Broken Britain?

Public attitudes in an era of crisis

Being in government has perhaps never been more challenging in the post-war era. Even though the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic now seems to be behind us, the new administration headed by Liz Truss is having to deal with a series of actual and potential crises that, between them, would seem to leave little room for the pursuit of its own policy agenda. How well it meets those challenges is likely to determine the future of the government and of the country.

The most immediate of these challenges, of course, is a 'cost of living crisis' that threatens a severe drop in living standards, especially for the less well off. Yet, at the same time, the health service is still recovering from the pandemic, the integrity of the Union is under threat from developments in Scotland and Northern Ireland, reducing regional disparities in economic and social well-being remains unfinished business, the deep political division over a Brexit that is still not fully 'done' now seems to be part of a wider 'culture war', while a summer of unprecedented heat has been a sharp reminder that climate change potentially poses an existential threat to the whole world. Between them these issues suggest a divided and buffeted country that perhaps is at risk of being labelled 'Broken Britain'. The job of the new administration will be to persuade voters that it has taken the action needed to avoid that fate.

This year's British Social Attitudes (BSA) report provides a wealth of evidence on where the public stand on the various challenges that the new government faces.

Tackling the 'cost of living crisis'

The COVID-19 pandemic left a legacy of record levels of spending and taxation. Concern at such a development was reflected in the leadership campaign fought by the new Prime Minister, which emphasised the need to reverse the tax increases introduced in the wake of the pandemic. However, for some the pandemic exposed an unacceptable level of inequality in British society, as both morbidity and mortality as a result of COVID-19 proved to be higher in less affluent areas. In any event, the government has now had to intervene in the 'cost of living crisis' on a scale that matches the actions it took in the pandemic, not least because of the anticipated disproportional impact that food and energy inflation will have on the less well off.

Our chapter on attitudes towards taxation and spending, inequality and welfare suggests that, despite the dramatic impact that it had on everybody's lives, the COVID-19 pandemic did not occasion large changes in public opinion on these issues. However, in the years prior to the pandemic the public had already reacted against the financial austerity, including not least in the provision of welfare, that had been pursued in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008–9. Increasing taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits became a more popular option than keeping things as they are. Meanwhile, so far at least, the public have not reacted against the increase in government intervention by swinging away from backing increased taxation and spending – suggesting that the public face the 'cost of living crisis' with just as much appetite for potentially expensive government intervention as it had during the pandemic.

Much the same pattern is evident in attitudes towards the provision of welfare. After two decades of a largely critical outlook, the years prior to the pandemic had witnessed a substantial swing towards a more supportive attitude towards welfare. The balance of opinion did not shift further during the pandemic, but the new mood was maintained, a mood that might be thought to have been reflected in the government's decision to implement a temporary uplift in the main welfare benefit for people of working age, Universal Credit. Meanwhile, there is evidence that the pandemic was accompanied by wider recognition of inequalities in Britain – to a level not seen since the 1990s. The public also appear more willing than they were a decade ago for the government to redistribute income from the better off to the less well off. Between them these findings suggest that the public might well expect the action the government takes to mitigate the 'cost of living crisis' to take account of its particular impact on those who are less well off.

The NHS under pressure

The health service was inevitably in the front line of the COVID-19 pandemic. But, apart from dealing with the influx of people suffering from the disease, it is left with a legacy of increased demand for treatment from those who delayed presenting their symptoms during the pandemic, together with a backlog of patients whose treatment was postponed during the public health crisis. The public have noticed the pressures under which the service is now operating. Our chapter on attitudes towards the NHS reveals that satisfaction with the health service as a whole has fallen sharply to its lowest level since New Labour came to power in 1997. This trend is replicated in drops in satisfaction across all individual NHS services, but has been sharpest in respect of GP services. Once the most popular part of the NHS, GPs are, of course, the most used part of the NHS and thus this was the service where the impact of the pandemic was most widely visible. The biggest source of dissatisfaction appears to be waiting times, a complaint that echoes perceptions of the service in the 1990s before the New Labour government of1997-2010 pumped

more money into the service. This finding is underlined in a separate chapter that compares attitudes towards health care in Scotland and England, which shows that waiting times appears in both countries to be the biggest barrier to people's ability to access care during the pandemic. Meanwhile, although the increase in NHS funding during the pandemic has been accompanied by some increase in the perception that the service wastes too much money, it looks as though the public are looking for an improvement in the quality of the service akin to that achieved after 1997 – and for this to happen while maintaining it as a taxpayer-funded service that is largely free at the point of use. Our chapter also reports high levels of dissatisfaction with social care, the reform of which remains unfinished business from Boris Johnson's administration, with the public expressing concern about both low pay for staff and difficulty in securing the care that people need.

The state of the Union

The implementation of Brexit has given rise to particular difficulties in Scotland and Northern Ireland, in both of which a majority voted to Remain in the EU. The UK's withdrawal from the EU means that the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic has become a border of the EU single market, and one that, therefore, would normally be subject to border controls. However, there was a widely-shared wish that, in the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement, the existing open border should be retained. The compromise agreed between the UK and the EU (known as the Northern Ireland Protocol) was for Northern Ireland to remain in the EU single market and that checks on goods entering the single market would take place between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. But, in the event, those checks have proven unacceptable to the largest unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party and, indeed, the UK government. Legislation has already been laid before Parliament under which the UK would unilaterally revoke some of the terms of the Protocol, a step to which the EU and the nationalist parties in Northern Ireland object. Resolving this issue, where attitudes reflect people's preferences for being part of the UK or unifying with the rest of Ireland, is also high in the new Prime Minister's in-tray.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, the outcome of the Brexit referendum has served to rekindle the debate about whether Scotland should become an independent country or remain in the UK, a debate that had supposedly been settled by the majority vote against independence in 2014. The Scottish National Party's vision of independence has, for the last 30 years, been one of 'independence in Europe', and its commitment to Scotland being part of the EU was

reflected in a request by the Scottish Government as early as March 2017 that another referendum should be held that might pave the way for an independent Scotland to remain part of the EU. That request was turned down, the issue was then on the backburner during the pandemic, but now the Scottish Government has announced that it wishes to hold another referendum in October 2023 and that it is to seek a legal ruling as to whether this ballot could go ahead without the say-so of the UK government. In the meantime, in order to try and increase public support for independence, the Scottish Government is embarked on publishing a series of papers making the case for independence.

Our chapter on attitudes towards the constitution examines attitudes towards the Union. People in England would prefer Scotland to remain in the UK. At the same time, and in contrast to the position throughout the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, more people in Britain would prefer Northern Ireland to remain in the UK than believe it should unify with the rest of Ireland. But the popular foundations of the Union within Scotland and Northern Ireland have weakened. Around a half of people in Scotland now back independence, roughly double the proportion that did so when it was decided that a referendum should be held in 2014. Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, support for being part of the UK has slipped for the first time to no more than half. In both cases, much of the increase in support since the 2016 EU referendum has occurred among those who wish to be part of the EU. At the same time, in both Scotland and Northern Ireland the parties' popular support has come to be polarised around the constitutional question, a development that will not make it easier to secure widespread assent to whatever outcome emerges from the debate in both countries. Indeed, Scotland and Northern Ireland are not unique in this respect, for the chapter also shows how the gap between Conservative and Labour supporters in their attitudes to constitutional rules has also widened in recent years.

Regional disparities in England

One of the most striking commitments of Boris Johnson's administration was to 'level up' the country. The stated aim was to reduce disparity in economic wellbeing between the north and south of the country, in particular through the provision of improved infrastructure, in the belief that this would promote the economic health of the country as a whole. Meanwhile, it might be thought that the less well off North would be particularly keen on government intervention that might reduce inequality in British society. Yet, one of the striking findings of our chapter on regional differences in attitudes in England is that those living in the North are only slightly more likely than those in the South to say that Britain is unequal and that the government should take action to reduce inequality, while the two regions hardly differ at all in their attitudes to welfare. This represents a striking contrast to the position in the 1980s and 1990s when there

was a marked difference in outlook between the North and the South – and suggests that the relative strength that Labour still enjoys in the north of England (despite its loss of a number of 'red wall' seats) may rest more on traditional support for the party than on current commitment to a more equal society. Rather, the biggest regional difference now is between London and the rest of England. People in London are both more supportive of welfare and are markedly more likely to express socially liberal views on subjects such as law and order and the need to uphold traditional values. Such socially liberal views have been shown to be associated with support for Remain in the 2016 referendum – and help explain why the nation's capital has not embraced the Brexit agenda that will be as much a defining issue of the new administration as it was for the old one.

The 'culture wars'

Indeed, one of the key challenges facing the new government will be whether it can replicate Boris Johnson's success in 2019 in appealing to Leave voters. For the most part Leave voters have more socially conservative views than Remain supporters on questions of traditional values and law and order. It has been suggested that the Brexit divide might be rekindled if the parties take divergent stances on so-called 'culture war' issues, which also divide socially conservative Leavers and socially liberal Remainers.

These 'culture war' issues are centred on two questions. First, how much should society do to recognise the culture, identity, and weaker economic position of minority groups. Second, should Britain apologise for or take pride in its past, and especially its history as an empire? The debate about what the answers to those questions should be has sometimes been highly intemperate. In our chapter on attitudes towards 'culture war' issues, we find that both Leave supporters and social conservatives are less inclined than Remain supporters and social liberals to recognise and accommodate the position of minority groups and are more inclined to express pride in Britain. To that extent, there does appear to be the potential for 'culture war' issues to maintain the Brexit divide in British politics. However, the popularity of such stances has diminished in recent years, such that what was once often a widespread (more socially conservative) point of view is now more of a minority outlook – a cultural change with which perhaps some social conservatives are uncomfortable.

Among the minority groups covered in the 'culture wars' chapter are Black and Asian people and those who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, with the chapter looking, in particular, at whether attempts to give them equal opportunities have gone too far or not far enough. The report also contains a chapter that examines attitudes towards equal opportunities for disabled people in the workplace. It shows that while the public are even more committed in principle to equal opportunities for disabled people than they are for some other

minority groups, they are not always happy with the idea that they themselves might have to work with a disabled person, especially someone with a mental health condition. Support for equal opportunities in principle may not necessarily be realised in practice.

Addressing climate change

But beyond these more immediate challenges the new administration – along with the rest of the world – faces the threat of climate change occasioned by the increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as a result, inter alia, of the burning of fossil fuels. Boris Johnson embraced this agenda when, in November 2021, the United Kingdom hosted the latest international conference on climate change, COP 26. However, now the new government is having to deal with the sharp rise in the price of (and potentially a threat to supplies of) fossil fuels in the wake of the post-COVID recovery and the Ukraine war. Our chapter on the environment, based on data collected before these latest developments, reveals that public concern about climate change is markedly more widespread than it was a decade ago, and that most people accept that it has been primarily occasioned by human activity. However, even at the time of the survey, willingness to pay more in prices or taxes in order to protect the environment was no higher than it was in the 1990s. Meanwhile, in what may well be a guide to how opinion might be affected by the 'cost of living crisis', willingness to do so fell sharply shortly after the financial crash of 2008-9. The new administration may well find that the cost of energy will now be a higher priority in voters' minds than concern about climate change.

Between them, our chapters certainly suggest why Britain might appear divided, buffeted, and 'broken'. The perception that Britain is an unequal country has long been widespread but is now noticeably higher than it was before the pandemic. The health service is widely thought not to be providing the timely service that people need and expect. Support for leaving the UK has grown in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and how Britain should be governed has become much more of a divisive issue. While England outside of London seems less divided in its attitudes towards inequality and welfare, a new attitudinal gap on attitudes to welfare and social issues has opened up between the capital and the rest of the country. The sometimes sharp divisions over 'culture war' issues could potentially become part of our politics, thereby helping to perpetuate the Brexit divide. Meanwhile the public are worried about climate change – but may, perhaps, in current circumstances, be less willing to take the action needed to combat it. Nobody ever said being in government was easy – but the new government certainly faces a particularly formidable challenge in bringing Britain together.

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