

Deliberative forums show that attitudes to welfare turn hostile because of low trust in government



[Peter Taylor-Gooby](#) outlines the findings of research that used deliberative forums to examine attitudes towards welfare. He concludes that what lay behind the views expressed was a mistrust in the capacity of the government to address the issues that most people face. It is this lack of trust that turns people against the welfare system rather than an ideological commitment to neoliberalism.

The welfare state is everywhere under attack. The pressures are particularly marked in the UK as a result of stringent austerity measures and tax cuts piled on top of demographic shifts and changes in family life that increase pressures on services. Using an innovative research approach, our project – [NORFACE “Our Children’s Europe”](#) – examines people’s ideas about how the welfare state in the UK will develop during the next 25 years.

This approach involved Democratic Forums – large groups with some 36 participants, chosen to be loosely representative of the population at large and conducted over two days separated by two weeks with the minimum of moderation. The participants were asked to provide an answer to the question: ‘What can the British government do for the welfare of its citizens, looking forward over 25 years?’ We gave participants the opportunity to request any information they needed at the end of the first day and provided it at the beginning of the second. We included plenaries and smaller break-out groups to enable discussion and asked the respondents to fill in a short questionnaire using questions taken mainly from British Social Attitudes. In the concluding plenary we asked respondents to suggest and agree on bullet points for a final report. The intention was to give respondents a reason for participating in discussion and arguing their point of view.

The forum method has mainly been used to address concrete policy issues. So far as we know, this is the first use to explore welfare attitudes and to provide insight into priorities, framing, and the arguments that do or don’t carry weight. Our project covered five countries (Denmark, Germany, Norway, Slovenia and the UK) and here I deal with the UK findings (explained in more detail [here](#)). The cross-national research will shortly be published by [Palgrave Macmillan](#).

The participants focused their discussion on four main areas: immigration, work and welfare, sustainability, and social investment. Lying behind the views expressed in all four areas was a mistrust in the capacity of the government to address the issues that most people face and a general sense of decline. It is this sense of a failure of government that lies behind the ‘Reluctant Individualism’ we identify, not the positive ideological commitment to market freedom and individual responsibility that drives the work of scholars like Friedman or is implicit in [Thatcherism](#).

Immigration, selected as the most important topic by participants on Day 1, is clearly a central issue, with a large majority endorsing much stricter border controls. Most participants believed that immigration is too high and ([mistakenly](#)) that current rates put severe strain on job opportunities and housing, although some also pointed to benefits from immigration in diversity and the value of skilled workers to the economy and the NHS.

Spending on those of working age and especially unemployed people was perhaps the most important issue raised in relation to the future sustainability of welfare. The cost of benefits was ([again mistakenly](#)) believed to be decisive in undermining the capacity of government to fund the areas of welfare they valued highly – the NHS and pensions. Many of the participants expressed strong stigmatic beliefs about benefit abuse by unemployed people. They did not believe that government was in a position to sustain NHS and pension spending especially in view of population ageing and expected to see substantial contraction and privatisation in these areas.

People expressed disquiet at state activities in other areas, including foreign aid spending, general waste and inefficiency in the public sector, and the failure to curb inequality and to frame effective tax laws that made the rich pay their fair share. They saw the state as unable to regulate multi-national companies and weak in its efforts to restrict zero-hour contracts or advance social mobility. All these ideas linked together to form a framing of government as unable to direct resources to the services that people needed, prone to waste money on those who should not be getting it and incapable of organizing provision so that the services people wanted were properly funded.

This self-reinforcing anti-state framing predominated in discussion and led to the *reluctant individualism* of those who would have liked a well-run welfare state but don't think UK governments are up to the job. Contrary views were expressed in discussion but were not linked together and the lack of positive pro-state framing meant that such an approach was largely absent from the final discussion.

There was a more positive framing in one area. Most people were enthusiastic about social investment in training and education, particularly for those who were less academically able and excluded from the university route to a career. There was also strong support for state subsidies to childcare (not surprising since childcare in the UK is currently [the most expensive in the OECD](#)) to enable women to enter paid work, but, in line with concern about scrounging, only for those in employment.

These attitudes fit with the overall individualist framing. The object is to enable the individual to compete fairly in an unequal labour market and to take responsibility for her or himself. Education and training are seen as primarily directed towards access to jobs. In relation to childcare there are few references to the value of nurseries in socialisation, education or child development.

Interestingly, attitudes as recorded in the before and after survey did not shift greatly as a result of the forum discussion and where they did it was against rather than towards state welfare: people were significantly more likely to value incentives against increased equality, to regard unemployed claimers as work-shy, and to want immigrants to work for longer before gaining entitlement to UK welfare. So much for the view that interaction nourishes generosity.

The upshot is low trust in government and what might be termed "Reluctant Individualism". Our participants are not enthusiastic neo-liberals. They just don't think government can serve their needs and the only way forward is to look after yourself.

Note: the above draws on the author's work (with Ben Leruth and Heejung Chung) published in [Policy & Politics](#); the research was funded by NORFACE under grant no 462-14-050.

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