

Welfare State Futures, Prospects and Cuts: Using Democratic Forums to Investigate Attitudes to Welfare

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Abstract (250 words)

Welfare states are undergoing major changes with the growth of new risks and needs, globalization and neo-liberalism. The broad class-coalitions that once made the welfare state settlement possible are now being eroded. With these changes, there is a growing number of studies that analyse the welfare attitude of individuals. However, existing studies are weak in exploring issues that are not contained within the prior assumptions of the researchers, or in examining reasoning processes or the meanings individuals attach to particular concepts and relationships and how they might explain attitudes. This paper is based on data gathered from democratic forums to study public attitudes to state welfare in the UK in 2015. We explored how people understand the changing pressures on welfare states, how they like to and expect them to develop in the future. Unlike previous studies, we find that education, labour market issues and immigration were the key areas of concern in discussion of welfare state futures. Furthermore, we find that individualisation and self-reliance dominated individual responses to welfare state reforms and the direction they should take reflecting the direction of recent UK policy reforms. Lastly, we find that personal experiences of individuals and those around them are one of the key factors driving one's welfare beliefs and attitudes, comparatively expert knowledge, media and other sources were not as widely used nor believed. The results of the analysis show that class solidarity is seriously being undermined by the new individualism, which can result in serious consequences for welfare state futures.

Key words: welfare attitudes, democratic forums, welfare future, cross-national study, Europe

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Introduction

European welfare states are undergoing profound change, driven by complex interacting economic, political and social pressures, operating at different speeds in different national historical and institutional contexts. The post-war welfare state settlement in Western Europe was based on broad class-coalitions supportive of a high standard of social provision across middle and working class groups (Korpi 1983; Baldwin 1990; Esping-Andersen 1990). These solidarities are now being eroded. New directions in policy to cope with new pressures and new demands have developed especially with the recession of 2007-8. Comparative research on attitudes makes an important contribution to understanding these changes.

This paper proposes the use of democratic forums alongside existing surveys which typically reply on individual interviews with a representative population sample using a questionnaire designed by experts. Democratic Forums (DFs) are groups which meet for an extended discussion of a topic over a period of time. The approach stresses the importance of a high degree of control being retained by the group rather than the researchers, allowing for a 'bottom-up' approach to research, so that researchers can examine people's unprompted concerns in an undirected discussion. We examined how people understand the changing pressures on welfare states through a two-day long democratic forum format carried out in 2015. The DFs also discussed how they would like to see them develop and how they expect them to develop in the future. The time horizon is set as twenty-five years which can be conveniently expressed as a generation.

In this article we discuss the background context of attitude change and the issues which emerge, explain why we chose the innovative methods of Democratic Forums, and compare findings from the project with those from other methods. This paper shows how this approach contributes to understanding the development of state welfare in Europe and to practical policy-making in response to the challenges confronting European welfare states.

Background on attitudes to welfare

Attitude studies are relevant to understanding current changes in the welfare state for theoretical and practical reasons. Particular social policy regimes enabled class collaborations between working- and middle-class groups (Baldwin 1990) and between rural and industrial workers (Esping-Andersen 1990), as well as enabling ruling class groups to contain class struggle, and providing an ideological context in which social democracy could be based on class alliance (Marshall 1950; Offe 1984). Welfare states also create their own constituencies of support among professionals and providers and among those receiving services and benefits (Skocpol, Amenta 1986; Immergut 1998; Goodin, Le Grand 1987).

Recent developments have fractured the traditional welfare alliances. These include: the shift from industrial to post-industrial society, the emergence of a more post-industrial and globalised political economy and the decline of the labour movement (Scharpf, Schmidt 2000, Iversen, Wren 1998); the emergence of new social movements (Snow, Soule 2010); the development of new social risks in relation to balancing paid work and family life, gaining

access to and opportunities in employment and coping with low pay and insecurity in work (Esping-Andersen 1999; Armingeon, Bonoli 2006; Taylor-Gooby 2004); the ‘fanning out’ of inequalities (Atkinson 2007) and tensions between immigrants and established populations over access to welfare state resources create further possibilities for division (Alesina, Glaeser 2004; Triandafyllidou, Modood et al. 2011).

Age-based solidarities are as significant as ever (Palier 2010; Goerres 2009; Lindh et al. 2005). Gender and family-based solidarities play an important role in the politics of The ‘New Welfare State’ (Bonoli, Natali 2012). Success in addressing new social risks in the labour market, has been more limited (Cantillon 2011, Marx, Nelson 2012). A national chauvinist defence of established rights has emerged (van der Waal 2010; van der Waal, de Koster et al. 2013).

Current empirical research suggests that both perceptions of self-interest (as suggested in the models of neo-classical economics: Hargreaves, Heap and Hollis 1992, ch. 3) and social values (as suggested in sociological and social psychological work: Miller 1976) are bound together in influencing attitudes. Work such as that of Blekesaune and Quadagno (2003) and Svallfors (2010) shows a strong relationship between perceiving that a given benefit or service will help a social group and endorsement of state provision by members of the relevant group or demographic category. The strong influence of normative attitudes in relation to desert (Van Oorschot 2006), need (Coughlin 1980), equality (Taylor-Gooby 1985) and reciprocity (Mau 2011) is identified in further work.

From a practical perspective, attitude studies enable researchers to map responses to current pressures and likely new directions in support for welfare state policies. Welfare states have come under strain during the past three decades from demographic real increases in the labour costs of human services (Esping-Andersen 1990), rising aspirations (Glennerster 2009) and labour market change, particularly as more women move into full-time employment, leading to demands for child-care and for state support, as wages and opportunities for those at the bottom stagnate (Green 2006). Most commentators expect these trends to continue into the future and in most cases to become more insistent (Pierson 2001; Hemerijk 2013; Glennerster 2010; Van Kersbergen and Kees 2014). The Great Recession from 2007 and subsequent stagnation in many countries exacerbates the problems (Gough 2011).

Much of the discussion proceeds from a top-down perspective, stressing government-led reform. These debates rest on analysis of the management of cost-pressures, from Pierson’s ‘permanent austerity’ (2001) to Palier’s ‘Farewell to Bismarck’ (2010). They are sharpened by recognition of the armoury of new techniques available to government, from new public management, internal markets and privatisation (Le Grand 2007) to personalisation, social investment (Vandenbroucke, Hemerijk et al. 2011, Morel, Palier *et al.* 2012). This is set in the context of emerging realignments of social divisions across age, generation, ethnicity, immigrant status and region, as discussed above, and between insider and outsider groups in a more dualised welfare state (Emmenegger 2012). The practical objective of attitude studies is to explore the priorities that people set, and find out what factors are likely to influence their future patterns of welfare state support.

Democratic Forums as a Method of Investigating Attitudes

Almost all comparative research on attitudes to and understanding of policy issues is based on quantitative analysis of structured sample surveys, the great majority on data from four surveys (European Social Survey, International Social Survey Programme, World Value Survey and European Values Study: see Svallfors 2010). These methods have considerable strengths in generating cross-nationally comparable data efficiently and making it available for analysis within agreed methodological frameworks. They are relatively weak in exploring issues that are not contained within the prior assumptions of the researchers, or in examining reasoning processes or the meanings individuals attach to particular concepts and relationships and how they might explain attitudes. Such topics can form the basis of structured questions but many people do not think through their ideas until they come to explain and justify their positions. Goerres and Prinzen (2011) point to the problem that structured research methods are often weak in identifying such ‘non-attitudes’ because many people feel that the interview situation requires a response from them. Discursive and interactive rather than pre-structured methods are better equipped to capture such positions because people do not experience a requirement to respond within a tightly structured framework.

The DF approach derives from concerns about the limitations of conventional social science methodology and also on issues within the current politics of democracy and political science theory. The approach stresses the importance of a high degree of control being retained by the group rather than the researchers. The topic is usually broadly defined. Typically there is a degree of light-touch moderation, in order to keep the discussion to the broad theme of the research rather than pursue a particular topic guide or schedule. There may be injections of relevant information, but these are typically on issues which the group requests and are provided by independent experts, or witnesses may be called to contribute particular viewpoints. Some approaches stress much more the importance of ‘bottom-up’ research (Wakeford 2007; Wakeford and Singh 2008), and others start from the position that people experiencing an issue are the best experts (Narayan 2000). There may or may not be a report to provide a focus and point to the discussion.

Two changes have directed the interest of political and social scientists towards this method. First, conceptions of democracy have shifted away from that of a system for managing consent from a largely passive electorate to one of democracy as an active institutional framework for promoting more widespread deliberation and citizen engagement (Mouffe 2000; Chambers 2003; Carpini *et al.* 2005; Goodin 2009; Dryzek 2010).

Secondly, some attitude theorists have moved away from a positivist concept of attitudes as original to an independent individual to a more social concept of attitudes as developed through interaction and expression in debate. This approach sees attitudes as social constructs, shaped through social interaction and best approached as properties of individuals in social contexts

than simply as individual characteristics (Brown 2011). From this perspective, interview responses are shaped by the interaction between a researcher (interviewer, questionnaire-designer) and an interviewee. DF discussions are the product of a group interaction between naïve citizens.

The strengths of DFs are that they allow participants much greater control over the way in which issues are defined and discussed than do structured surveys or, to some extent, than focus groups that are organised round a schedule of topics which the moderator pursues. They require that participants maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect, so that all points of view can be included and the members are encouraged to participate. They treat attitudes as socially constructed through discussion rather than as springing independently from individuals and allow opportunities for the researchers to trace the process of opinion formation and change over the period of the forum. For these reasons they permit researchers to examine the priorities of individuals without any prompting towards issues identified by academic researchers and contained in the question-format of a structured questionnaire, they allow researchers to examine the process of discussion and see how attitudes change and what influences them or strengthens them and how political and other cleavages emerge. Researchers can also consider the sources of information people use to reinforce their positions, from expert, politicians or media debate through to neighbours, acquaintances or family members or personal experience.

Furthermore, unlike other qualitative methods such as focus groups, where certain population samples are targeted, DFs encompasses a larger more representative sample of the population. This entails the possibility of allowing political cleavages to emerge and to be observed during the deliberations. Previous studies have measured such cleavages based on the diverging positions in welfare attitudes of the population through the analysis of survey data. Yet this approach would not allow for the observation of the development of cleavages during the deliberation of issues within groups.

There are corresponding weaknesses. DFs do not allow representative sampling, but can offer only a rough guide to the pattern of opinions. They cannot be directed to consider specific aspects of an issue according to a researcher's system of priorities.

Our project is concerned to examine a general issue of considerable importance (attitudes to the medium term future of the welfare state), where a number of factors will interact to influence change and where popular understanding of what is happening and of how it affects people's interests will have an impact. It is difficult to define and delineate the topic with confidence in order to construct a survey questionnaire that will cover all the issues that people will find important. Many people are likely to feel uncertainty on relevant topics (the impact of immigration, the future of the labour market, developments in relation to population structure) and will be particularly prone to modify or form their opinions in relation to what others say. Uncertainty is exacerbated by rising mistrust of politicians and experts (Rothstein 2005). For these reasons DFs offer an appropriate methodology for the work. To our knowledge this is the first time that DFs have been used for academic research on this topic.

Method

We carried out a DF exercise in Birmingham in late 2015, before the European Union referendum had become a major political issue, but at a time when immigration was high on the political agenda. The exercise formed part of a five-country comparative study on which we will be reporting in future work. The group contained 34 people, broadly representative of the UK population, all of whom attended the full event and received a small financial incentive for doing so (see Table 1). We also carried out a brief structured survey of attitudes to welfare state issues using questions taken from the 2008 ESS questionnaire before and after the exercise to provide further information on overt individual changes in opinion. The meetings were a mixture of plenary sessions and break-out group discussion in three groups to facilitate interaction. They took place over two days spaced two weeks apart. Prior to the event, participants were informed that the overarching question to be debated was the following: ‘What should priorities of the UK government in this country be for benefits and services in 2040?’

The first day consisted of a ‘naïve’ discussion of the welfare state with no prior stimulus, in order for participants to discuss and formulate themes they consider as the most important ones in response to the question. The five themes selected by participants were (in order of preferences): immigration; lack of money to finance the welfare state (which in practice led to discussion of inequality and redistribution); unemployment (which led to wider discussion of labour market issues); population ageing; and lack of/access to education and opportunity. We then added the theme of gender issues to the discussion, because we had agreed that this would be a common theme in the cross-national study. In practice gender issues were seen as relatively unimportant by participants, despite their prominence in policy debate.

A pack containing information (see online appendix for the pack) requested by the group drawn mainly from official statistical sources and covering immigration, resources and public spending on welfare, unemployment, population ageing and access to educational opportunities, was distributed by email between the meetings and introduced and discussed at the beginning of the second day. The second day was structured around the five themes which formed the basis of the comparative study: income inequality; immigration; gender; intergenerational issues; and labour market. Education issues re-entered in relation to opportunities in the labour market and inequality of opportunity. These themes corresponded closely to those generated by the first day forum with the exception of gender. The participants were asked to formulate the policy priorities for government in 25 years’ time, in order to provide a focus for the discussion. Interactions were audio and video-recorded, with note-taking by three observers providing a check, so that all statements could be traced a specific identified individual.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

Gender	Female: 18 (52.94 per cent) Male: 16 (47.06 per cent)
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Age [??collapse this a bit??]	Under 24: 4 (11.8 per cent) 25-44: 16 (47.1 per cent) 45-64: 9 (26.5 per cent) 65 and over: 4 (11.8 per cent)
Education	ISCED2: 3 (8.82 per cent); ISCED3: 19 (55.88 per cent) Tertiary, bachelor or equivalent: 12 (35.29 per cent)
Work status	Full-time work: 19 (55.88 per cent) Part-time work: 6 (17.65 per cent) Permanently disabled: 1 (2.94 per cent) Stay at home: 2 (5.88 per cent) Full-time education: 2 (5.88 per cent) Retired: 4 (11.76 per cent)
Marital status	Married or in a civil partnership: 18 (52.94 per cent) Separated or divorced: 6 (17.65 per cent) Widowed: 1 (2.94 per cent) Never married nor in a civil partnership: 9 (26.47 per cent)
Vote for party in next elections	Labour: 11 (32.35 per cent) Conservative: 7 (20.59 per cent) Liberal Democrats: 3 (8.82 per cent) UK Independence Party: 2 (5.88 per cent) Don't know: 11 (32.35 per cent)
Household net income [Collapse this a bit to make it more comparable??]	J (1 st decile): 4 (11.76 per cent) R (2 nd decile): 2 (5.88 per cent) C (3 rd decile): 1 (2.94 per cent) M (4 th decile): 4 (11.76 per cent) F (5 th decile): 2 (5.88 per cent) S (6 th decile): 4 (11.76 per cent) K (7 th decile): 2 (5.88 per cent) P (8 th decile): 5 (14.71) D (9 th decile): 6 (17.65 per cent) H (10 th decile): 3 (8.82 per cent) No answer: 1 (2.94 per cent)
Ethnic minority	Yes: 14 (41.18 per cent) No: 20 (28.82 per cent)

We coded the data using a coding frame which started out from the five issue areas identified by participants for the information pack and then extended this to 21 areas through an iterative process on the basis of the topics emerging in the discourse. In addition, the question of how a particular need should be address (by the individual, family, community, employer or the state), the extent to which people approved or disapproved of particular policies, the sources of evidence referred to, the justification for a particular argument, the level of conflict in the group and the extent of attitude change were coded in Nvivo. The before and after survey data was coded and analysed using SPSS. Table 2 offers a summary of the themes discussed in the democratic forums over the two days. The overarching theme of ‘labour market’, which includes issues related to employment opportunities, job creations and employer-employee

relations, was the most discussed, followed by the issues of income inequality, education, intergenerational issues and immigration.

Table 2. Themes discussed in the democratic forums, per number of occurrences

	Day 1	Day 2	Total
Labour market	697	1047	1744
Income inequality	399	599	998
Education	641	319	960
Intergenerational issues	263	665	928
Immigration	438	437	875
Childcare and parenting	165	400	565
Old-age pensions	88	411	499
Social safety net	266	209	475
Taxation	153	256	409
Welfare state financing	239	166	405
Other - various	183	211	394
Unemployment	235	154	389
Healthcare	156	179	335
Gender	39	274	313
Productivity	121	158	279
Funding and or financing priority	123	112	235
Apprenticeships	41	85	126
Housing	90	19	109
Zero-hour contracts	74	34	108
National service	12	61	73
Volunteering	5	35	40

Main Findings

Key emerging issues on the welfare state

The DFs provide a picture of attitudes to major issues in the future of the welfare state as our participants understood them and also indications of how attitudes change as a result of DF discussion. As mentioned above, our analysis covers the five themes selected by participants (immigration; lack of money to finance the welfare state; unemployment; population ageing; and access to education and opportunity) and the additional theme we introduced due to its prominence in expert debate (gender issues). Comparison of surveys conducted before and after the event suggests that DFs do have a significant impact on people's attitudes, though such impact depends on the issue raised. Questions where significant attitude change were noticeable mostly related to the issues of income inequality, welfare state financing and immigration (see online appendix).

Immigration

Immigration, which was selected as the main topic of interest by participants, is seen as a major issue; with a large majority agreeing that much stricter controls of borders are required. Most participants believe that immigration is too high and that current rates put severe strain on job opportunities and on housing, although some also pointed to benefits from immigration in diversity and range of skilled workers in the economy. The concerns about immigration were strongly expressed by many of those participating including one recent immigrant.

All participants agreed that there should be a points-based system limiting immigration and this was prominent in the final recommendations. Potential immigrants “must have language, a promise of a job, be able to employ people, no health issues, no criminal record, money in the bank, that sort of thing. Incomers need to bring something to the system” (participant 70). Only one participant disagreed with the view that immigrants must have resided in the country for more than two years before being entitled to claim any benefits. Some participants had expressed interest in stronger policing of immigrants, e.g., immigrants should be tracked through ID cards, and that all criminal acts by immigrants should result in deportation: “if [the criminals] come here and they are naughty, send them home”. (participant 72)

Some participants acknowledged that emigration should also be taken in consideration when discussing about the introduction of immigration caps (“British people are going to go and follow the money abroad so, we’re going to have to get other people in”).

The argument that immigrants’ rights to benefit should be severely curtailed corresponds to findings from the BSA: 40 per cent of the sample for that survey believe immigrants from outside the EU should never be able to access UK benefits (66 per cent for a maximum of 6 months), while 29 per cent support no access for EU immigrants (59 per cent for a maximum of 6 months: Taylor-Gooby 2015, Table 1). In the surveys completed by each democratic forum participant before and after the event, a majority of respondents (50 per cent before the event, 70.59 per cent after) believed that immigrants should obtain rights to social benefits and services after having worked and paid taxes for at least a year, and that immigrants tend to receive more than they contribute (47.06 per cent before the event, 55.88 per cent after). In terms of attitude changes, t-test results revealed that such changes are not statistically significant.

Finance of the welfare state and related issues

The DF respondents expressed severe concern about the sustainability of the welfare state. Much of this was attributed to the cost of welfare benefits for people of working age (discussed below in relation to unemployment). Discussion focused on this area rather than on the big spending services of pensions, health care and education, although participants expressed interest in the evidence presented about the relative cost of these services in the information pack. The overall view of the group was that it would not be possible to maintain the NHS and state pensions in 25 years’ time and most people expected the services to be privatised. Among final recommendations was an obligation for people to pay a percentage of their wage into a private pension scheme (with one participant disagreeing) and pay ceilings for high earners in large corporations, with two participants disagreeing.

In relation to this issue, participants repeatedly criticised the lack of transparency in terms of government spending, and feel the authorities should be more accountable:

“Somebody’s given £10, £15, £20 million, whether it be council or a government department, they’ve got to say what they’re spending the money on, where they’re spending the money and what are going to be the benefits to us as, as part of the society, yes so there’s got to be more accountability of where the money’s going and what it’s being spent on and more transparency”. (Participant 83)

In discussion of how funding shortfalls might be met there was little support for higher tax. Such discussion mostly focused on taxation for large multinational corporations and how to tackle tax evasion. A significant proportion of participants believed that high earners should not be taxed more, as illustrated by this quote:

“I feel quite strongly, if you are bettering yourself: why should you pay twice as much tax as other people, just because you’re bettering yourself, your life for your family? It’s your money, you’re earning it”.

Social inequality was likely to increase and redistributive social policies did not form part of the discussion. This reflects the logic of the arguments about individual advance through education and training in the education section below.

Structured survey data shows a similar picture, although the enthusiasm for state provision in pensions, health care and education comes out more strongly. Most people think the government should be responsible for and provide generous pensions and health care (BSA 2015) but there is real concern about the future. For example, nearly three-quarters of BSA respondents believe the NHS faces either a “major” or a “severe” funding problem’. Only around a half (48 per cent) believe it “will still be paid for by taxes” and be “free to all” in ten years’ time. The results of our before and after surveys revealed similar results.

Similarly, support for paying more tax for more welfare spending is low: ‘... on the key issue of the appropriate balance between taxation and public spending on health, education and social benefits, the most common position remains that taxes and spending should stay at the same level as they are now. Despite the cuts in public spending of the last five years... 52 per cent still take this view. There has been no more than a marginal shift in favour of more spending – from 32 per cent in 2010 to 37 per cent in 2014, still far below the proportion that was of that view in the late eighties and throughout the nineties.’ (Source?). In our before and after surveys, when participants were asked whether the government should increase or decrease taxes and social spending, attitudes tended to be strongly divided over this issue but changed after the event to move towards favouring cuts in taxes and public spending (44.12 per cent; against 38.26 per cent in favour of more spending).

Inequality emerged as an issue here and in relation to employment and unemployment. The general pattern of attitudes in the forums was an acceptance of inequality in society and a reluctance to increase taxation except on the very rich. The best response was seen as the improvement of opportunities among lower income groups, especially through education and training (see below). Structured surveys show majority concern about inequalities but limited

support for redistributive policies (Burkhardt, C., Martin, R. and Mau S., and Taylor-Gooby, 2011).

Population Ageing

The discussion of population ageing and intergenerational issues focused centrally on paying for pensions and did not take up the issue of conflict between younger and older generations that has been discussed by writers like Willetts (2010). The earlier discussion of sustainability led to recommendations for pension privatisation, but the area is clearly one of tension. In relation to population ageing, the real concern about sustainability of pensions was reflected in a recommendation from one breakout group to increase the retirement age to between 70 and 75 and to stop funding state pensions: “we just didn't think the funds would last unless we did something like that”. However, this provoked a high level of disagreement between participants. Similarly the idea of abolishing the state pension and making private pensions compulsory was controversial, with one group arguing for retention of the state pensions and expanding the national insurance scheme and two others being in favour of privatising pensions in order to put less strain on the state. The pattern of attitudes expressed here reflects the influence of framing and the way in which questions of sustainability may foreground one policy response and a focus on pensions another.

The before and after surveys reflected these findings as well. The majority of participants believed that the UK will not be able to afford the current level of old age pensions in 2040, but this majority significantly increased after the event (from 55.88 per cent to 79.41 per cent). T-test results proved that this increase was statistically significant.

Unemployment and related issues

Spending on those of working age and especially unemployed people figured strongly in discussion of the future sustainability of the welfare state. Despite the expert views presented in the stimulus material, most people believed that benefits for unemployed people make up a substantial proportion of the costs. In reality the benefits for unemployed people make up about two percent of spending, for people on low incomes 17 per cent, for children 18 per cent, for disabled people 18 per cent and for pensioners 45 per cent (IFS 2014). There is also a strong view that benefits make unemployed people lazy and reduce incentives to find work. Some of those involved spoke of the ‘alcoholics’ who waste money on drink and make no effort to look after themselves or their families. These constituted a moral out-group, a normative contrast to hard-working citizens. The idea of a benefits cap – benefits should be more than 25 per cent below average wage levels was among the recommendations: “We'd achieve this by saving money on benefits and giving this back to employers, who can pay this back in the form of a higher minimum wage”.

There is also some support for greater social equality and a lot of unease about conditions at the bottom of the labour market. Concern was expressed in the forums about zero-hour contracts (although the only forum member on such a contract spoke about its advantages) and about insecurity. The answers are seen as a higher minimum wage and as better opportunities (further discussed in relation to education). In the final recommendations, there was a consensus on abolishing zero-hours contracts: “people on zero hour contracts, they're not entitled to the same things as permanent full time employees [...] they don't qualify for sick pay, there's no guarantee of work, they're not paying the level of tax or National

Insurance, [...] they can't get loans, they can't get a mortgage, they don't know when they're working, they have really no say.”. Some forum members believed that UK nationals should have priority over immigrants for available jobs, although after discussion this was diluted to a right to be interviewed. There was support for compulsory work-experience for all school-children and, following the individualist theme of the discussion, stronger regulation of trade unions.

Structured survey respondents express similar views. BSA 2014 respondents are much less keen on benefit spending for people of working age, especially unemployed people, than they are for spending on pensions or health care. There is strong and increasing concern about how benefits reduce work incentives. ‘... in 2014 support for more spending on welfare remained just 30 per cent. So while the long-term decline in support for further welfare spending may have stopped, it has not reversed in response to either the tough economic climate or tighter government policies on benefits.’ Also ‘52 per cent of the public... believes... that benefits for the unemployed are “too high and discourage work” while 27 per cent believe they are too low and cause hardship’ (Taylor-Gooby 2015). In relation to policies: ‘73 per cent support the benefits cap’ (a policy to set a low maximum level for benefit payments to a household.). Also only ten per cent give benefits for unemployed people high priority for extra spending, but 67 per cent give pensions extra priority and 60 per cent benefits for disabled people. Only 18 per cent believe that the system encourages people to move off benefit (Taylor-Gooby 2015 http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38977/bsa32_welfare.pdf). In our before and after surveys, the majority of participants believed that social benefits and services tend to make people lazy, and this proportion increased from 50 per cent to 70.59 per cent after the experiment. The t-test results proved that such increase was also statistically significant.

Education and training

Education and training opportunities were stressed by almost all forum participants as key to addressing problems of inequality, in relation to the topic of education and also in discussion of paying for welfare, inequality and unemployment issues. The emphasis by DF respondents fits with the focus on individual as opposed to collective advance and the fact that redistributive policies played little part in the discussion. Education and training opportunities allow those who take them up the opportunity to improve their lives as individuals within an unequal structure. Many of the participants referred to apprenticeships as a positive policy and an expansion of apprenticeships was prominent on the final list of policies put forward at the end of the DF.

Such policies are not extensively discussed in the structured surveys, possibly because the surveys include few relevant questions. However, BSA has investigated the politically controversial area of university fees. Despite a tripling of fees to £9,000 a year in 2011, there is considerable support for fees: ‘one in ten feel that all students should pay fees, two-thirds that some should’. This is in contrast with views expressed in the DFs. Some participants complained that student fees damaged opportunities.

Gender issues

Gender issues were added to the forum by the researchers in order to enable comparability on this topic with the other four national studies. It was made clear that the area included equal opportunities and treatment, workplace rights, childcare and parental leave and evidence on women's participation in paid work and the unequal outcomes for men and women of equal educational achievement was presented in the stimulus document. However, these themes did not generate much interest in the groups despite the high level of concern among academic commentators. "I don't hear people talking about that" was one response, although one breakout group did discuss child care costs and saw them as too high. DF members did recommend a number of policies in this area after the discussion had been encouraged. These included: equal pay for equal work and (in two of the breakout groups) compulsory volunteering work for unemployed mothers claiming free childcare (common to two breakout groups): "we don't want the child to suffer, we still want them to have free childcare, but we also believe that people that are getting benefits should also go and do some voluntary work at least because they're not earning";

Survey data shows a shift over the past twenty years of increasing support for women's right to work and against the assumption that women's place was in the home. Show that agreement with a gendered division of household and work roles has declined from nearly 50 to 12 per cent of the sample between 1987 and 2012 although two-thirds believe that mothers should work part-time when children are of school age (Scott and Cleary 2013).

Other issues

Further issues concern what is omitted from DF discussion, but figures in academic debate and thus in structured survey questionnaire design and the overall framework in which forum members see the welfare state. We have already mentioned the lack of salience of gender issues. In general collective approaches to social issues play little part in the responses of the forums. Ways forward include state regulation (in relation to immigration; greater stringency in benefits for unemployed people, requirements for employers to provide pensions, run crèches, employ or interview UK nationals, ban zero-hour contracts and so on) but very little positive policy in terms of expansion of state services (in health or child care or pensions), and virtually no mention of other collective institutions such as trade unions or local government.

The framework through which forum members approach welfare state issues includes a heavy focus on individual responsibility and on employers rather than more traditional state agencies and an acceptance that some areas which academic debate often sees as the territory of state intervention are unlikely to change. These include patterns of inequality (and thus the potential for state redistributive policies) and, to a considerable extent, family and gender issues (not subject to much popular discussion).

Welfare attitudes and key directions

Taken together, we find several key differences from our findings compared to that of previous studies. Firstly, the findings of the DF show people to be much more strongly individualist than do structured survey findings. This can be found for example, in people's

attitudes towards privatization of the health care system, as well as increased emphasis on the privatized pension system tier. In general, the greater population of the DF agree to a greater emphasis on individual's responsibility for welfare benefits and systems in the future. This discrepancy between our results and previous studies may be because survey designers tend to look across the range of aspects of the welfare state and to better informed on how small a part of total spending, benefits for those of working age and especially unemployed people constitutes. The mass public is aware of the range and diversity of benefits but focuses very much more strongly on unemployment benefits as representative of the welfare state, so that punitive and moralistic attitudes in this area bulk much larger in their views on the welfare state as a whole. It is the individual who is responsible for their own future in a world in which collective advance through state redistribution does not enter. This type of sentiment may be even stronger when discussing the future of the welfare state as we have done in our case, especially in light of the concerns regarding government's deficit and ever rising national debt prevalent in media.

This is not to say that all participants of the DF have signalled a total retrenchment of the welfare state. The strongly positive role of government is stressed by the participants within the DF especially concerning education, training, and on provisions of childcare. These provisions are seen as the way to expand individual opportunities in an unequal society, following some aspects of the social investment paradigm (Palier and Palme 2012). Furthermore, there were roles of the state's involvement in regulating what has been seen as unfair employment practices such as zero-hours contracts.

In short the DF study shows that people see the role of the state as primarily to help people to advance as individuals, rather than to support collective advance by raising living standards for social groups or redistributing resources between them. This stance is erosive of any solidarity on welfare state issues, and also is reflective of the policy developments we have seen over the years in the UK and how policy changes may have had an influence

Solidarity and conflict

Despite the growing literature on the new emerging cleavages in the welfare state (e.g., Pierson, 2001) in relations to people's interests as well as political stances, we found surprising little conflict between our participants in the DFs. In other words, although there was a clear sense of an erosion of solidarity within the welfare state, as evidenced by the frequent reliance of individualisation and self-reliance as the key welfare ideological stance presented by our participants, the support for such stances were unanimous despite people's income level, age, gender, employment and immigration statuses. One reason behind this may be due to the inherent avoidance of conflict embedded within British culture. However, these results may be also due to the general consensus in these stances, a movement towards individualisation, self-reliance, with the role of the welfare state restrained to social investment strategies. These stances are a clear reflection of the direction of the major policy changes occurring within the UK throughout the Blair-Brown Labour governments and accelerated throughout the Conservative/coalition government. Further, may also be a reflection of the views highly represented in the main stream media sources.

Conclusions and discussion

In some areas, notably immigration and unemployment, the forums parallel the findings of surveys: most people adopt a more or less welfare chauvinist attitude to support for immigrants and express strong concerns about what they see as over-generous welfare for those of working age. In others there are real differences. In particular, the stress on education and training, spilling across labour market and equality issues, the lack of enthusiasm for gender issues although a discussion was developed here, and the uncertainty about the role of private pensions, reflecting framing issues, contrast with the smaller role for education, the prominence of gender and the more decided attitudes to pension futures from the structured survey data.

Comparison of before and after survey suggest that DFs do have a significant impact on people's attitudes, though such impact depends on the issue raised. Questions where significant attitude change were noticeable mostly related to the issues of income inequality, welfare state financing and immigration.

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