likely to blame injustice and less likely to blame laziness than the average. Thus only 5 per cent of those lacking five or more necessities blamed laziness compared with 25 per cent of those lacking none of the necessities. In contrast, 40 per cent of those without five or more necessities blamed injustice compared with 32 per cent of those with all the necessities.

Attitudes to the roots of poverty also vary with people's self-perceptions of whether they are poor. Twice the proportion (26 per cent) of those who think they are 'never poor' blame poverty on 'laziness and lack of willpower', as those (13 per cent) who believe they are poor 'all the time'. Those who think they are poor 'all the time' are much more likely to blame injustice, (40 per cent) than those who think they are never poor (26 per cent).

The poor themselves are therefore more likely to blame poverty on wider structural factors; but this is not exclusively so. Thus, 13 per cent of those feeling poor all the time still attributed living in need to laziness. This is a much lower figure, however, than in Townsend's survey, where in answer to a similar question nearly one-third of those feeling poor all the time blamed poverty on the people themselves. This led Townsend to conclude,

Some of the poor have come to conclude that poverty does not exist. Many of those who recognise that it exists have come to conclude that it is individually caused, attributed to a mixture of ill-luck, indolence and mismanagement, and is

not a collective condition determined principally by institutionalised forces, particularly government and industry. In this they share the perceptions of the better-off. Divided, they blame individual behaviour and motivation and unwittingly lend support to the existing institutional order.

(Townsend, 1979, p. 429)

While this attitude was also evident among some of the poor in the *Breadline Britain* survey, it was much less pronounced.

Some of the sharpest differences, however, are found between people with different political affiliations. Conservative supporters are much more likely to blame the victim and much less likely to identify injustice. Thus, 14 per cent of Conservatives blamed injustice compared with 44 per cent of Labour and 41 per cent of Liberal /SDP supporters. Nearly three times as many Tories blamed laziness as Labour supporters. There were also some differences by age, with pensioners much more likely to blame the victim and much less likely to blame wider social and structural factors than were non-pensioners. Differences in attitude between men and women and across occupational groups, in contrast, were small.

The deserving and undeserving poor

The public's attitudes to the causes of poverty also affect their views on anti-poverty policy. Some groups and policies are likely to be viewed with greater sympathy than others. Partly this is a reflection of the public's image of who the poor are. Surveys have found that, even where it is accepted that poverty exists, some groups are more likely to be seen as poor and therefore more deserving of help than others. In Golding and Middleton's survey in the late 1970s, for example, while only 5 per cent completely denied the existence of poverty, most had in mind the elderly and the disabled. Few mentioned the unemployed or lone parents, although slightly more mentioned the low-paid (1982, p.189). With the emergence of mass

unemployment and the growth in the number of single parents, the public might now be more likely to recognise poverty among these groups.

The main explanation underlying the public's discriminating outlook is that, even where they recognise that groups such as the unemployed and single parents face financial hardship, they have tended to view them with much less sympathy than pensioners and the disabled.

The nineteenth century distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor seems to be alive and kicking - despite the efforts of social reformers to abolish it over the past 70 years - in the minds of a majority of the people. (Klein, 1974, p. 411)

This 'moralistic' stance on welfare issues reflects a view that some groups are poor or in need more because of their own personal failings than society's. If people are perceived to be poor because of individual inadequacies such as fecklessness, mismanagement or feebleness, they are much more likely to be viewed with disapproval. State support is more likely to be seen as an undeserved and indiscriminate handout and indeed as a discouragement to the individual effort required to escape from poverty. In the past, the unemployed, and to a lesser extent single parents and large families, have been especially likely to be viewed as undeserving. In an ORC survey conducted in 1968, for example, it was found that:

89 per cent agreed that 'too many people don't bother to work because they can live well enough on the dole', 78 per cent agreed that 'we have so many Social Services that people work less hard than they need to' and 87 per cent agreed that 'too many people take advantage of unemployment and sickness benefits by taking time off work'. (Klein, 1974, p. 412)

These views can be reinforced by the way welfare services and benefits are operated and delivered. Different groups of claimant, for example, are entitled to different levels of benefit,

both national insurance and supplementary benefit. The sick and unemployed, for example, receive a lower benefit than pensioners and the disabled. This gap, which has steadily widened since the mid-1970s, has been officially defended as reflecting the lower needs of short-term as against long-term claimants, yet the unemployed are not entitled to the long-term rate of supplementary benefit even after a year of unemployment.

Past surveys have also shown that distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor tend to be held on a relatively uniform basis. 'One of the most striking features of the distinction between deserving and undeserving groups is the homogeneity of opinion across the population . . . the groups most likely to suffer the needs accounted undeserving express very little more support for welfare in these areas' (Taylor-Gooby, 1983a). In Golding and Middleton's study (1982, p. 170-2), hostility towards welfare claimants was found to be strongest among the low-paid and unskilled workers, who felt themselves to be no or little better off than those on the dole. Unemployment and sickness benefits were often seen as blunting motivation and independence and encouraging workshyness and scrounging, a view fuelled by a feeling that claimants were often those least in need.

A similar hostility was also voiced by claimants themselves - and not only among pensioners, whose resentment was often born out of a view that the unemployed have it too easy compared with when they were young. This hostility is partly bred within the process of claiming itself. The experience of dependency on welfare - of the DHSS office, of the local authority housing department, of the social services - is often frustrating, debilitating and humiliating. In the *Breadline Britain* survey, supplementary benefit claimants were asked how they felt about claiming benefit. Although most (85 per cent) said it was a right they were entitled to, as many as 40 per cent said they were embarrassed about claiming it. And, although the majority (60 per cent) were satisfied with the service they got from their local DHSS office, more than 1 in 4 (27 per cent) were dissatisfied. In an identical question asked in a MORI

survey of poverty in Greenwich in December 1983 (MORI, 1984), the level of dissatisfaction was much higher at 40 per cent. This seems to confirm a view that the problems faced by claimants are more serious in urban areas where the offices are under much greater pressure.

Sometimes the stigma associated with the way means-tested benefits are administered, or perceived to be administered, leads to outright rejection. Moreover, in responding to meeting need, welfare policies also operate a system of sanctions, such as encouraging unemployed claimants to find work. This, combined with the policing role that such sanctions require and the emphasis on preventing abuse in many offices can inflame the unpopularity of services. It is perhaps not surprising that the resentment that often arises from this process can turn not only against the institutions themselves but also against other claimants who may be perceived as less deserving but somehow getting a better deal.

Shielded from any broader view of social injustice, those crushed by inadequate and censoriously administered welfare benefits on the one hand, or by poverty wages on the other, find their fears and resentments readily channelled into bitter and divisive contempt for those alongside them at the bottom of the economic ladder. (Golding and Middleton, 1982, p. 181).

While this distinction in the public's mind between the deserving and undeserving poor has prevailed throughout the postwar period, it has been held with varying intensity. It seems, for example, to have been especially widespread in the second half of the 1970s. Golding and Middleton have documented with particular force the mood of 'scroungerphobia' that prevailed in this period, producing 'a shrill and mounting antagonism to the welfare system and its clients' (1982, p. 59). As in other surveys, however, it was mainly the unemployed who were the targets of this antagonism. When asked who they thought most deserved to get money from the welfare, it was the old and sick who were nominated; only 5.9 per cent mentioned the unemployed and 2.4 per cent the low-paid, even

though up to three answers were coded (p. 169). This rising tide of hostility towards claimants was also found to be especially strong among the working class. This was attributed to three main factors; first, to the 'drop in real incomes experienced by many on low or average wages' in the years after the mid-1970s; second, 'the tax net was dragging in more and more of the low paid so that large numbers of ill-rewarded people found their pay packets irritatingly rifled for dubious purposes' - that is, the protection of benefit levels; third, 'there had been, real, visible and irreversible rises in the costs of welfare' (pp. 231- 3).

The waning of the welfare backlash

Since the late 1970s, however, there is evidence of some softening in public attitudes. This is reflected both in overall attitudes on the need to tackle poverty and in attitudes to particular groups of claimants and types of benefit. We have already seen how the tendency to blame the victim is much weaker now than in the past. In the *Breadline Britain* survey, respondents were also asked whether they thought that the government is doing too much, too little or enough to *help those lacking necessities*. A majority (57 per cent) thought that it was doing too little, one-third thought that it was about the right amount, and only 6 per cent thought it was too much (Table 7.4).

The poor themselves, both those on the lowest incomes and those lacking the most necessities, were nearly twice as likely as those who are best-off to argue that too little is being done. Similarly, working-class groups were much more likely than the middle class to think that too little is being done, while Labour supporters were nearly four times as likely to think so as Conservatives.

In the 1976 EEC survey, respondents were asked whether they thought the authorities were doing too little, too much or about what they should do *for people in poverty*: in the UK 36 per cent said too little, 20 per cent too much and 35 per cent the

right amount. As in the answers to why people live in need (Table 7.2), this revealed a much less supportive attitude to the poor than in the European Community as a whole, where 54 per cent said too little and only 7 per cent too much. Although this question was differently worded than in the *Breadline Britain* survey, the sharp differences in the answers indicate some shift towards greater public support for actions to help the poor.

The *Breadline Britain* survey also suggests that attitudes towards those on benefit are much less hostile than they appeared to be in the late 1970s. In particular, the traditionally undeserving poor and traditionally unpopular benefits are now viewed with greater sympathy than in that period. A majority think not only that pensions are too low, but also that supplementary benefit is too low, while 40 per cent think that unemployment benefit is too low compared with 9 per cent too high. (This is discussed further in Chapter 9.) In August 1976, in contrast, a Gallup poll found that 37 per cent thought unemployment benefit was too high and only 9 per cent too low.

This change in attitude towards claimants, especially the unemployed, is mainly explained by the personal impact of the recession, soaring unemployment and the sharp rise in the number of claimants. Since 1979, the number of unemployed supplementary benefit claimants has more than tripled from 560,000 in 1979 to 1.9 million in August 1983. The unemployed now account for 43 per cent of all claimants compared with 20 per cent in 1979. For the first time since the war, there are now more unemployed than pensioner claimants. With this trend, the old antipathy towards the unemployed seems to have weakened markedly. By mid-1980, a Gallup poll showed that unemployment had displaced inflation as the most important problem facing the country, whereas, in April 1975, only 26 per cent mentioned unemployment compared with 65 per cent mentioning inflation. The public also seem much more aware of the underlying structural causes of unemployment, and of the lack of jobs available compared with the number looking for work. In an NOP poll in August 1982, 31 per cent blamed the government for unemployment, 20 per cent blamed the

world recession and only 5 per cent mentioned laziness. In September 1977, in contrast, in a Gallup poll, one-third mentioned 'people not wanting to work'. Moreover, with the spread of unemployment, more and more people have had direct experience of life on the dole within their families. In the *Breadline Britain* survey, 26 per cent said that unemployment was a problem facing them or their family, while more than one-third of families (36 per cent) were worried about employment prospects for their children. As many as 34 per cent said that they or someone in their family were or had been unemployed, or had someone in their family unemployed in the past year. It is not surprising, therefore, that people are much less likely to blame the victim and that the unemployed are less likely to be labelled undeserving.

That the recession has had a moderating impact on social opinion and helped to weaken the old distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor is also confirmed in people's attitudes towards supplementary benefit claimants. In contrast to earlier attitudes, Table 7.5 shows a clear majority (69 per cent) strongly agreeing or tending to agree that most people claiming supplementary benefit are in real need. As many as 74 per cent also agreed that a lot of people who are entitled to claim supplementary benefit don't claim it.

How far do attitudes vary across social groups? As we have seen, earlier surveys have shown that hostility to claimants was not confined to the middle classes but also existed among the working class and to a lesser extent among the poor themselves. Table 7.5, however, shows that the poorest - both those with the lowest incomes and those lacking the most necessities - are much more likely to agree strongly that claimants are in real need than are the richest, although still 17 per cent of those with the lowest incomes disagreed, compared with 30 per cent of the richest. The working class are also much more likely to agree strongly with the prevalence of need among claimants than are the middle class.

The answers are particularly strongly correlated with political affiliation - though slightly less strongly than with other attitudinal questions. In general, Conservatives display a more

reactionary view, being less likely to agree that claimants are in need, and less likely to acknowledge a failure to claim among those entitled.

These findings do not mean that the equivocation found in other studies no longer exists at all. As we shall see in Chapter 9, public spending on social security is afforded a relatively low priority compared with other spending, even if it is not as low as in the past. Tackling poverty is also relatively low in people's rankings of current problems. In a Harris poll conducted in May 1984, when asked which three of a list of nine were the most serious problems during the past five years, 22 per cent said 'getting rid of poverty'. While expectedly way behind unemployment (86 per cent) and inflation (44 per cent), it was also given a lower priority than industrial relations (32 per cent), the crime rate (30 per cent) and the competitiveness of British industry (28 per cent). It was also only slightly ahead of the need to encourage people to work harder (17 per cent). Against this there was overwhelming concern about the government's record on poverty: 38 per cent thought the government unsuccessful and only 1 per cent successful (*The Observer*, 6 May 1984).

There also appears to be some concern about the incentive effects of welfare spending. Table 7.6 shows that 57 per cent agreed with the proposition that 'Britain's welfare system removes the incentive for people to help themselves', whereas 35 per cent disagreed. Even so, this does not necessarily imply an opposition to the welfare system. It may simply mean that the public are aware of the problem of the 'poverty trap' facing low-income families whereby increased earnings simply lead to loss of benefits, so that they may be no better off. This question of incentives is discussed further in Chapter 9 (pp. 258-60).

Further, in the *Breadline Britain* survey, as many as 62 per cent strongly agreed or tended to agree that 'many people claiming supplementary benefit are on the fiddle', with only 23 per cent disagreeing (Table 7.5). Given the clear majority saying that supplementary benefit recipients are in real need, this could be said to reveal a basic contradiction in the public mind. This

Table 7.5 *Attitudes to supplementary benefit claimants (percentages)*

'I'd now like to ask you some questions about supplementary benefits. I'm going to read out some statements and I'd like you to tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with each one.'

	<i>All households</i>	<i>Households on SB</i>	<i>Net equivalent household income</i>					<i>Social class</i>		
			<i>Poorest 10%</i>	<i>Richest 10%</i>	<i>AB</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	
<i>Most people claiming SB are in real need:</i>										
Strongly agree	25	54	49	25	16	17	25	23	41	
Tend to agree	44	36	28	38	51	46	38	47	41	
Neither agree/disagree	8	3	1	4	9	8	9	9	4	
Tend to disagree	16	7	16	23	17	16	22	16	8	
Strongly disagree	3	0	1	7	4	7	3	2	0	
Don't know	4	1	5	4	2	5	3	3	6	
<i>A lot of people who are entitled to claim SB don't claim it:</i>										
Strongly agree	23	28	33	19	24	14	25	26	24	
Tend to agree	51	47	46	63	48	57	55	48	47	
Neither agree/disagree	8	5	6	9	10	11	5	6	7	
Tend to disagree	10	8	4	8	13	12	9	8	10	
Strongly disagree	2	3	1	1	0	3	0	4	2	
Don't know	6	8	10	-	4	4	5	7	11	
<i>Many people claiming SB are on the fiddle:</i>										
Strongly agree	25	22	23	29	20	19	28	32	22	
Tend to agree	37	30	32	36	36	39	35	41	33	
Neither agree/disagree	9	8	7	5	10	10	9	8	8	
Tend to disagree	17	17	15	21	23	19	19	7	17	
Strongly disagree	6	15	11	7	6	8	3	5	9	
Don't know	7	8	12	2	6	5	6	7	10	

I'd now like to ask you some questions about supplementary benefits. I'm going to read out some statements and I'd like you to tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with each one.'

Most people claiming SB are in real need:

	Political affiliation					Lacking necessities		
	Conservative	Labour	Lib/SDP	None/ Don't know	0	1 or 2	3 or 4	5 or more
Strongly agree	11	40	25	23	18	28	48	50
Tend to agree	51	38	47	39	46	43	35	25
Neither agree/disagree	9	3	7	13	10	6	3	5
Tend to disagree	22	13	15	15	17	16	9	16
Strongly disagree	3	3	2	5	3	4	1	1
Don't know	5	2	4	5	4	3	3	3

A lot of people who are entitled to claim

SB don't claim it:

Strongly agree	17	24	32	20	21	24	30	36
Tend to agree	55	56	45	47	52	53	50	41
Neither agree/disagree	10	6	6	7	7	10	5	1
Tend to disagree	11	5	12	14	11	7	7	12
Strongly disagree	1	2	1	2	1	4	1	4
Don't know	5	6	4	10	7	3	8	6

Many people claiming SB are on the fiddle:

Strongly agree	26	20	27	27	25	27	19	17
Tend to agree	41	36	31	37	37	35	37	44
Neither agree/disagree	7	7	11	13	9	10	8	10
Tend to disagree	14	21	21	13	18	14	17	15
Strongly disagree	3	11	5	4	5	5	13	11
Don't know	9	6	4	7	7	9	6	4

Table 7.6 *Public attitudes towards the impact of welfare on incentives (percentages)*

	<i>All households</i>	<i>Net equivalent household income</i>			<i>Social class</i>			
		<i>Poorest 10%</i>	<i>Richest 10%</i>	<i>AB</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>'Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the statement that Britain's welfare system removes the incentive for people to help themselves.'</i>								
Agree	57	44	54	62	53	59	59	51
Disagree	35	44	41	34	44	32	31	37
Don't know	8	12	5	3	3	9	11	12

	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Political affiliation</i>	
			<i>Lib/SDP</i>	<i>None/Don't know</i>
<i>'Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the statement that Britain's welfare system removes the incentive for people to help themselves.'</i>				
Agree	76	44	49	56
Disagree	21	46	43	34
Don't know	4	10	8	10

is not necessarily so. People may well acknowledge the existence of fiddling but still accept that claimants are in need. Whether or not such fiddling is disapproved of or accepted as sometimes necessary because of the inadequacy of benefit levels is unclear from the findings. We have seen how concern about abuse and fraud, about work-shyness and about incentives has existed throughout the postwar period, and was especially strong in the late 1970s. Such concern has persisted but is now mixed with an apparently genuine concern about the position and needs of the poor, and seems to be a lot less dominant and powerfully held than in the recent past. People seem to accept that, even if fiddling or abuse occur, a generous system of benefits is still required to ensure that those perceived as in genuine need are adequately supported.

Thus, acknowledgement of fiddling is not associated with the widespread hostility or the welfare backlash apparent in the late 1970s. It could be argued that the lack of a public reaction to unprecedentedly sharp cuts in benefit levels represents a sort of backlash by default. This seems unlikely, however. The lack of a widespread reaction to these cuts is probably as much to do with ignorance, or concern with self-preservation, or at worse, apathy in the face of a lack of alternatives as with any quiet endorsement of government policy. In the late 1970s, apparently high public spending levels and their beneficiaries - the poor and the unemployed - were convenient and easy scapegoats on which to pin the blame for wider austerity. This view was, after all, at least implicitly acknowledged by the then Labour government, which had already begun the process of cutting welfare programmes. Since 1979, although the present government has accelerated the process of cuts initiated by Labour, rising unemployment has made people much more sceptical of the case for cutting welfare spending. It is much less easy now to single out such easy targets.

Attitudes to redistribution

Above it has been seen that there is public support for the broad principle of tackling poverty and some evidence of a

growth in sympathy for the position of the poor. In Chapter 9 we shall look more closely at how far support in principle is matched by support for the policies required to tackle poverty. First, we look at the related but wider issue of redistribution.

Like poverty, the question of redistribution has been highly controversial. If poverty is defined in terms of subsistence only, its elimination involves a relatively limited degree of redistribution that is compatible with widespread inequality. If, on the other hand, poverty is defined in a generous relative sense, then solving it requires more redistribution and less inequality. In this book it has been argued (Chapter 6, pp. 196-9) that poverty cannot be eliminated without more redistribution from the non-poor to the poor and on a relatively substantial scale. This does not mean that poverty and inequality are the same thing, but they are related. A reduction in inequality does not necessarily lead to a reduction in poverty. A redistribution from the rich to the moderately rich, which indeed has been the main characteristic of the redistributive process since the war, might reduce inequality but it would have little or any impact on poverty. Similarly, the elimination of poverty might still leave an unacceptable degree of inequality. Moreover, because poverty in the sense of an enforced lack of socially perceived necessities is not confined to those on the lowest income but extends up the income scale (see Chapter 4, pp. 105-113), the more such redistribution is from the middle-rather than the higher-income groups, the less effective it would be in tackling poverty as well as reducing inequalities.

So, how much support is there for redistribution? Table 7.1 (from the British Election Survey) shows that, in 1979, 55.3 per cent thought that redistribution was a very or fairly important government activity. On the other hand, 28.2 per cent were opposed to redistribution. This indicates less public backing than for getting rid of poverty, which gained 83.5 per cent support. Nevertheless, support had remained roughly static since 1974.

In the *Breadline Britain* survey, answers revealed strong support for the aim of a more equal society (Table 7.7): 74 per cent thought that the gap between the rich and the poor is too

wide, with 21 per cent disagreeing; 76 per cent thought that differences in pay between the highly paid and lowly paid are too great, with 20 per cent disagreeing; 63 per cent thought the government should increase taxation on the rich, while 32 per cent disagreed.

There were sharp differences between income groups, social classes and political affiliation. The rich were much less likely to favour greater equality than the poor: 91 per cent of the poorest households thought the gap between rich and poor was too wide, compared with 53 per cent of the richest. Again 71 per cent of the poor supported higher taxation on the rich, with 25 per cent opposed. The rich themselves were evenly divided, with 48 per cent for higher taxation and 48 per cent against. Similar differences also emerge by occupational group. Working-class households were much more committed to greater equality than the middle class. There was, none the less, majority support across all classes for narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor and between the highly paid and the low-paid, though not for increasing taxation on the rich.

People's political affiliation is also a strong indicator of their attitudes to equality. Both Labour and Alliance supporters are overwhelmingly committed to a more equal society. Conservatives are much less supportive. Even so, among Conservative supporters there is still a slight majority (51 per cent) in favour of narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor, with 39 per cent opposed. A majority (58 per cent) of Conservatives were also in favour of lower wage differentials. In contrast, a majority of Conservatives were opposed to higher taxes on the rich.

There is a strong element of self-interest running through these responses, as in earlier answers. People are motivated by how they perceive themselves to be personally affected. But this is not entirely so. For example, a small majority of the rich and of professional and managerial groups support greater equality, apparently against their own interest. It may be that altruism is an important influence among the better-off. On the other hand, they may not perceive themselves as among the better-off groups who would lose out. As shown in Appendix

Table 7.7 *Attitudes to equality (percentages)*

I am going to read out a number of statements about Britain today. Please would you tell me whether you agree or disagree with each one.'

	Net equivalent household income			Social class				
	All households	Poorest 10%	Richest 10%	AB	C1	C2	D	E
Differences in pay between the highly paid and the lowly paid are too great:								
Agree	76	87	67	59	65	83	83	81
Disagree	20	11	29	37	30	14	13	13
Don't know	4	2	3	4	5	2	4	6
The Government should increase taxation on the rich:								
Agree	63	71	48	40	56	69	71	70
Disagree	32	25	48	54	39	27	23	22
Don't know	5	4	4	5	5	4	6	8
The gap between the rich and the poor in Britain today is too wide:								
Agree	74	91	53	51	64	83	81	83
Disagree	21	7	41	40	28	14	14	13
Don't know	5	2	6	9	9	2	4	5

C, the rich are under-represented in the survey, so we are not sampling the very rich in these answers. They also might well be less inclined to support egalitarian goals if the full policy implications were spelt out. Owner-occupiers with a mortgage, for example, might be less prepared to support the principle of greater equality if it involved a switch in housing subsidies from mortgage tax relief to council tenants. The higher-paid might be less committed to positive attempts to narrow pay relativities, or to a more progressive tax system.

Despite these qualifications, these results show little public backing for inegalitarian values, even among Mrs Thatcher's

Table 7.7 *Continued*

I am going to read out a number of statements about Britain today. Please could you tell me whether you agree or disagree with each one.'

	<i>Political affiliation</i>				<i>Sex</i>	
	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Lib/SDP</i>	<i>None/Don't now</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Differences in pay between the highly paid and the lowly paid are too great:						
Agree	58	85	83	82	75	76
Disagree	37	11	16	13	21	19
Don't know	5	4	1	5	4	4
The Government should increase taxation on the rich:						
Agree	35	84	70	65	66	60
Disagree	58	13	27	25	31	33
Don't know	6	3	3	10	3	7
The gap between the rich and the poor in Britain today is too wide:						
Agree	51	90	80	79	74	74
Disagree	39	7	19	15	21	20
Don't know	10	3	1	6	4	6

supporters. As we have seen in Chapter 1, poverty has risen and inequalities have widened since 1979. This has been the product of soaring unemployment, widening pay differentials, some cuts in benefits and welfare services, and the shift in the burden of taxation away from the rich. It is the poor, not the prosperous, who have borne the burden of the recession and the government's social policies.

The New Right's commitment to inequality

These widening inequalities have not simply been an unfortunate necessity in times of hardship. If this was the case,

it might well be asked why measures have not been taken to ensure equal misery for all, with the poor and the rich sharing the burden of the recession.

The government believes that greater inequality is a necessary price for creating the incentives seen as essential for sustained economic recovery. That means both the creation of low-paid jobs and lower rates of taxation, especially on the highly paid. One of the constant themes of current Conservative thinking, backed by right-wing academics such as Patrick Minford, has been that people have been priced out of jobs by excessively high wages, particularly at the bottom end (Minford *et al.*, 1983). In turn, high taxation, especially on the rich, is seen as stifling the effort, entrepreneurship and innovation that are essential to the process of capitalist wealth creation and general prosperity.

These views are by no means new. The arguments for a more unequal society have been implicit in the views of the radical right for many years. Friedman has long stressed the role of income inequalities, risk and uncertainty in promoting the incentives necessary to an efficient society (Friedman, 1962). Lord Robbins has argued that 'the inequality of reward which the market system engenders does not seem to me something which persons of good sense should worry about over-much' (Robbins, 1977, p. 16). Implicit in this thinking is that the role of government in redistribution should be an even more limited one than at present. The right accept the need for some state intervention to tackle poverty, but that this should be confined to meeting subsistence needs only or, as Hayek has argued, providing 'security against severe physical deprivation, the assurance of a given minimum of sustenance for all' (1960, p. 259), below which no one should fall. There should be no question of income transfers to people above the poverty line and only a small degree of redistribution from the non-poor to the poor. Benefit levels should therefore be set at a minimum level, thereby encouraging individuals to make their own additional provision if they so wish. This involves a minimum of interference in market processes, preserves incentives to

individual self-help and avoids the excessive redistribution that is seen as a discouragement to enterprise and personal thrift.

Such anti-welfare ideology has been promoted from the fringes of the Conservative party since the war, but until a decade ago such views would have fallen largely on deaf ears within its leadership. No longer. In a speech entitled 'Let the Children Grow Tall' in 1975 in New York, Mrs Thatcher, shortly after becoming leader of the Conservative party, spoke strongly about the wisdom of incentives and equal opportunity and how 'the pursuit of equality is a mirage' (Conservative Central Office, 1975). Many of Mrs Thatcher's ministers are also profoundly opposed to egalitarianism. As seen in Chapter 2 (pp. 15-48), as recently as 1979 Sir Keith Joseph had argued not only that there was little absolute poverty in contemporary Britain but that it should not be defined in relative terms. He went on to argue that redistribution from the rich to the poor would, because of its effect on incentives, simply increase poverty: 'You cannot make the poor richer by making the rich poorer, only by making everybody richer, including the rich' (Joseph and Sumption, 1979, p. 22). In short, reducing inequalities will simply mean lower living standards all round. Others have gone even further. In *Down with the Poor*, a pamphlet published in 1971, Dr Rhodes Boyson had this to say about the welfare state:

The moral fibre of our people has been weakened. A state which does for its citizens what they can do for themselves is an evil state . . . In such an irresponsible society no-one cares, no-one saves, no-one bothers, - why should they when the state spends all its energies taking money from the energetic, successful and thrifty to give to the idle, the failures and the feckless? (Boyson, 1971, p. 5)

Of course, Mrs Thatcher has been careful not to be too candid about her record and her real intentions on these issues. She has limited the collection and publication of some of the official statistics required to chart actual trends in these areas. She has also been careful not to present her egalitarian

ideology in too stark a fashion. Instead, she has attempted to give it a more popular ring, presenting it in terms of the meritocratic virtues of self-reliance, thrift, hard work and achievement. In this way she has avoided a potential public backlash. She has often appealed for a return to Victorian values, by which she has meant: 'you were taught to work jolly hard, you were taught to improve yourself, you were taught self-reliance, you were taught to live within your income' (*Daily Telegraph*, 16 April 1983). In the same interview, she went on to stress the importance of the role of charity in helping those in need:

And many of the improvements that were made *during Victorian times* were made voluntarily, for example, people built hospitals, many of the Church schools were built during that time, and prison reforms came from this tremendous sense of reliance and duty. You don't hear so much about these things these days, but they were good value and they led to tremendous improvements in the standard of living. [Emphasis added]

Beneath the popular rhetoric, however, what is meant is a much reduced role for the state in the provision of social welfare, and a greater emphasis on individual, voluntary and charitable help. Although the government has to date travelled only a very limited way down this road, the measures that have been taken have already combined with the recession to create a more unequal society.

The failure of the Labour party

If Mrs Thatcher can find little comfort in these findings, the Labour party too cannot help but reflect on its failure to have capitalised on these foundations for building public support for a more equal society. Tackling poverty and reducing inequality have been the dominant preoccupation of the Labour party

throughout its history. Leading Labour thinkers have repeatedly stressed the centrality of equality to Labour's faith. 'Equality has been the strongest ethical inspiration of virtually every socialist doctrine [and] still remains the most characteristic feature of socialist thought today' (Crosland, 1964, p. 77). Yet in office this fundamental belief has proved to be little more than empty rhetoric. Labour in power in both the 1960s and 1970s did not lead to reductions in inequality.

In the 1960s, this failure is partly explained by Labour being 'blown off course', shelving social objectives to cope with unforeseen and intractable economic difficulties. However, it was also a more fundamental failure of will. From the late 1950s, Labour's public statements and speeches were careful to stress that social spending would have to move in line with but not ahead of economic growth, thereby avoiding the need for higher taxation. In the 1960s, the key task was seen as promoting economic prosperity from which improvements in public services would spring. Labour was engaged in a delicate balancing act designed to win wider public support through an appeal to the middle ground, and the emphasis on social justice was presented as a secondary objective to the primary task of more effective economic management. Such pragmatism was hardly a recipe for a fundamental attack on social and economic inequalities. The poor and those in need were seen as gaining, as they had throughout the 1950s, not by redistribution but by growth. If radical redistributive measures were not even on the agenda in the expectation of economic progress, it is hardly surprising that little was achieved under Labour in the colder economic climate that prevailed in the second half of the 1960s.

Following Wilson's election defeat in 1970, some attempts were made to revive Labour's commitment to social justice. 'A fundamental and irreversible shift in wealth and power in favour of working people and their families' was made a key objective in its 1973 *Programme*, while its 1974 manifesto promised to 'eliminate poverty wherever it exists'. But Labour's record in office from 1974 to 1979 was again at best mixed. It had some promising beginnings with a rapid growth in public expenditure in its first year in office. Some important changes

were made in social security policy, notably the linking of benefit increases to earnings rather than prices, the introduction of the new pension scheme and, if reluctantly, the introduction of child benefit. However, faced with the deepest economic recession since the war, social objectives were soon sacrificed. Labour entered the 1979 election remembered as the party that only a few years earlier had launched a programme of harsh public spending cuts.

Of course, there is much room for debate about how much could have been achieved by way of social reform in the prevailing economic circumstances of worldwide recession, mounting industrial stagnation and dramatic inflation. However, the facts are that Labour has never had a coherent strategy for redistribution even in favourable economic conditions, let alone a situation of nil or low growth. Even relatively minor reforms such as chipping away at the regressive nature of tax allowances and reliefs such as mortgage interest relief were ignored.

There is little doubt that Labour's failures to make much impact on tackling inequality raised severe doubts about its credibility as a party committed to radical social change. This in turn fuelled the bitter internal wranglings that beset the party in the aftermath of the 1979 defeat and that helped pave the way for Labour's crushing defeat in 1983. Even during the 1983 election campaign, however, the fundamental question of the need for a fairer and more equal society was not made a central issue. During Mrs Thatcher's first term, inequalities had sharpened, not by accident but by design. Yet, while not unchallenged, Labour did not make the reversal of these trends a central theme of its message. The campaign, instead, was dominated by defence and disarmament, the EEC, unemployment and to a much lesser extent wider issues about the welfare state, though even here the debate was confined to the relatively 'safe' and popular issue of the future of the National Health Service.

The will to act - in principle

Throughout the postwar period, attitudes to the poor have tended to fluctuate according to both the prevailing economic and social climate and the public's 'moral' stance. The birth and development of the welfare state seemed to do little to rid us of the old nineteenth-century distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Certain groups of the poor, such as the unemployed and single parents, have been viewed with much less sympathy than other groups, such as the elderly and the disabled. Hostility towards the unemployed seemed to be especially strong, though far from overwhelming, in the late 1970s, this group being an easy scapegoat for growing economic and social problems.

Since the late 1970s, however, the public mood has shifted. People now show an improved understanding of the causes of poverty, a strong scepticism about the effectiveness of government policy and widespread sympathy for welfare claimants. Although this softening of attitudes is still tinged with some underlying suspicion about the circumstances and attitudes of the poor, the old distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor has become blurred against the background of the deepening recession and the rising number of claimants. The poor, including the unemployed, are now seen as more deserving and less the victims of their own inadequacies.

How far is this change in attitude matched by willingness to support more effective policies? Certainly there is support for the broad goal of reducing poverty and evidence of strong support for a more equal society. In the past, however, other surveys have tended to show some conflict between the goal of helping the poor and the specific policies themselves. It is to this question that we turn in Chapter 9. First, it is necessary to assess the success and failures of welfare policies for the poor.

