

A new British model?

Ratings of economic and public policy from the
Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Monitor
in Britain, the US, France, Germany, Spain and Italy

Bobby Duffy and Rea Robey

Ipsos MORI's Social Research Institute works closely with national government, local public services and the not-for-profit sector to understand what works in terms of service delivery, to provide robust evidence for policy makers and to help politicians understand public priorities.

The International Social Trends Unit (ISTU) is responsible for analysing and disseminating social survey findings from around the world within the Social Research Institute, and acts a focus for our international social policy work. It uses both internally and externally generated data to shed light on emerging developments in social issues, and provides commentary on international comparisons.

Bobby Duffy is a Research Director and Rea Robey is a Research Executive in the ISTU. For further information please contact Bobby Duffy at bobby.duffy@ipsos-mori.com or 020 7347 3000.

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Foreword

In the early 1990s, as the UK emerged battered and bruised from its second deep recession in a decade, commentators and analysts looked enviously to the economies of Continental Europe for inspiration to cure the ills of Anglo-Saxon capitalism. The “Stakeholder” economy was briefly in vogue, an analytical frame through which the short-termism, low investment and weak skills base of UK economy could be counterposed to the muscular, far-sighted, high productivity economies of Germany and France.

Mid-way into the first decade and the comparison is now more commonly reversed. British analysts contrast a decade of steady growth, rising employment and sustained investment in the UK’s public services with the high unemployment and sluggish performance of the Eurozone economies. For their part, a parade of European thinkers return the compliment, angrily denouncing the UK as a Trojan horse for US-style neo-liberalism which threatens to unravel the social solidarity of the European Union.

In truth, each of these positions is a caricature. It is hubris to pretend that the economies of Continental Europe are basket cases, waiting for the lean and hungry entrepreneurs of India and China to consign them to the dustbin of history. But at the same time, the UK is now very far from being a transatlantic outpost of neo-liberal orthodoxy. True, the UK labour market is less regulated than many of those of its EU partners. Its product markets are open and competitive and the economy is heavily service-based. But it also has a Minimum Wage, an impressive new architecture of tax credits and in-work training entitlements, a socialised National Health Service and an expanding system of early years education and childcare. As Mike Dixon and I argued in an ippr book last year, the UK better merits the title “Anglo-Social” than Anglo-Saxon¹.

This new Ipsos MORI research confirms that the British people are aware of their relative economic success and are prepared to give the government credit for it. This contrasts with the pessimism and concern for the efficacy of government policy shown in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. By and large, the British people are also supportive of the investments in, and improvements to, core public services. Healthcare is currently a topic of anxiety, but we should not lose sight of the fact that support for the NHS runs deep in the UK.

The research also makes clear that reducing inequality is a tough challenge in the UK. Our welfare state has always been based on providing a social minimum for those who lose their jobs or become incapacitated. We have never sought to protect the relative earnings and status of those who fall outside the labour market, as other European countries have done. One consequence of this is that we have stronger tendencies towards inequality, exacerbated by limited coverage of coordinated wage bargaining, the hourglass structure of our labour market, and regressive elements in our tax and benefit system.

¹ Mike Dixon and Nick Pearce, *Social Justice in a Changing World: The Emerging Anglo-Social Model*, in Pearce and Paxton (eds) *Social Justice: Building a Fairer Britain*, London; Politicos (2005).

A new British model?

To make greater progress to a just society will require stronger efforts to reduce inequality, with a priority placed on eradicating child poverty (to which the UK government is committed) and the creation of a comprehensive, high quality early years education and childcare system. But as the Ipsos MORI research shows, although the British people repeatedly tell pollsters that the gap between rich and poor is too great, they dislike the notion of redistribution and are less concerned than their continental counterparts with abstract notions of equality. Reciprocity, fairness and “playing by the rules” guide attitudes to the welfare state and public spending. This makes the task of building an enduring coalition for tackling inequality a difficult, long-term task.

The report sheds valuable light on all these issues and many more, notably immigration and crime. It is sometimes said that you have to go abroad to know your own country, and this research allows a trip of the mind across the channel for British analysts of public attitudes. As more comparative survey data is built up over time, the results will be of considerable interest to policymakers and analysts.

Nick Pearce,
Director, Institute for Public Policy Research

Summary and conclusions

Introduction

There is increasing interest in comparing the different approaches to balancing economic and social welfare priorities across countries in Europe and beyond. This has led to new models that have attempted to explain and classify the current government's approach in Britain – for example, Will Hutton has talked about the “social democratising” of the Anglo-Saxon model, and last year Nick Pearce (Director of ippr) and colleagues outlined the “Anglo-Social Model”. This describes the approach as an attempt to combine the economic performance and flexibility of liberal welfare states with the social protection and equality of Scandinavian countries.

Alongside an emphasis on work as a route out of poverty (with, for example, a focus on tax credits to help people in low income jobs) and some structures to deal with the inequalities a flexible labour market will tend to encourage (for example, the minimum wage), a key element of the British model has been much increased spending on public services, focusing on health and education (with, for example, the latter up over 50% since 1997).

And, for many commentators, this seems to have been relatively successful, with the economy in particular out-performing most of our usual comparison countries on employment, inflation and growth – even if there are increasing concerns about the level of government and private debt that has been required to sustain this.

But does public opinion across countries reflect the picture painted by analysts? Do the public recognize the relative economic success in Britain and are they noticing any impact from increased spending on public services compared with other countries? Do their priorities for welfare policies reflect those being pursued by the government?

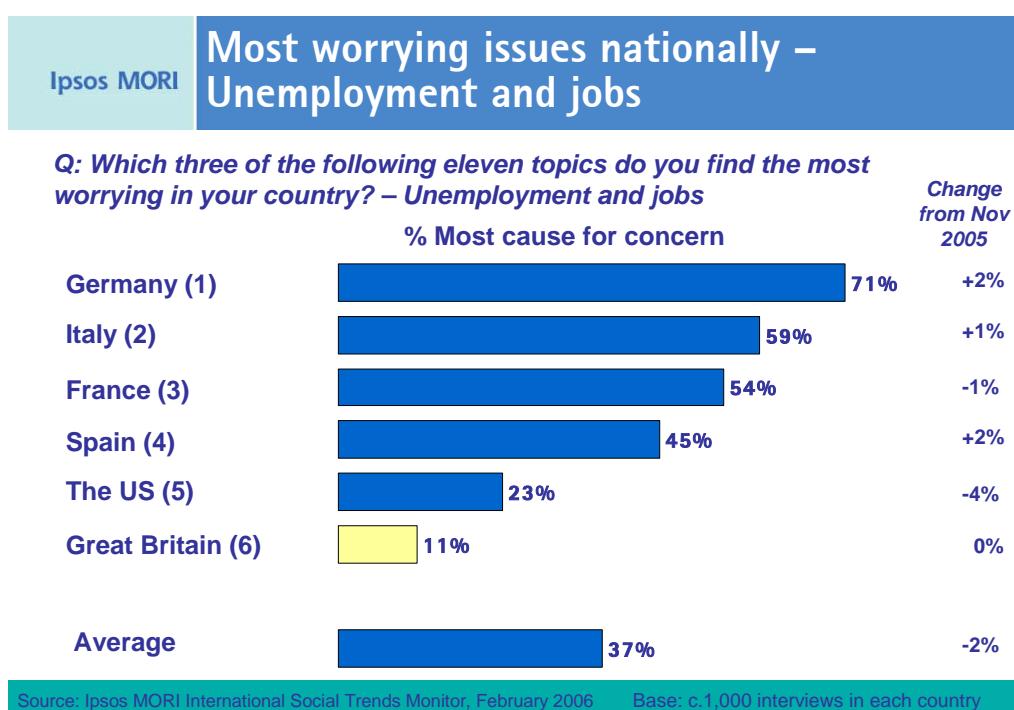
Until recently it has been relatively difficult to answer these types of questions, as there has been very little up-to-date information on the public's perceptions of government policy and performance across different countries. A new quarterly study by Ipsos MORI – the International Social Trends Monitor – aims to fill this gap, with consistent questions asked in Britain, France, Spain, Germany, Italy and the US. This report outlines new findings and draws in other sources such as Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey. The key points are:

- Britain feels positive and optimistic about the **economy**, relative to other countries. For example, just 11% in Britain think that unemployment is a key issue facing the country, compared with 71% in Germany. Faith in the British government to further reduce unemployment is also high compared with most other countries. We are also positive about our economic future, with our expectations for both the country and our own households among the highest seen;

- But Britons are among the most concerned about a range of other social issues – particularly **crime** (our top concern), **health care** and **immigration**. The British also have the lowest confidence in the government to deal with these problems. For example, we are nearly half as likely as the Germans to be confident in the government to tackle crime (31% versus 57%) and nearly half as likely as the Spanish to be confident in the government to integrate foreigners (25% versus 45%);
- **Terrorism** is also a major worry in Britain, although this is somewhat dwarfed by the level of concern seen in Spain (due to ETA activity at the time of the last survey). But again the worrying point for the government in Britain is that faith in them to defend the country against terrorist attacks is the lowest seen;
- **Education** is a relatively bright spot for the British government, as satisfaction with services (based on findings from other studies) appears high – although concern is rising. At the time of the last survey, the British were also the least concerned about **political scandal or corruption** – but it will be interesting to track the impact of recent events and focus (particularly on loans to political parties and John Prescott's affair) in future waves;
- A key concern for many commentators is whether the British model has sufficient impact on **poverty and inequality** – but this is not a concern shared by many of the British public. We are in fact one of the least sympathetic countries about the causes of poverty (we are more likely to see it as being due to laziness than injustice) and among the least likely to want government action;
- The **overall position** for the Labour government looks very weak when compared with most other countries. Confidence in Tony Blair to tackle the country's main problems is the lowest seen and, despite the high ratings of economic management and prospects, the government receives low levels of overall support, on a par with the now ousted Berlusconi government in Italy.

There is economic optimism in Britain

The British do recognize their relative economic success. For example, just 11% of people in Britain see unemployment as the most important issue facing the country, which is by far the lowest level across the countries surveyed, and compares with 71% in Germany, 59% in Italy and 54% in France. Even the US is more focused on jobs, with 23% saying unemployment is the most important national issue. This suggests that people have a great deal of sensitivity to unemployment as an issue, as differences in actual rates are not nearly as large as differences in levels of concern imply, varying from around 5% in the UK and US, 7.5% in Italy, 8.4% in Spain and up to around 9% in France and Germany.



And the British are even (uncharacteristically) bullish about the future, being more confident than their European neighbours about what will happen to their own standard of living and the economic situation in the country as a whole. France is particularly pessimistic.

The good news for the British government is that they do seem to be getting some credit for this success. Britons have the among the highest levels of confidence in their government to reduce unemployment (even given the already relatively low levels), with 38% saying they are confident, compared with just 21% saying they are confident in Angela Merkel's government in Germany (although this is an improvement from the Schröder government). This is vital for Labour, as our previous work on long-term trends in political opinion has shown just how closely related ratings of economic competence and electoral success can be.²

² Duffy, B and Skinner, G (2003) *The more things change... Government, the economy and public services since the 1970s* MORI

But we're not so positive about nearly all other social issues

But perceptions of performance on key public services are generally much less encouraging. Britons are among the most likely of the six countries to see *crime* and *health care* as worrying issues, with, for example, twice as many saying they are worried about health care here than in Spain (this will be particularly disappointing for the government, as we have shot up the OECD ranking of spend per capita on health in the last few years). And crime is in fact the top concern in Britain, with people here being nearly twice as likely as US residents to see this as the most pressing issue in the country.

And the really bad news for the British government is that, in the same way they get credit for the economy, they get the blame for perceived failures in health care and crime. So, for example, just 31% are confident in the government to crack down on crime and violence in Britain, compared with almost double that in Germany.



Similarly we are among the most worried about *immigration*, behind only Spain. But the really marked difference is in confidence in the government to promote the integration of immigrants, which is clearly lowest in Britain, with just 25% saying they are confident, compared with 45% saying they are confident in Spain. There may therefore be lessons to be learnt from the Spanish approach, which has involved an amnesty for existing undocumented immigrants coupled with tightening of entry for new immigrants – although the current socialist government is probably also benefiting from a comparison with rather inconsistent approaches by previous governments.

The British also do count *terrorism* as a key concern, but this is over-shadowed by the focus on the issue in Spain, which will be a result of significant ETA activity around the time of fieldwork, before the permanent ceasefire was declared. But again the most worrying aspect for the British government is that they are not seen to be very convincing on this key issue: they receive the lowest confidence ratings of the six countries, and this has declined since the end of 2005.

Education provides one bright spot for the British government. We know from the European Social Survey that satisfaction levels with public education services in the UK are among the highest in Europe. The Deloitte/Ipsos MORI Delivery Index in Britain (which tracks expectations for the future of key public services) also shows that of all the big services it is education that people are most consistently positive about. Reflecting this, education does not come out as a top concern for Britons in the International Social Trends Monitor. However, it has to be said that ratings have declined and concern has increased significantly from the end of 2005 (probably as a result of coverage of disagreements over the education White Paper).

Inequality is not a national concern in Britain

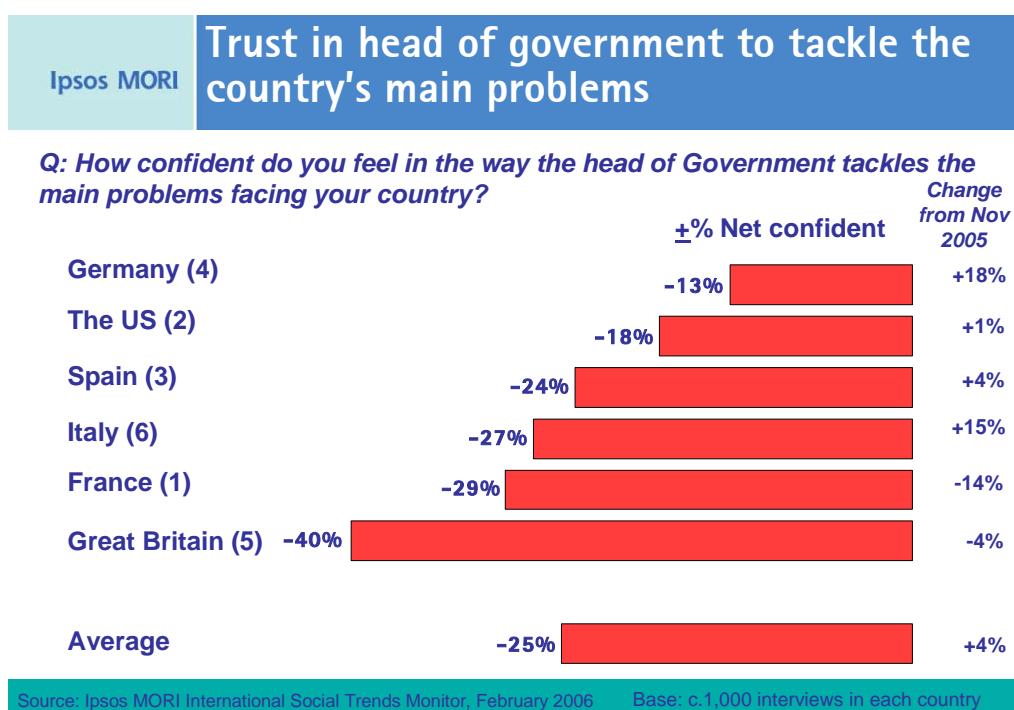
Despite its relative economic success, a key worry for many commentators is whether the British model actually helps reduce inequality or not – and there are arguments and data that seem to support both views. But one thing that is clear is that this concern is mostly not shared by the general public – because Britons just do not seem to care that greatly about poverty and inequality when compared with other countries, particularly Germany and France.

For example, from a study of twenty countries we're fourth least likely to think it is important to support people who are worse off, and second least likely to agree that the government should reduce differences in income levels. This seems to be partly because we're much more likely than most of our European neighbours to think that poverty is down to laziness rather than injustice.

But this lack of focus on the government's role in reducing inequality should not be taken as a sign that the British public are particularly eager to cut government spending. It is true that there is little confidence in the government to cut taxes (with only the new German government less expected to make cuts), but there also appears to be relatively little concern about current tax levels, with only 17% of people seeing taxes as one of the most pressing national issues. This suggests there may even be some scope for increases in tax-take to support public service spending for a little longer.

Overall ratings of the government and leader are more negative in Britain than other major countries

When people are asked for an overall assessment of confidence in the head of the British government to deal with the country's main problems the message is fairly clear – we come bottom of the six countries. Of course, it could be argued that this does not take account of the good feeling generated from the government's perceived economic competence (as people do not see the economy as a problem so do not have it in mind when answering this question). It will also be a lot to do with the declining personal popularity of Tony Blair. Long-term trends show how during his first term the Prime Minister was a real asset, with ratings significantly higher than the party's share of the vote, but that this turned around part way through the second term, and the PM is now less popular than his party (although it is possible to overstate this, and looking at long-term data, it is his high initial rating and not his decline that has been exceptional, at least until very recently).



But a further overview question on whether people would most like the current government or the opposition to be in power suggests deeper problems. This shows more people would like a change of government in Britain than the current one, and we are placed towards the bottom of this table too, alongside the (at the time of fieldwork) Berlusconi government in Italy, which has now been ousted.

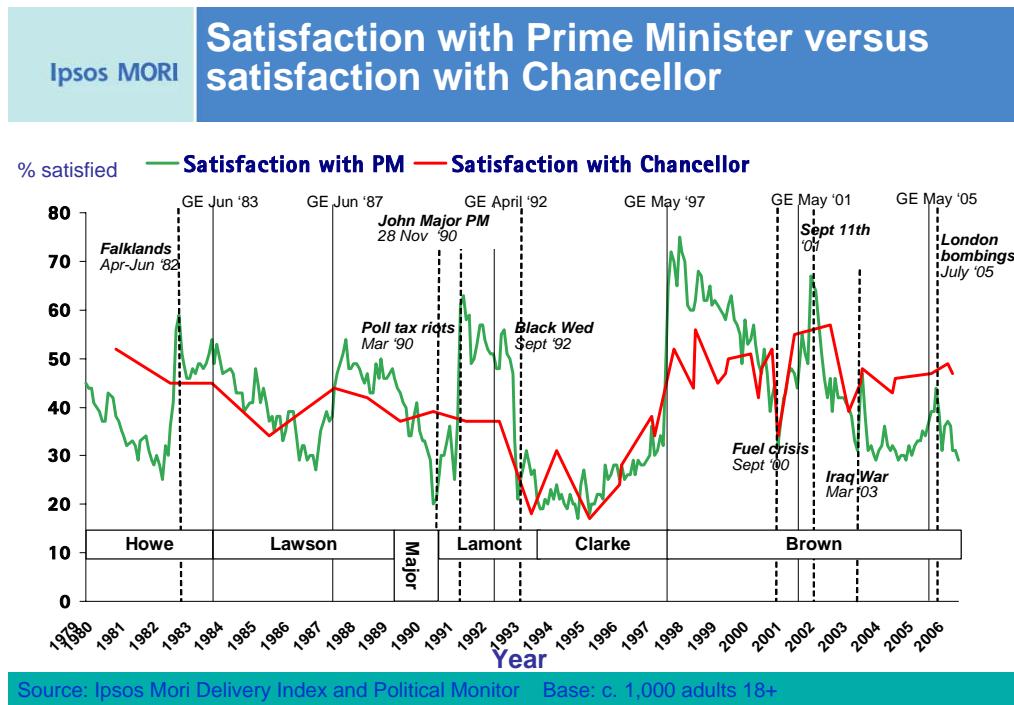
Conclusions

Looking across the study, there is a clear contrast in British perceptions of their government's relative economic success and their failure on many other key social issues. We are the most positive and optimistic of these six major countries on a number of economic and personal financial measures – but we are among the most negative on just about all other major social welfare issues, including healthcare, crime and immigration. And, more importantly, Britons have low levels of confidence in the government on these compared with other countries. The one exception is education, but views here have been slipping recently.

Of course, this contrast will be at least partly related – when we are not worried about our own jobs and income, we have more time to worry about other things. But the particularly concerning aspect for the government is that the balance in opinion between these two distinct sets of views has resulted in negative views of the government overall. This must be a major concern for Labour, as all our other work on the determinants of electoral success shows that perceptions of economic competence are critical – and if views of the current government are (at best) equivocal in the currently very positive economic climate, then prospects do not look bright.

Of course, there is an optimistic version of how this will develop – that it has taken time for public service spending and reform to feed through and people will start to notice the impact in the coming months and years. But the pessimistic version – that resources to support public service improvement are drying up before they can do much more than raise expectations – seems more likely. This is something we'll be tracking closely in the coming year, at this crucial time when Tony Blair's successor finds out what sort of foundations he has been left to build on.

Indeed, our long-term tracking data on perceptions of the Chancellor suggests that if Gordon Brown does take over, he will have record-setting personal ratings to draw on, as seen in the chart below. This shows his ratings are now significantly ahead of the PM, and he is no doubt benefiting from being associated with economic success and maintaining a reasonable distance from aspects of policy that are perceived as less successful. But the fuel crisis in the Autumn of 2000 shows he has no special immunity; when he did get involved in a difficult situation for the government, his popularity fell to a very similar level as the Prime Minister. This association with failure is clearly likely to be much more frequent if he does become PM.



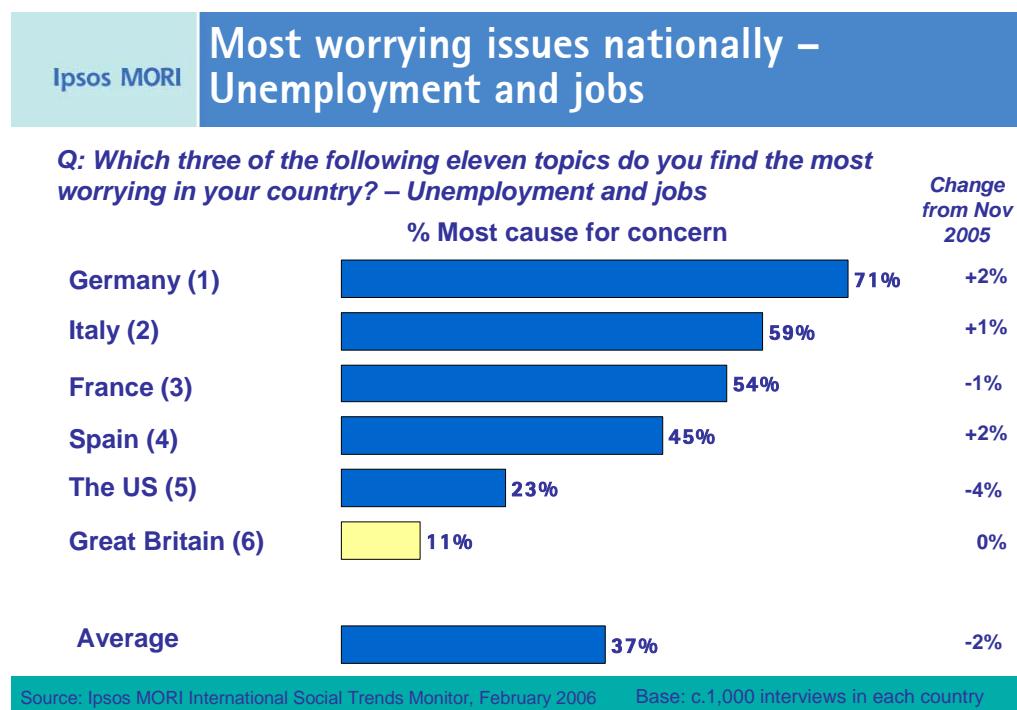
And finally, the other key theme that the study brings home is just how different priorities are across Europe and the US. Some of these variations are event-driven (such as the focus on crime and terrorism in Spain at the time of the last survey) and therefore likely to be relatively short-lived. However, others seem much more consistent across surveys and over time, and are perhaps related to national values that will remain fairly steady – for example, Britons' apparent lack of interest in government's role in addressing inequality compared with other European countries. Indeed, the compromise and small incremental steps suggested in the Anglo-Social Model is perhaps the best that the government can hope to achieve – it is difficult to see any sustained support for Scandinavian levels of redistribution in Britain given our rather less sympathetic national views.

The economy

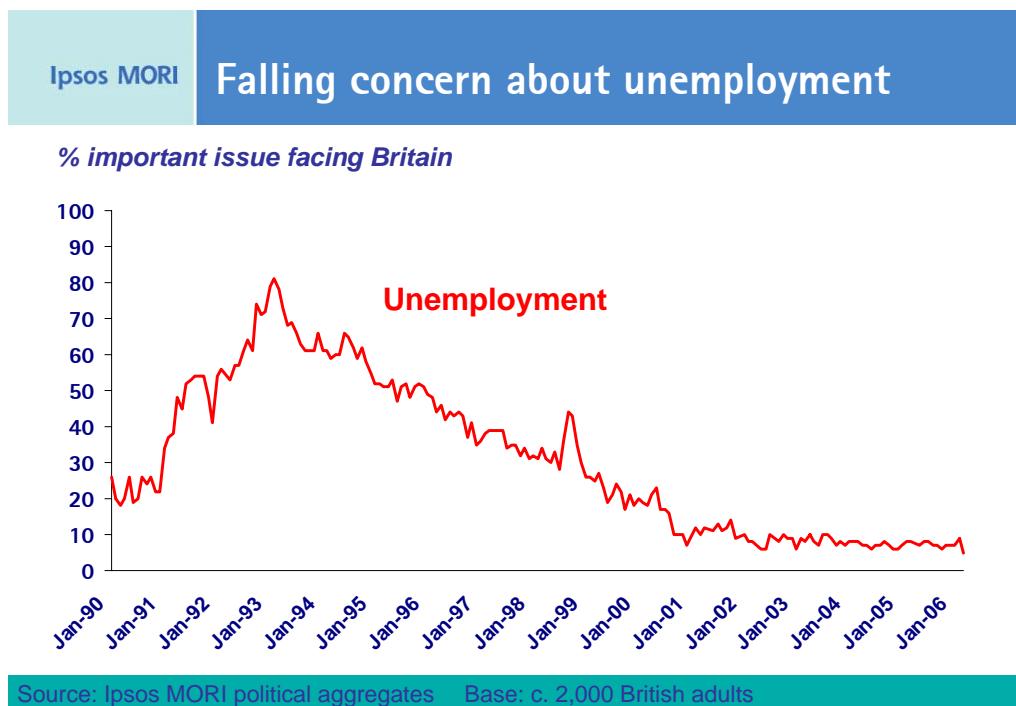
Concern about the economy is low...

British confidence is high when it comes to jobs and employment. When asked to prioritise national concerns, this isn't at the front of Briton's minds, and this is particularly clear when we compare their views with other major economies in Europe and the US. The variation in levels of concern is extremely high, with Germans nearly seven times as likely as Britons to see jobs as a key concern. Even those in the US are twice as likely as the British to feel worried.

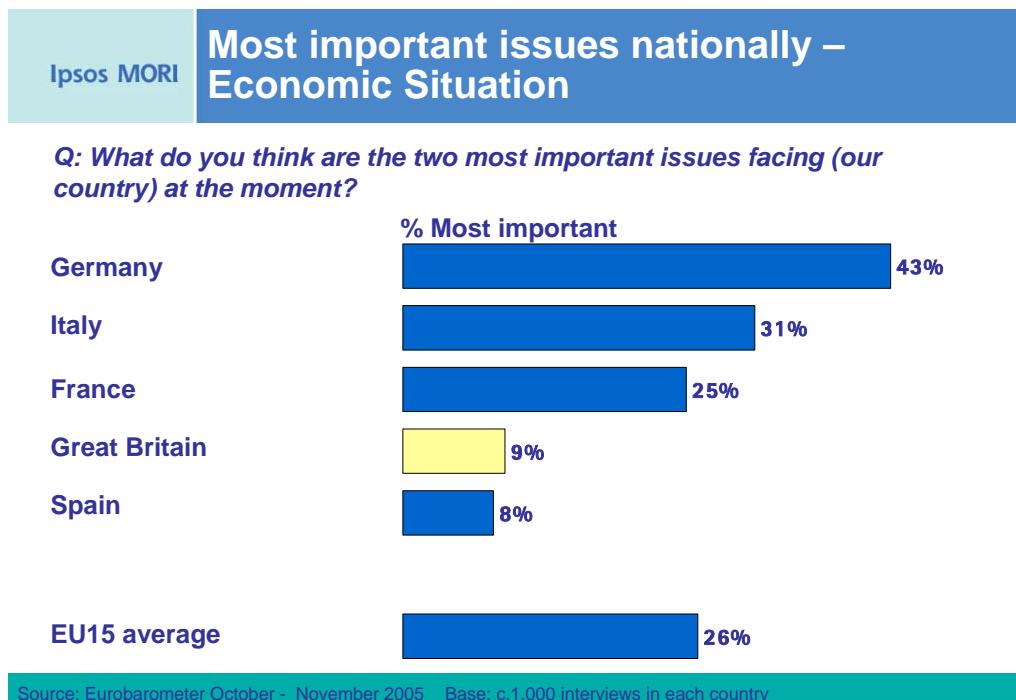
This illustrates just how sensitive people are to economic factors, as the actual differences in current unemployment levels are not that great. Figures range from around 5% in the UK and US, 7.5% in Italy, 8.4% in Spain and up to 9% in France and Germany, although concern is likely to also reflect the perceived trajectory of the economy. However, views have remained fairly consistent over the last few months, as seen in the chart, which shows the extent of change and the rank order (in brackets) from the previous survey in November 2005.



The chart below shows trends in concern about unemployment in Britain, going back to the early 1990s, drawn from Ipsos MORI tracking data. Concern has declined fairly steadily since 1993, but it is easy to forget how high it was, with over 80% saying it was an important issue at one point; when people are worried about the economy it does take precedence over all other issues.



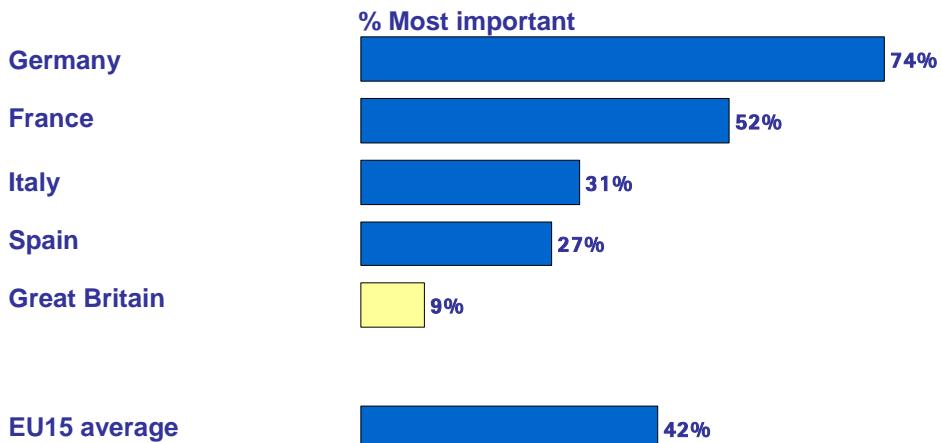
The two charts below show this picture is consistent with the findings from the annual Eurobarometer study that asks about the economic situation and unemployment separately. In both cases the Germans are, by some distance, most likely to be concerned, with the British among the least concerned.



Ipsos MORI

Most important issues nationally – Unemployment

Q: What do you think are the two most important issues facing (our country) at the moment?



Source: Eurobarometer October - November 2005 Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country

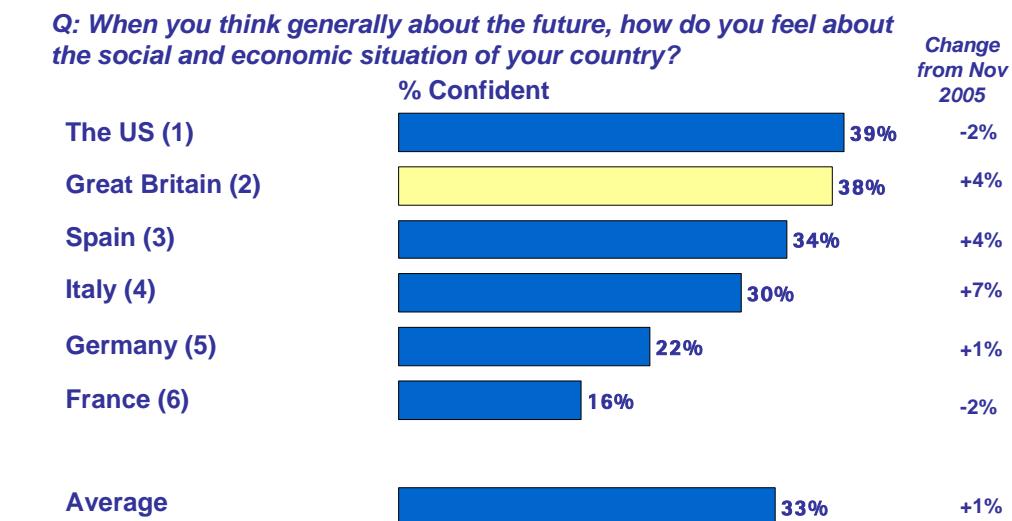
... and optimism is (uncharacteristically) high

Reflecting current feelings of economic security, Britons are also among the most positive about the future. They have very similar levels of confidence to that seen in the US, and are around twice as likely as the French and Germans to feel optimistic about the future. Britain also looks to be on an upward trend since November, in line with most of the other major European economies, except France which appears increasingly pessimistic.

Ipsos MORI

The future social and economic situation of your country

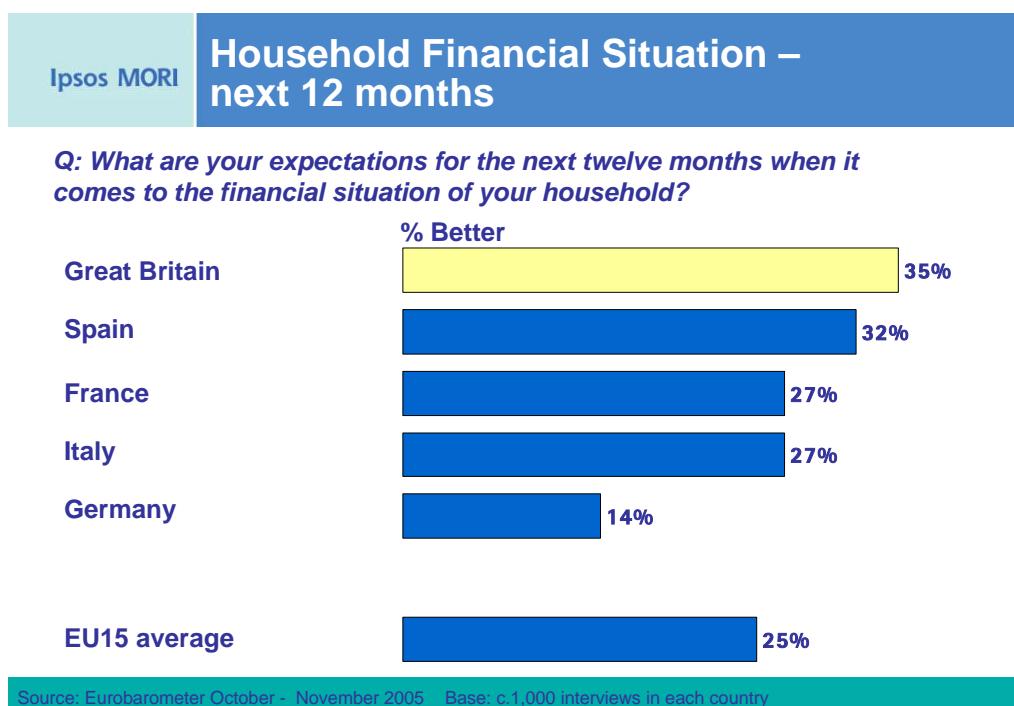
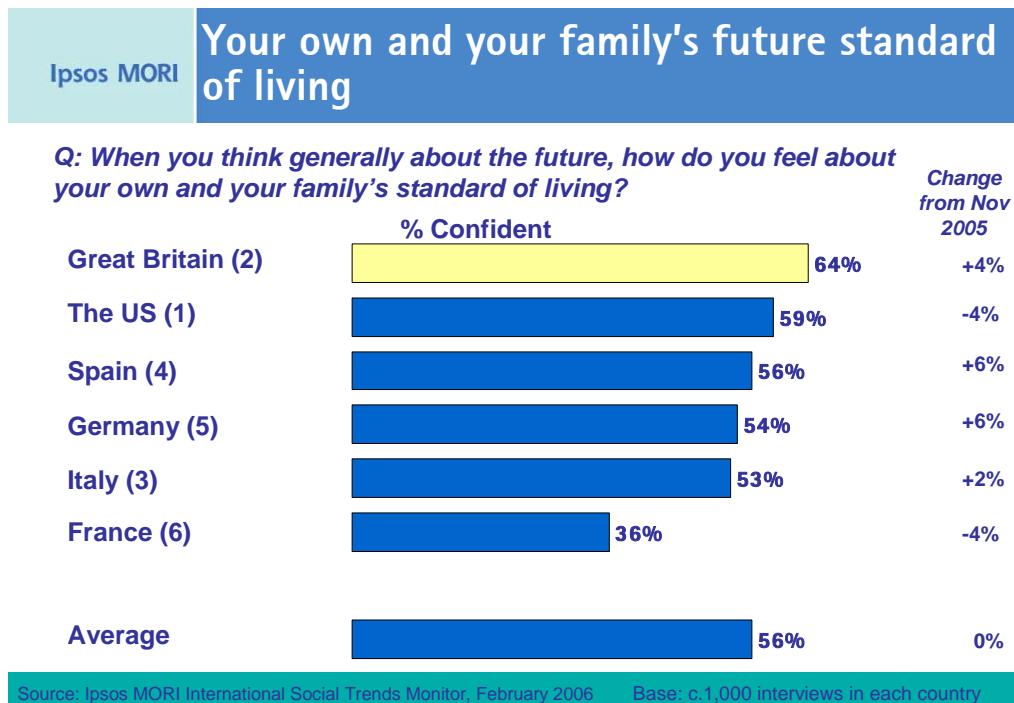
Q: When you think generally about the future, how do you feel about the social and economic situation of your country?



Source: Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Monitor, February 2006 Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country

A new British model?

Again Ipsos MORI data is in line with that gathered in the less frequent Eurobarometer (data are from October-November last year) on feelings about personal financial futures: Britons are the most optimistic and, depending on the exact measure, the Germans and French are the least, again by some distance.

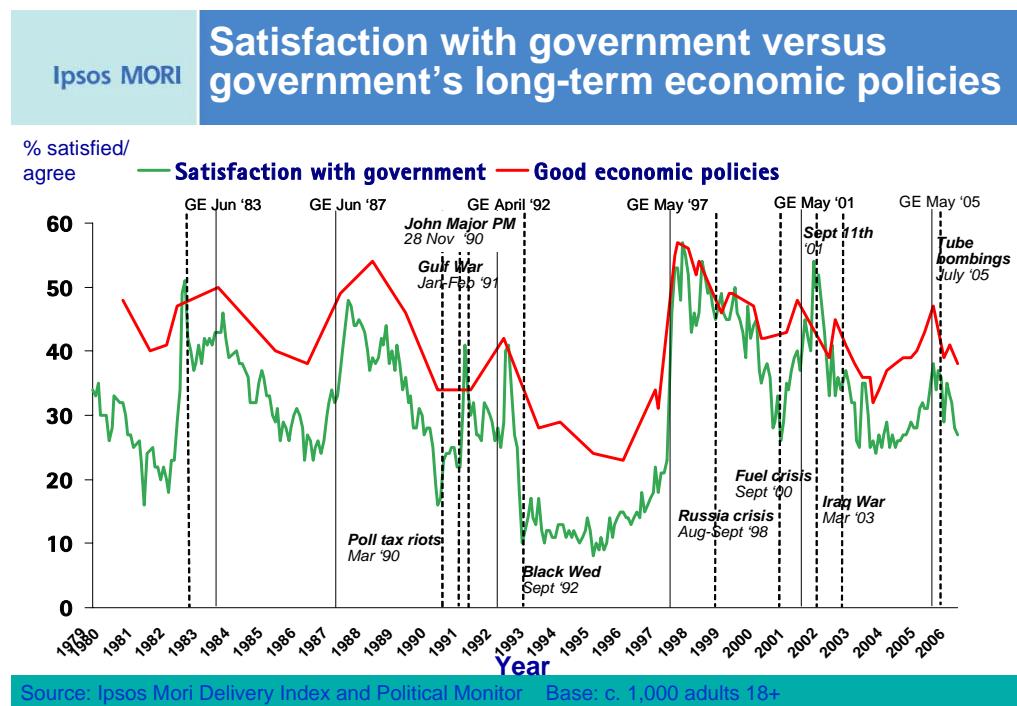


...and the government is getting (some of) the credit

And confidence in the British government to further reduce unemployment is fairly high relative to other major economies. This is a positive finding, given that people already largely think the issue is under control and, as seen, actual levels of unemployment are already relatively low in Britain compared with other countries. Again France and particularly Germany have the least confidence in their leaders on employment issues; it will be interesting to track in future waves of the International Social Trends Monitor whether recent demonstrations against the proposed first employment contract (CPE) in France will have a further negative effect on perceptions of the government on this issue.



And perceptions of economic competence are vitally important to governments, as suggested by the chart below, based on Ipsos MORI data going back to the early 1980s. There is a strong relationship between confidence in the government's long-term economic policies and overall satisfaction with the government. However, over the last couple of years there has been a shift in the relationship. While the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s generally had much higher ratings of economic competence than overall satisfaction, for most of their first two terms the current Labour government had a higher overall satisfaction level than you would expect from perceptions of economic competence. But now the relationship between the two measures is much more like previous Conservative governments, with ratings of economic management consistently ahead of overall views. However, this seems to be more a case of ratings of economic competence holding up slightly better than falling overall popularity, rather than it having taken time to convince the electorate that the economy is safe with Labour.



Public services and other key issues

While perceptions of economic competence remain a real perceived strength for the government in Britain, views of just about all other areas of social policy are more negative than we see in other countries.

Crime, health and immigration are the big concerns in Britain

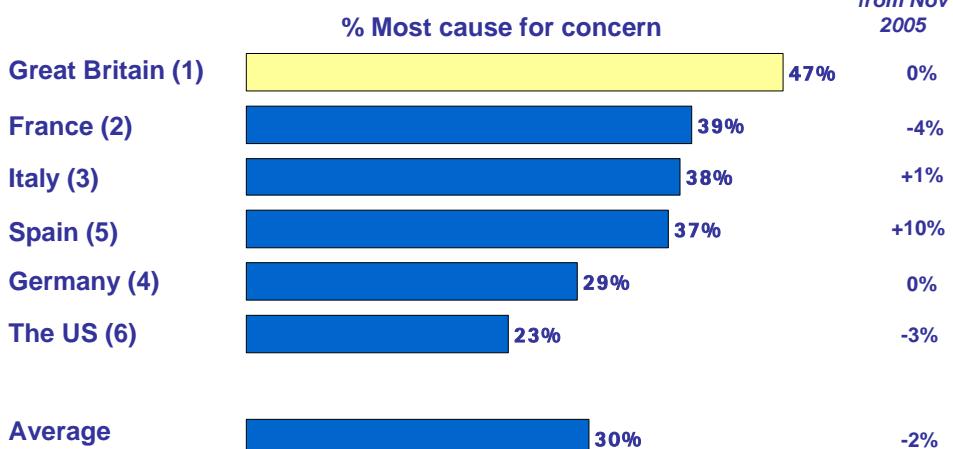
Concern about crime is very high in Britain, with almost half of people rating this in their top three priorities, significantly ahead of other countries, with, in second position, France eight percentage points behind (again recent disturbances around new labour laws are likely to have a notable impact on future waves). Attitudes have remained fairly stable over recent months, with the exception of Spain, where concern has risen markedly since November, which is likely be the result of a spate of ETA attacks early in 2006, before the ceasefire in March.

One of the common explanations put forward for Britain's continued high levels of fear of crime (despite falling crime levels) is the concentration and slant of media coverage. However, the same dislocation between actual and perceived levels of crime is seen in studies in a number of other countries³, and, in particular, the much lower concern about crime in the US (which has a similarly crime-focused media) suggests this is not the whole explanation. Whatever the explanation, this is worrying for the government, as several Ipsos MORI and other studies show how important perceptions of crime and safety are to how people feel about their quality of life and local area.

³ See for example a 2004 survey by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony in Germany, which showed that respondents thought that just about all crime types had increased significantly over the last 10 years, while in fact just about all had fallen.



Q: Which three of the following eleven topics do you find the most worrying in your country? – Crime and violence

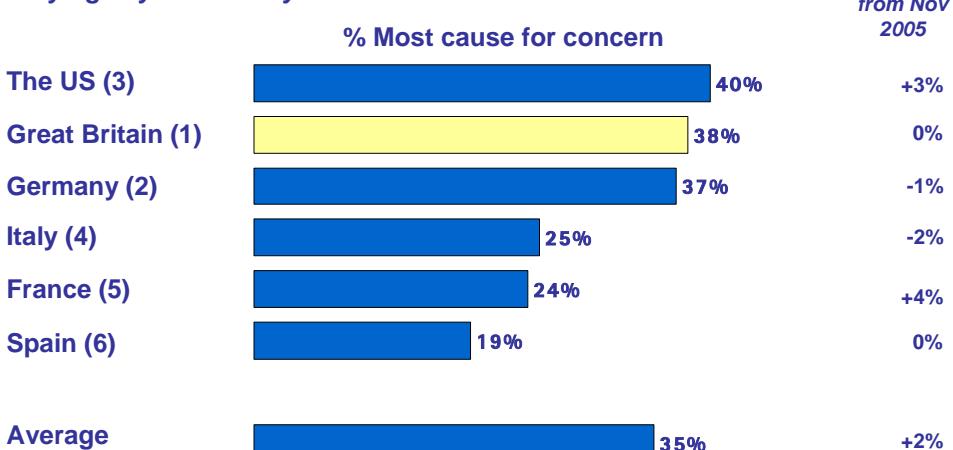


Source: Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Monitor, February 2006 Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country

British concern about the healthcare system is also very high, alongside the US and Germany. France, Italy and Spain are all much less worried about healthcare, and opinions have not altered greatly since November.



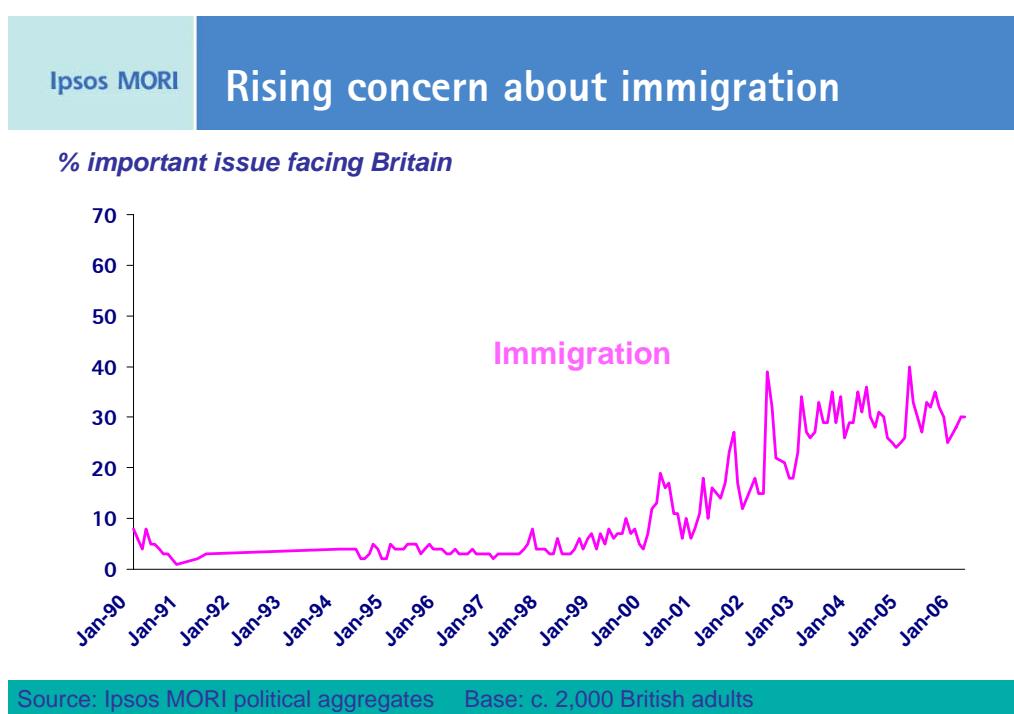
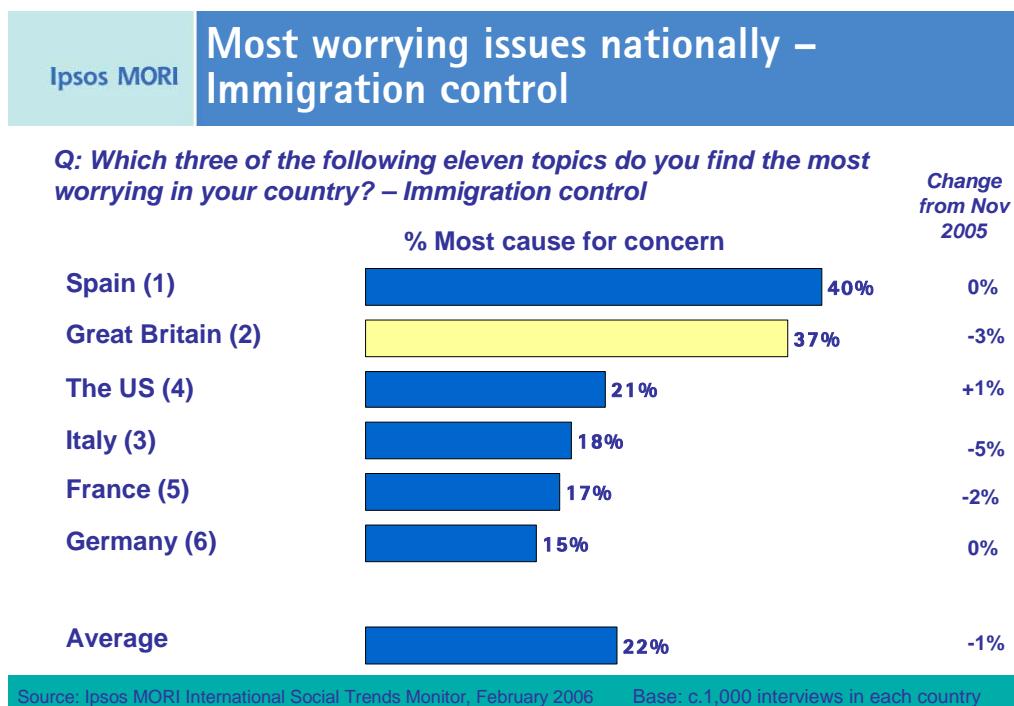
Q: Which three of the following eleven topics do you find the most worrying in your country? – Healthcare



Source: Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Monitor, February 2006 Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country

Britons also rate immigration control as a top national priority, with the proportion saying it is a key concern fifteen percentage points higher than the average. Only the Spanish are slightly more concerned. In the last few months opinions have remained relatively stable, which reflects Ipsos MORI trend data that shows this has been a major concern consistently for the last few years.

However, it is easy to forget that this is a relatively new pattern, and there was virtually no-one citing immigration as an issue up till 1999, as seen in the second chart below.



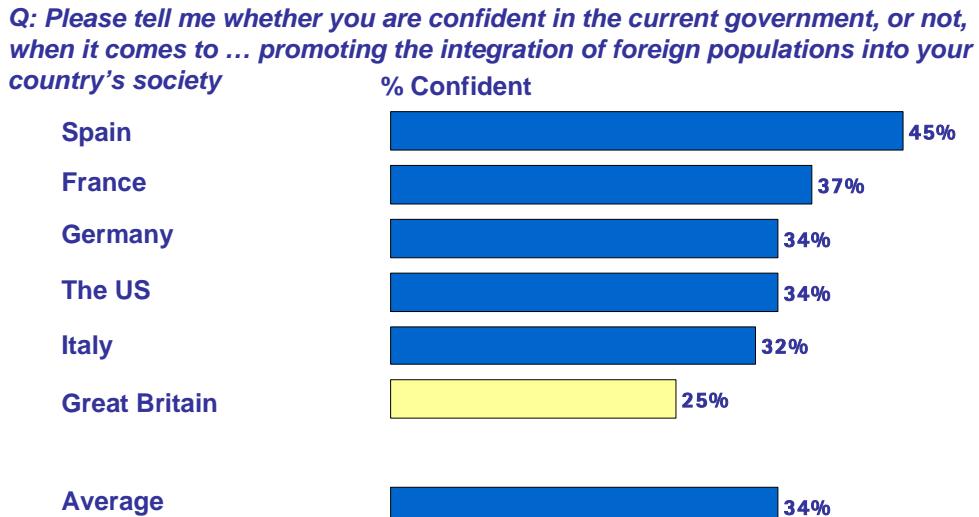
And there is a lack of confidence in the British government to deal with these issues

The most worrying aspect of the survey for the British government is the lack of confidence in them to deal with each of these key concerns. For example, on both tackling crime and managing immigration, faith in the British government ranks lowest of all the six countries. So, whereas nearly three in five Germans are confident their new coalition government will be effective against crime, less than a third of the British public feel the same about their government.



And views are even more negative on the integration of immigrants, with only a quarter of British people expressing confidence in their government's abilities on this issue. It is interesting that the Spanish are so supportive of their government's approach, given that concerns about immigration as an issue are even higher than those seen in Britain. There may therefore be lessons to be learned from the Spanish experience, which has involved an amnesty for existing undocumented immigrants coupled with tightening of entry for new immigrants – although the current socialist government is probably also benefiting from a comparison with rather unclear approaches by previous governments.

Ipsos MORI **Confidence in the government to promote the integration of foreigners into society**

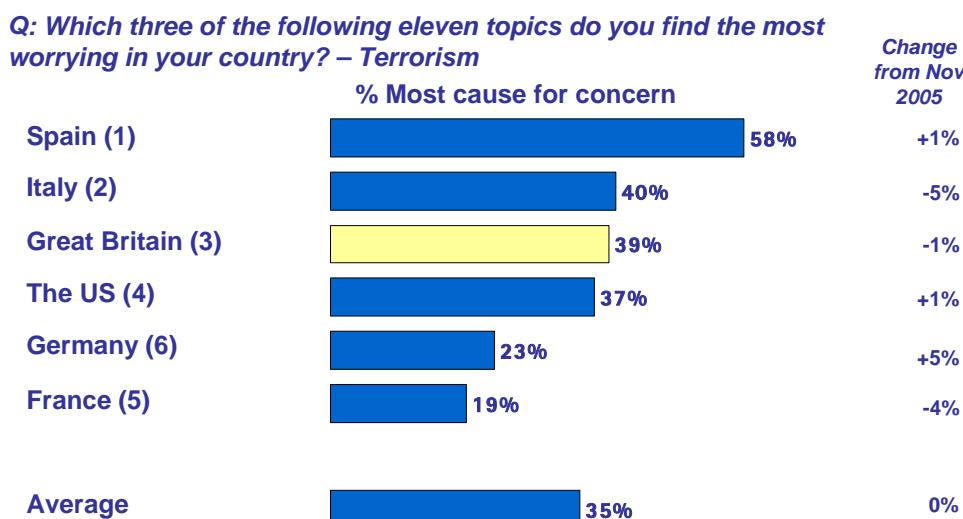


Source: Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Monitor, November 2005 Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country

Terrorism is also a very high priority – but less so than in Spain

The British do count terrorism as a key concern, but this is over-shadowed by the focus on the issue in Spain, which again will be a result of ETA activity around that time. France and Germany are the least concerned by some margin, which probably reflects feelings that they are less likely to be targets for international terrorism, given their government's stance on the Iraq war.

Ipsos MORI **Most worrying issues nationally – Terrorism**



Source: Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Monitor, February 2006 Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country

And again the worrying aspect for the British government is that they are not seen to be very convincing on this key issue, compared with governments from other major countries. This may be a result of the remaining memories of the attacks on London in July 2005, but it is notable that confidence in the government is lower than in Spain, which had suffered much more recent attacks and much higher levels of concern.

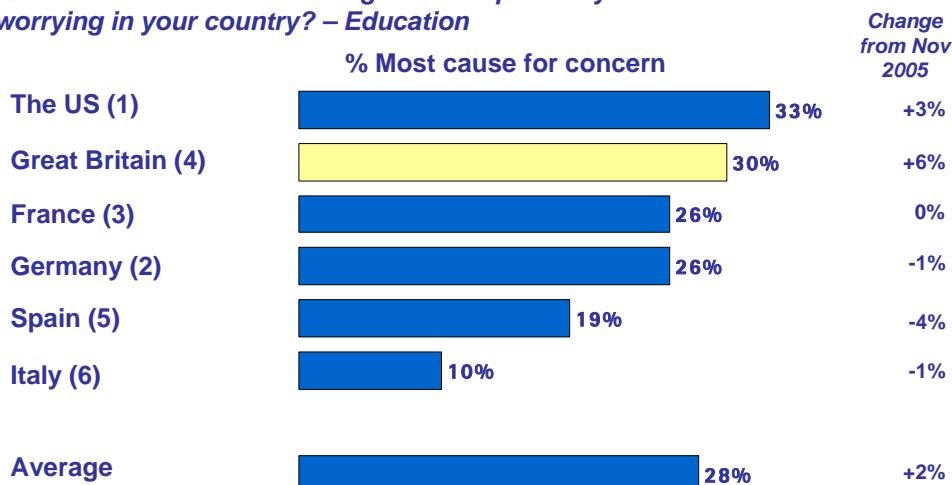


Education is more encouraging – but concern is rising

Education is a slightly brighter spot for the British government. It is somewhat less of a concern in Britain than other issues considered so far, but this is true in other nations too, with Spain and Italy particularly unlikely to be worried. The second chart below based on European Social Survey data from 2004 is more encouraging though, with the British most likely to rate education as good.

Ipsos MORI **Most worrying issues nationally – Education**

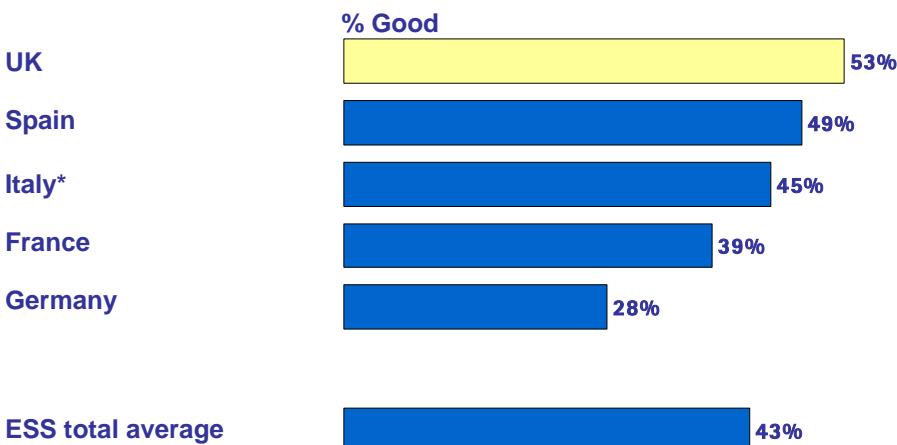
Q: Which three of the following eleven topics do you find the most worrying in your country? – Education



Source: Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Monitor, February 2006 Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country

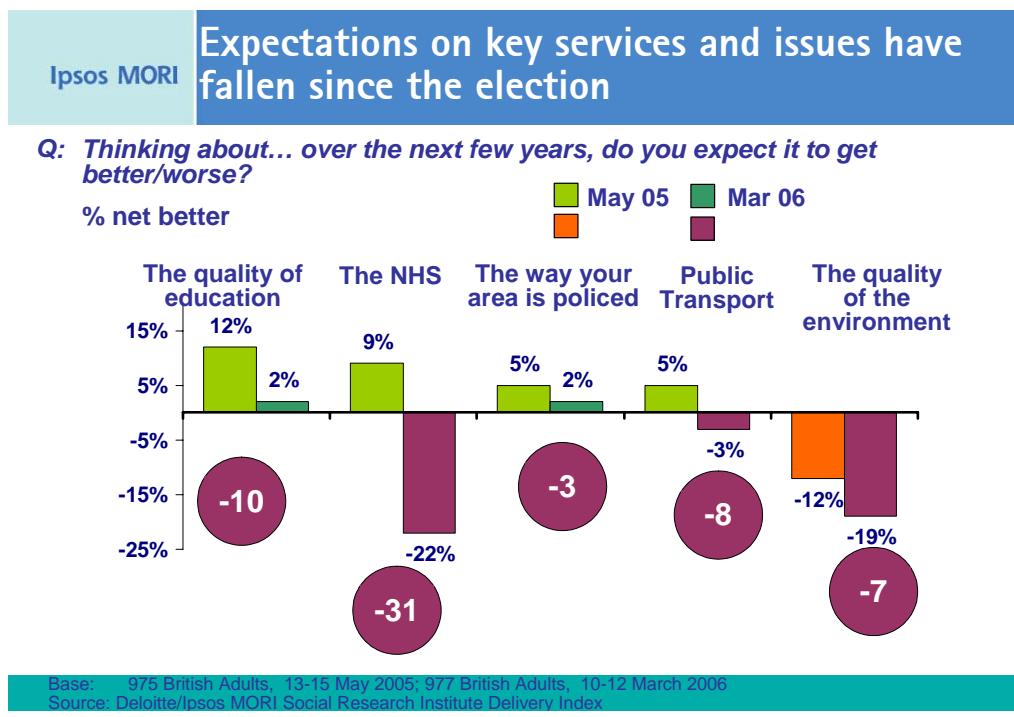
Ipsos MORI **The state of Education**

Q: Please say what you think overall about the state of education in (country) nowadays.



Source: European Social Survey 2004 (*2002) Base: c.2,000 interviews in each country

However, the ESS data may be painting a rather out of date picture – as concern about education has increased in Britain significantly since the last International Social Trends Monitor in November 2005, with those who say they are worried now six points higher. The Deloitte/Ipsos MORI Delivery Index in Britain also suggests a slide in positive views of education, along with other key services, as seen in the chart below. The decline in optimism about the NHS is particularly marked, while the drop for education is no doubt at least partly because of the widespread criticism of the education White Paper, and again it will be interesting to see how views shift in future waves of the Delivery Index and the International Social Trends Monitor.



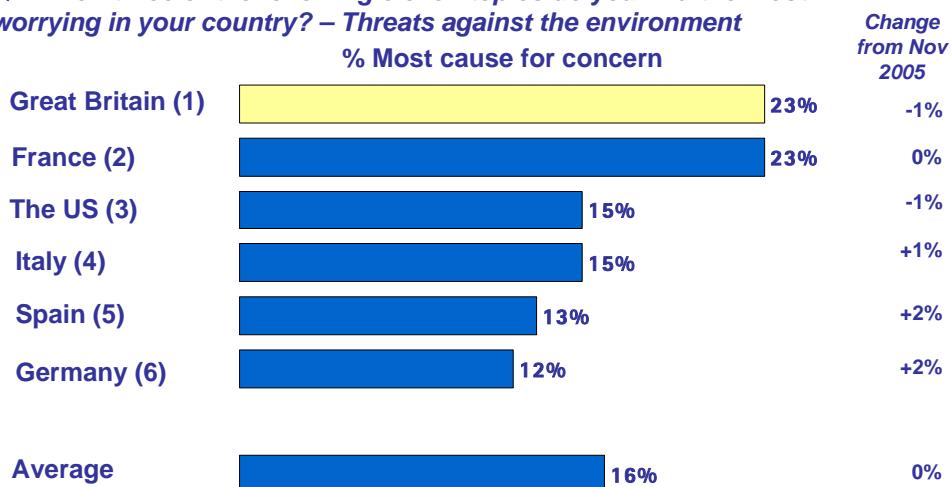
The environment is further down the list, but it is a higher priority in Britain than most other countries

The British show the greatest concern about threats to the environment, alongside the French. Levels of worry in the other four countries are similar and fairly low. While it is not a top concern, still a quarter of all Britons see it as among the most important issues facing the country, and this could be seen as support for the current government to increase their environmental focus.

However, the long-term trends in the second chart below suggest two further points. Firstly, the long-term question does not use a list and asks respondents unprompted what the most important issues facing the country are. Significantly lower proportions (around 10%) currently cite the environment as a key issue using this approach than when they are shown a list, as in the International Social Trends Monitor. This suggests that the environment is still not a top of mind concern. However, the second point the chart makes is that there have been times when the environment really was a significant spontaneous concern; we will be tracking whether the recent upturn is the start of a new public focus or just another small blip.

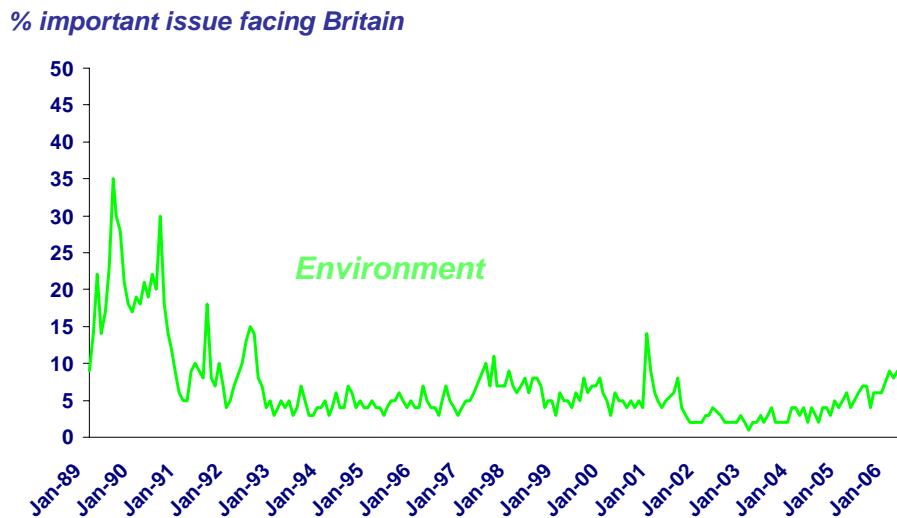
Ipsos MORI **Most worrying issues nationally – Threats against the environment**

Q: Which three of the following eleven topics do you find the most worrying in your country? – Threats against the environment



Source: Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Monitor, February 2006 Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country

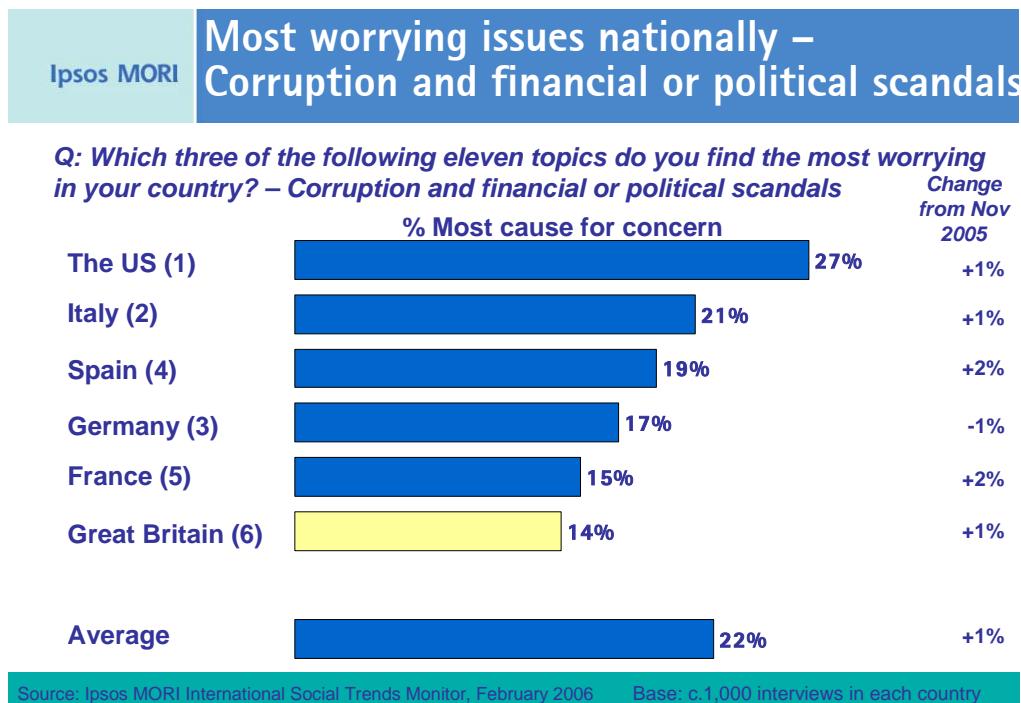
Ipsos MORI **Trends in importance of the environment**



Source: Ipsos MORI political aggregates Base: c. 2,000 British adults

Corruption and scandals are not an issue – yet

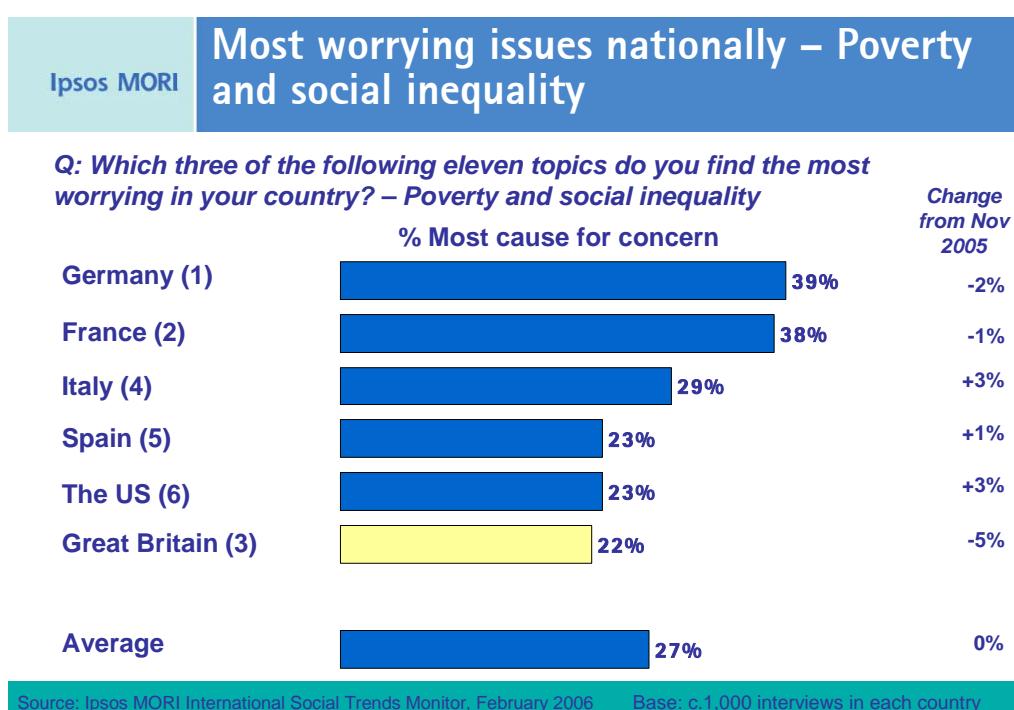
When the survey was conducted in February, Britons were the least concerned about corruption and financial or political scandals, with the Americans the most worried about dishonesty. Again, it will be interesting to see how the recent focus on loans to political parties in Britain, John Prescott's affair with his secretary and a range of issues around the Home Office will affect opinions in future waves.



Attitudes to welfare and inequality

Poverty is not a major concern in Britain – in contrast to some other countries...

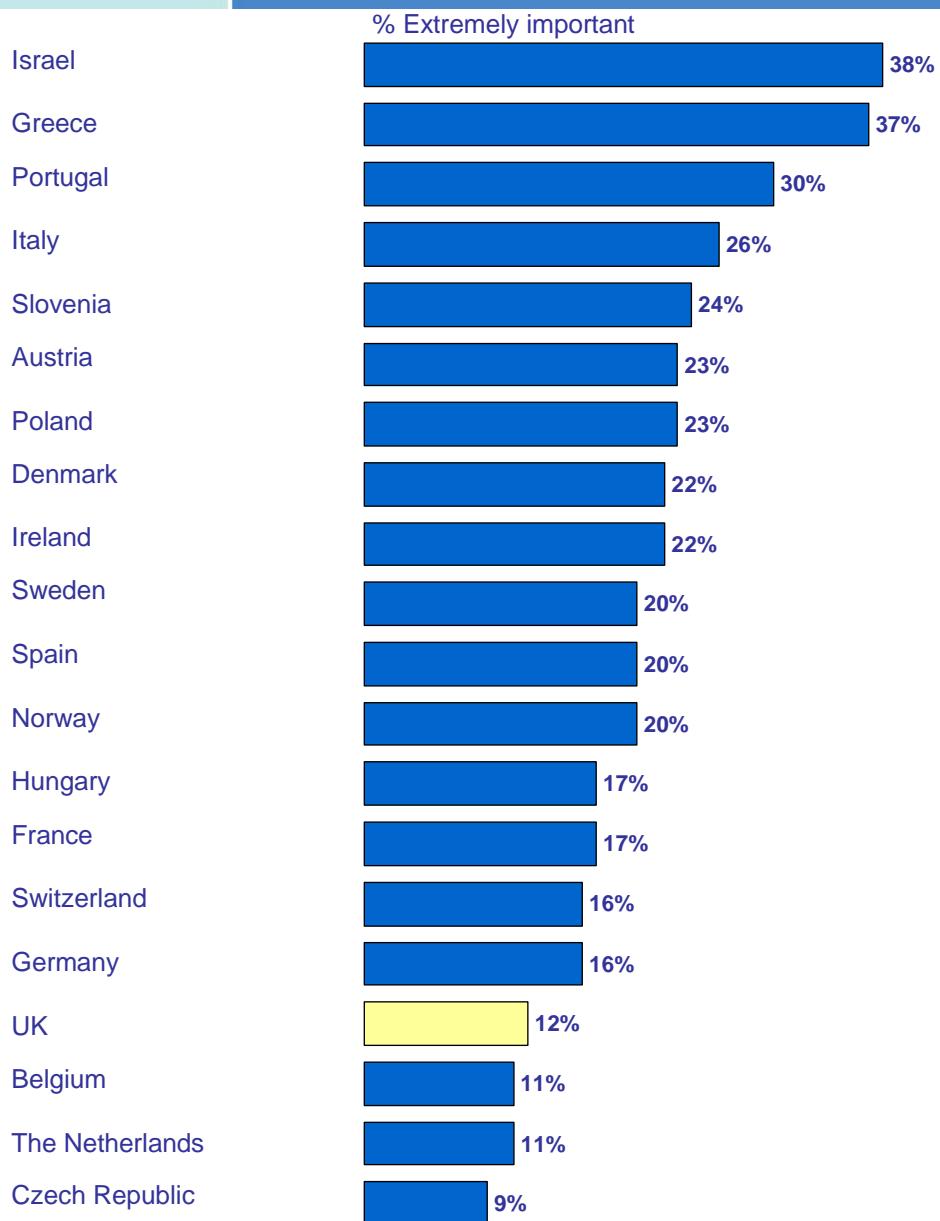
The impact of the current British government's policies on poverty and inequality has become an increasing focus for commentators in recent years, with many questioning the progress that has been made despite general economic success and increased public spending. The International Social Trends Monitor, however, suggests that the British public do not generally share this concern, with Britons the least worried about poverty and inequality out of these major countries. Indeed levels of concern are similar to that seen in the US and half what we find in Germany and France.



Other studies also suggest that the British are not likely to prioritise tackling inequality, as the chart below from the European Social Survey shows. Just 12% of UK residents think that it is extremely important to support people who are worse off, which is among the lowest levels of support seen in this 20 country study.

Ipsos MORI

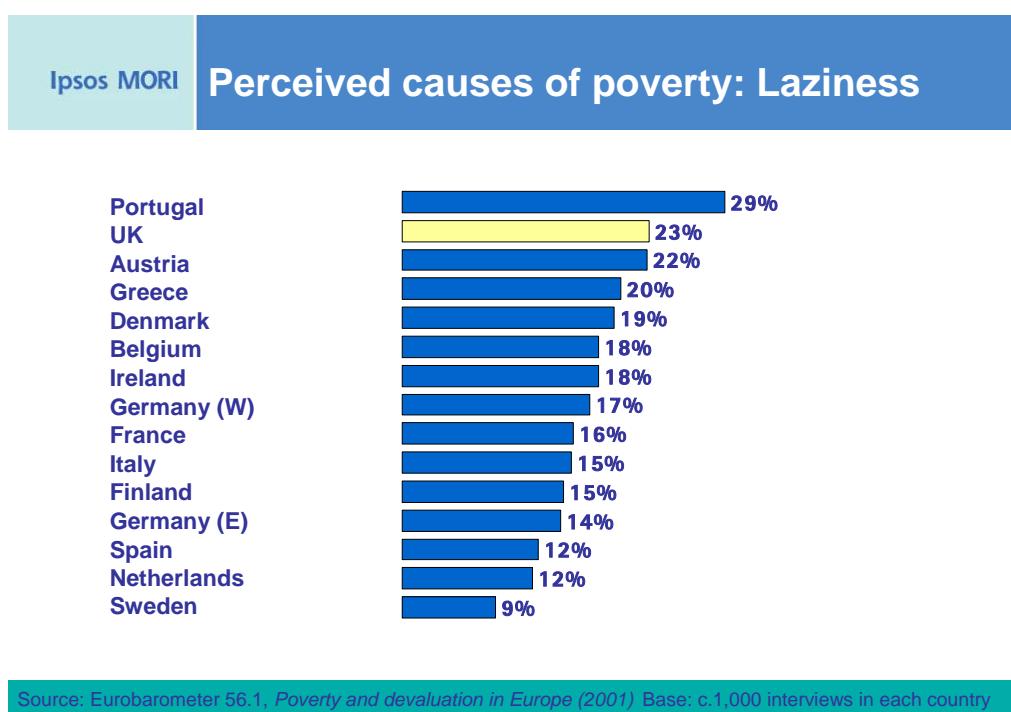
To be a good citizen, how important is it to support people who are worse off?

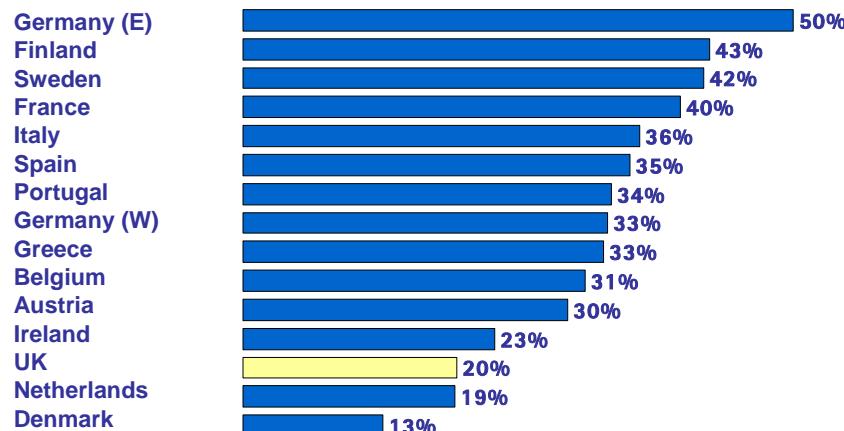


Source: European Social Survey 2002/03

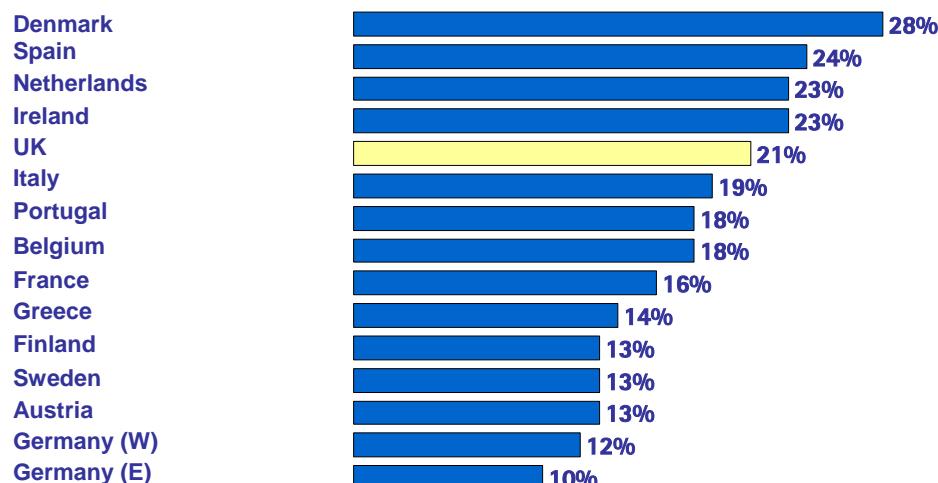
...and we have relatively unsympathetic views on the causes of poverty and government's role

This relatively unsympathetic picture of the British is also seen in an older Eurobarometer study on what different nations see as the cause of poverty. While those in Finland, Sweden or particularly (the former) East Germany are more likely to think that poverty is brought about by social injustice or circumstances outside the individual's control, Britons are among the most likely to blame the laziness of the poor themselves, as seen in the first two charts below. Only Portugal is more likely to blame lack of effort, and only Denmark is significantly less likely to cite injustice. The third and fourth charts do show, however, that we were more likely than average to see bad luck as a cause and are mid-table on seeing poverty as inevitable.

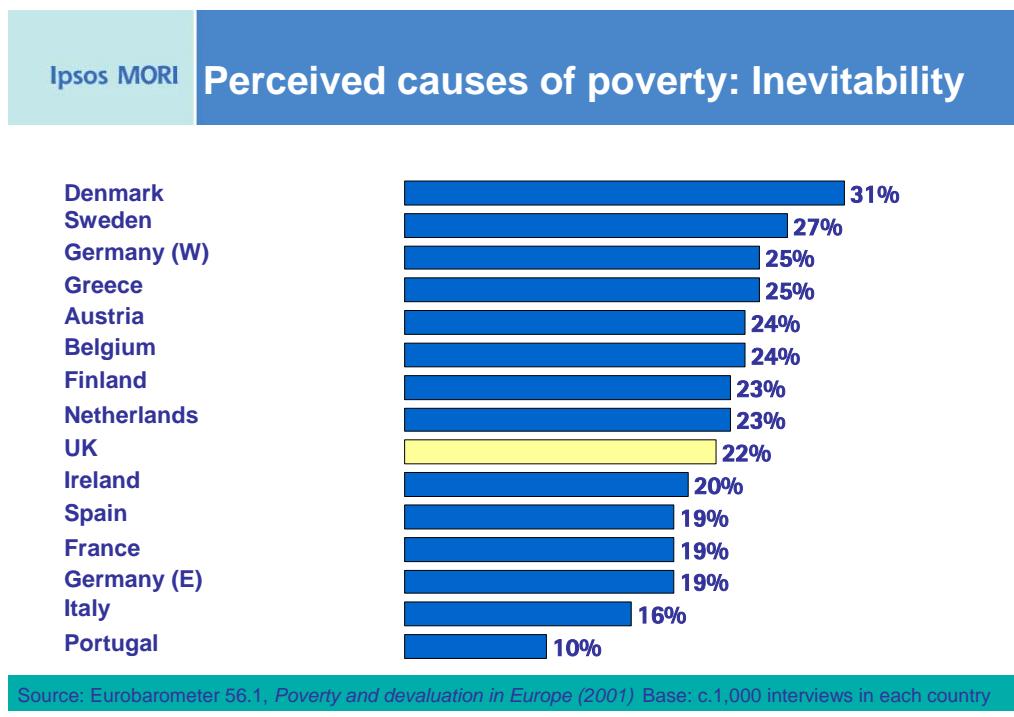




Source: Eurobarometer 56.1, *Poverty and devaluation in Europe* (2001) Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country



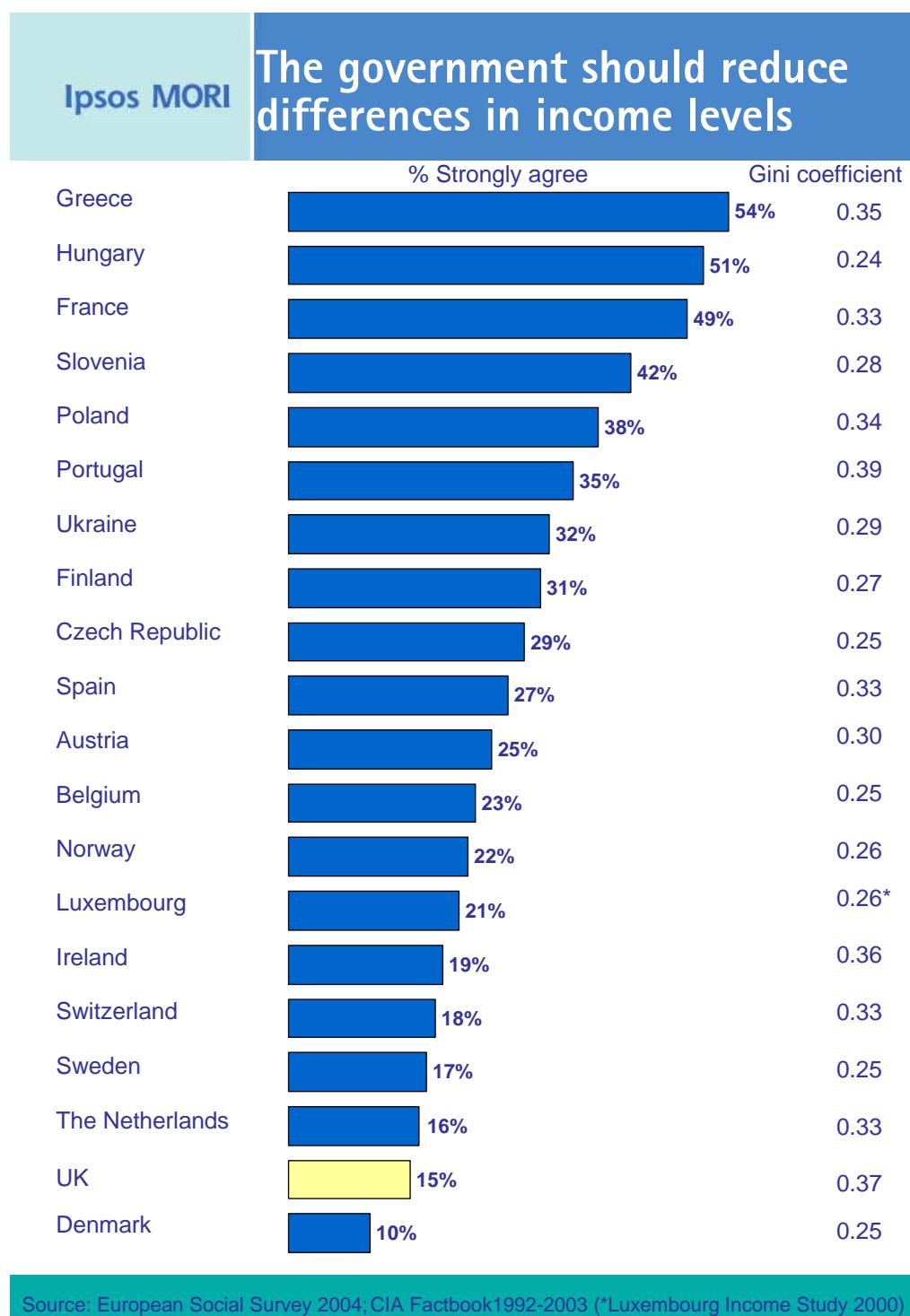
Source: Eurobarometer 56.1, *Poverty and devaluation in Europe* (2001) Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country



Given that the British mostly do not see poverty as a result of injustice, it is no surprise that they are among the least likely to want the government to step in. For example, a recent wave of the European Social Survey found that Britain is the second least likely out of 20 European nations to strongly agree that the government should reduce differences in income levels, as seen in the chart below.

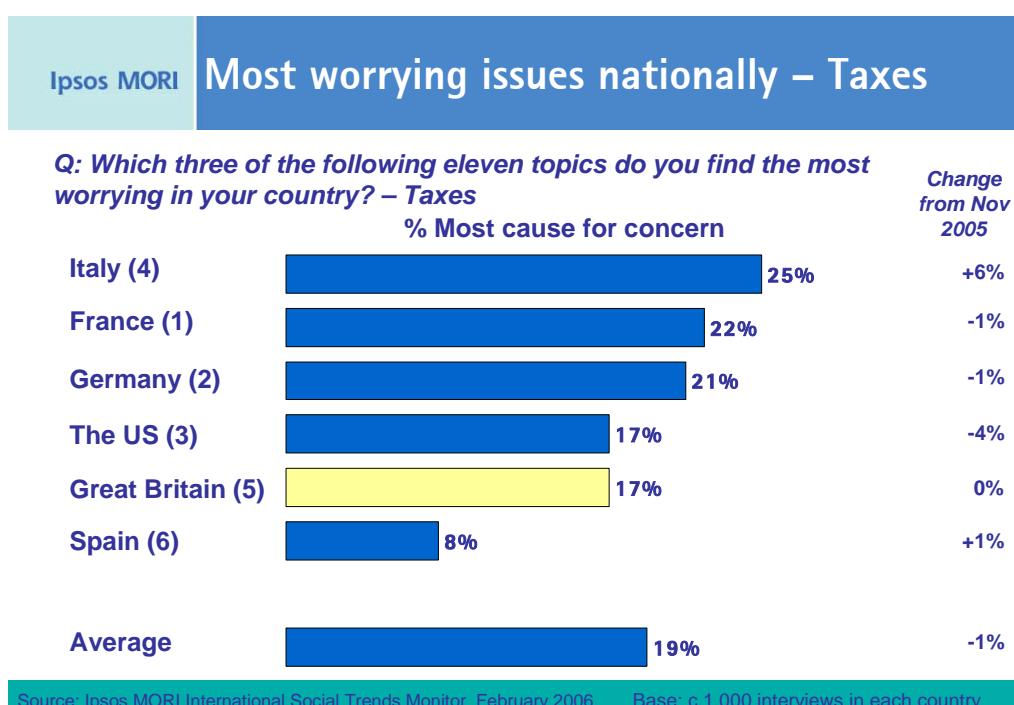
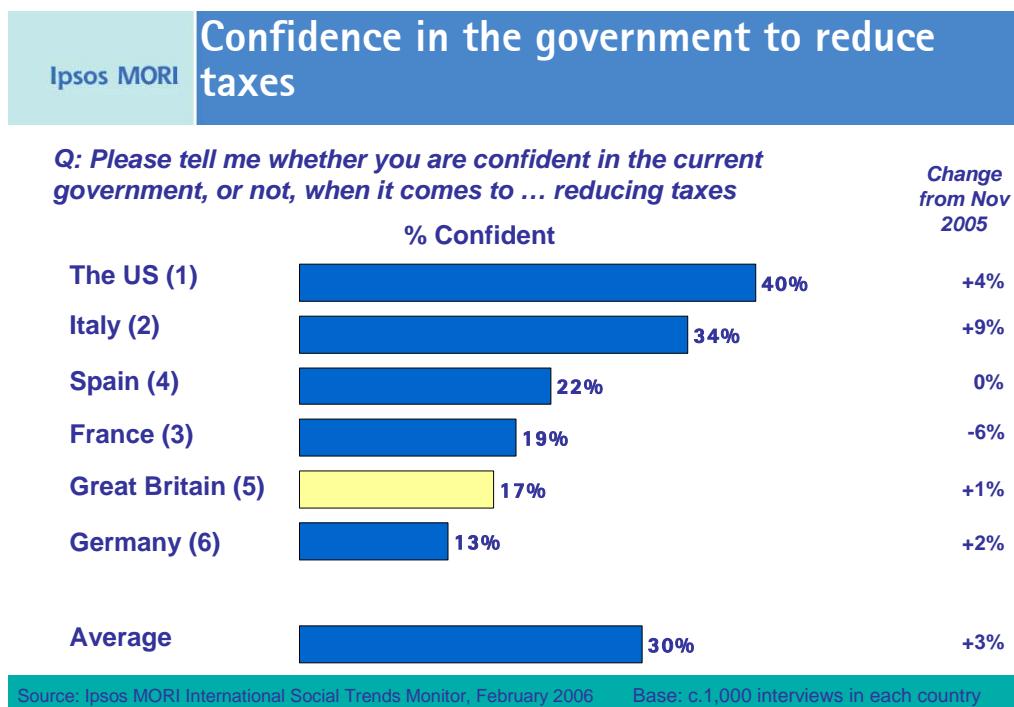
The chart also shows a measure of actual levels of inequality, based on the Gini coefficient drawn from the CIA factbook⁴. This is an index based on income distribution, where the higher the number the greater the level of inequality. And this suggests that there is very little relationship between actual levels of inequality and calls for government intervention. So for example, on this measure the UK has the highest levels of inequality among these main European countries (in fact, only the US is more unequal), but very little interest in the government tackling it. On the other hand, the lack of focus on government action on inequality in Denmark and Sweden is not as surprising as it might at first seem, given that actual levels of inequality are among the lowest.

⁴ These Gini coefficients are the latest available for this range of countries, but are rather out of date, and are not from the same period as the survey data. However, despite some progress on some poverty measures in Britain in the last few years, the general pattern is unlikely to have changed greatly.



No expectation of, or real demand for, tax cuts

But this lack of focus on government's role in reducing inequality should not be taken as a sign that the British public are eager to cut back government spending. It is true that there is little confidence in the government to cut taxes (with only the new German government less expected to reduce taxes), but there also appears to be relatively little concern about current tax levels, as seen in the second chart. This suggests there may even be some scope for increases in tax-take to support public service spending for a little longer.



Overall views

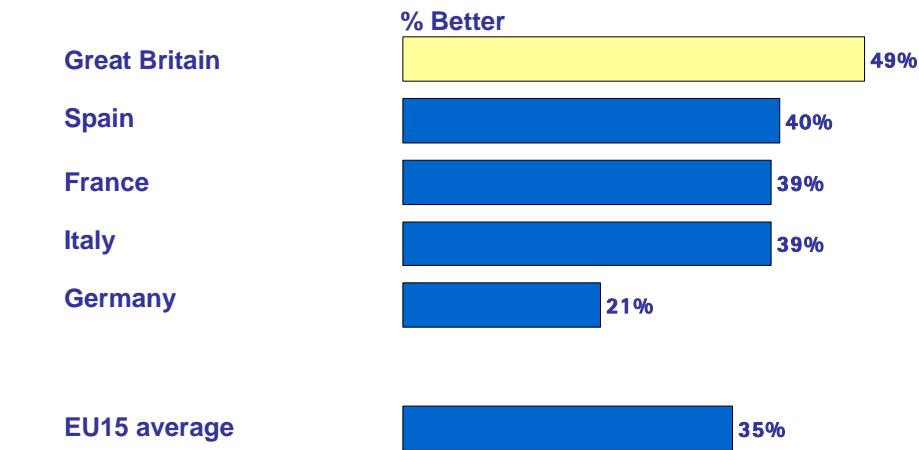
We are happy with life overall

In general, the British are very satisfied with their life overall – and optimistic for their future. When compared with other major European countries using Eurobarometer data, Britons rate their life satisfaction highest – and are significantly more likely to think their life will get better than residents in other countries, as seen in the second chart below. In contrast, the Italians are relatively less positive about their lives at present and the Germans are least optimistic for their future.





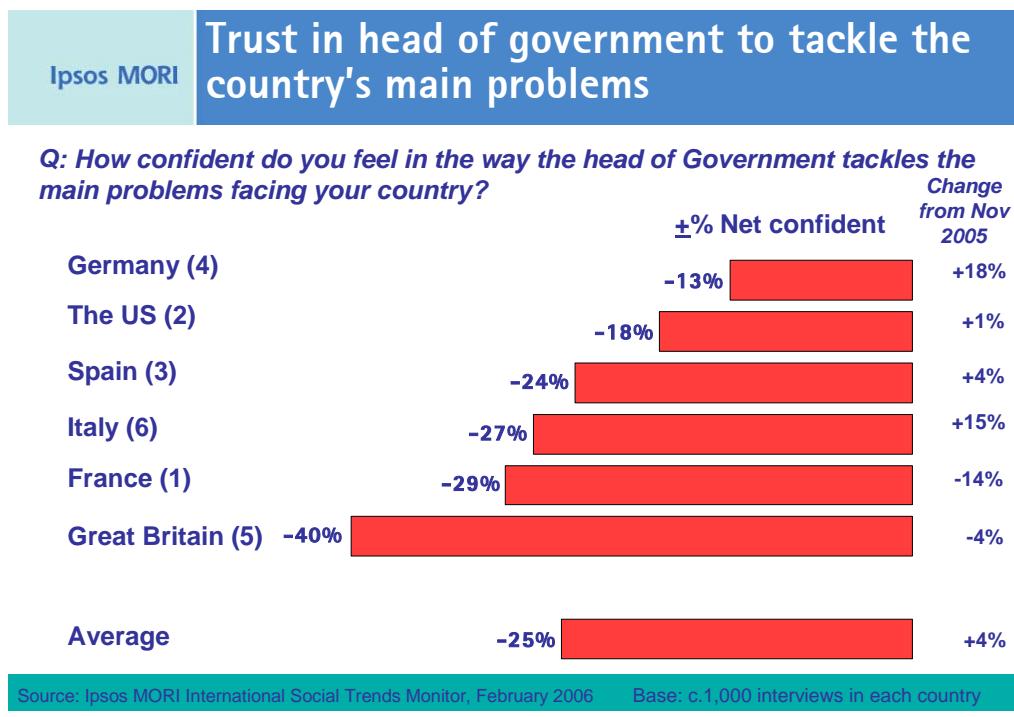
Q: What are your expectations for the next twelve months when it comes to your life in general?



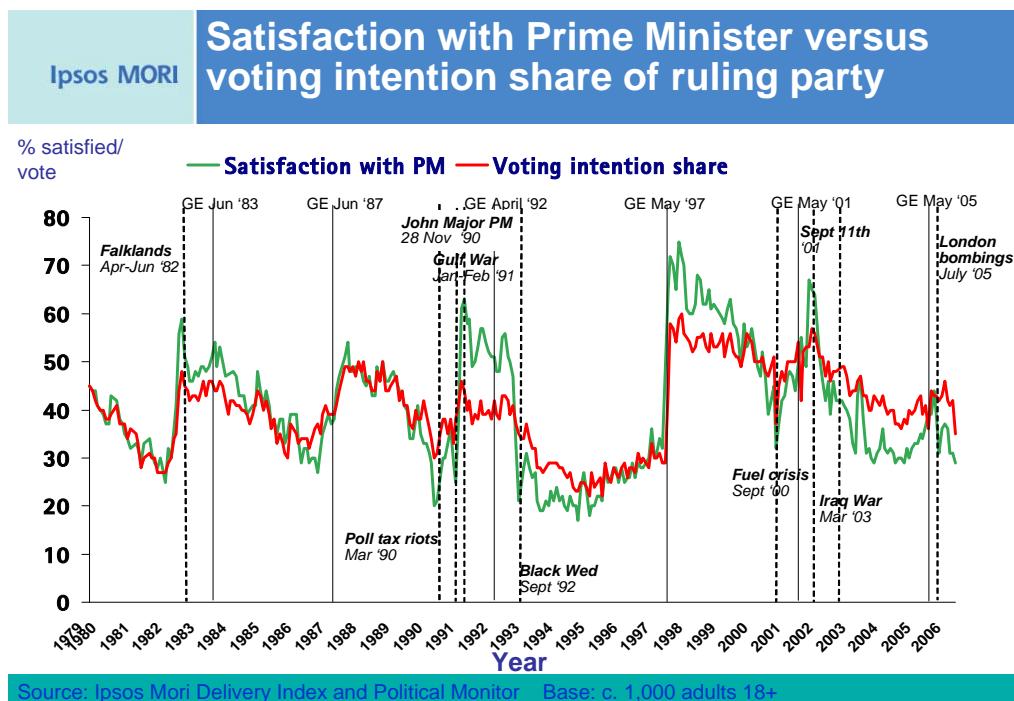
Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country 2005 Base: c.1,000 interviews in each country

But overall ratings of the government are fairly low

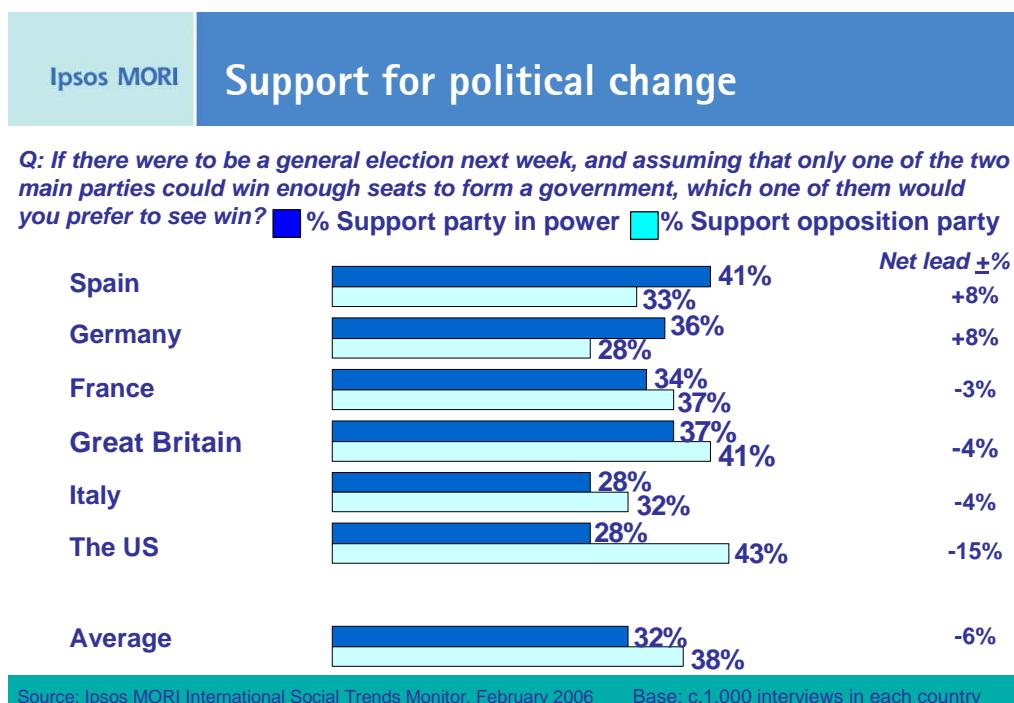
These very high levels of personal happiness and economic confidence compared with other countries makes it particularly worrying for the government that, overall, they receive among the lowest levels of support compared with other major countries. For example, out of the six national leaders, Tony Blair receives the lowest levels of confidence in his ability to solve the country's problems – although it has to be said that none of the leaders do particularly well, with more saying not confident than confident in each case. The chart also shows that this question tends to change quickly, with, for example, Angela Merkel's government receiving a significant boost in support and the French government experiencing a notable decline between November and February. And interestingly, despite the Republican party being in a very weak position overall (see later), trust in the US President to solve national problems remains fairly high (relative to other countries at least). In the next wave of the study it will be fascinating to see how perceptions have shifted in light of the very different political upheavals seen in Italy, France and Britain since February.



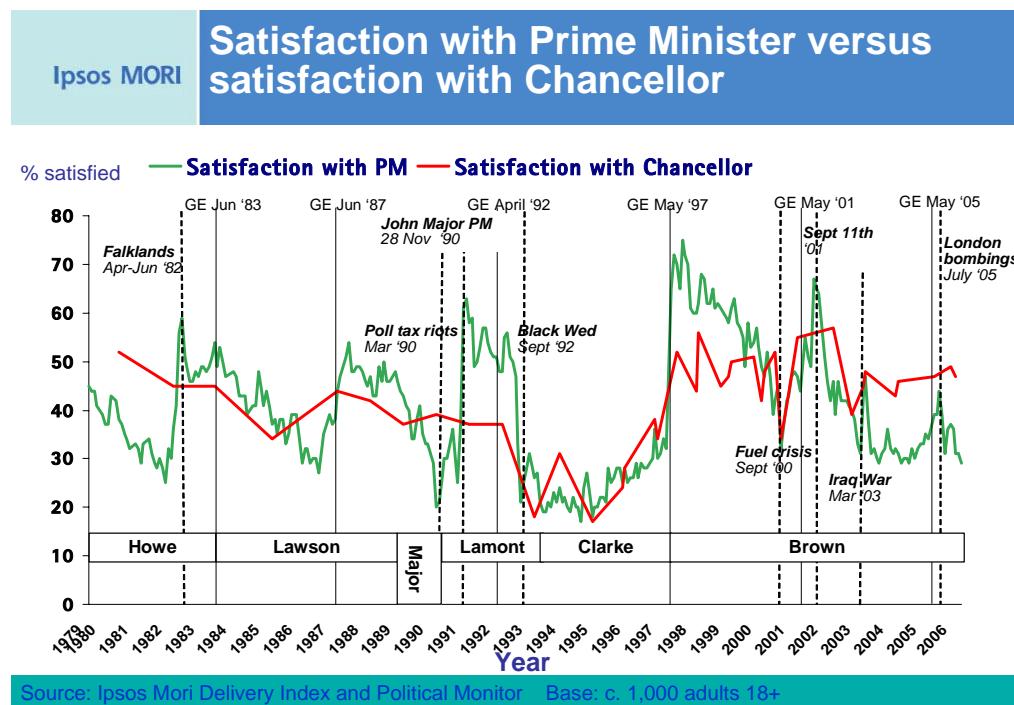
Of course this lack of confidence in the leadership in Britain will be largely a result of a decline in Tony Blair's personal ratings, which is clear from the chart showing long-term trends below. While the first term saw the Prime Minister as a real asset, with ratings significantly higher than the party's share of the vote, this turned around part way through the second term, with the PM now less popular than his party. However, it is possible to overstate this, and looking at long-term data, it is Tony Blair's high initial rating that looks exceptional, while his decline is in line with the political cycle and his current ratings are still higher than those seen for Margaret Thatcher and John Major at various points in their tenure.



But overall views of the British government as a whole are not encouraging, with greater support for the opposition party than the current government, as seen in the chart below. This has deteriorated for Labour in recent months, and the current British government was on a par with the Berlusconi government in Italy that has now been ousted. The other notable finding from this question is the very poor showing for the Republican party in the US, with a net lead of -15 percentage points. As noted above, this contrasts with the fairly positive position of President Bush relative to other leaders – although the absolute levels of net confidence in the President and net support for his party are actually very similar. This could be because leader and party are more synonymous in the US than most other countries, or because Americans are just more likely to express confidence in their President regardless of views of his administration's performance.



So overall then, these comparisons do not make happy reading for the British government, which is particularly worrying given we are entering a critical phase of the political cycle, with the next few months vital in determining the foundations that Tony Blair's successor can build on. The Chancellor's popularity is holding up rather better than the Prime Minister's (as seen in the chart below), and he now gets significantly higher ratings than the PM, again in contrast to the late 1990s. Indeed Gordon Brown achieves ratings as good as anything seen for a Chancellor in the last 25+ years, which is particularly notable given his length of time in office. However, he is clearly benefiting from being so closely associated with the remarkable economic success of the British model while at the same time being distanced from aspects of policy that are perceived as less successful. But the fuel crisis in the Autumn of 2000 shows he has no special immunity; when he did get involved in a difficult situation for the government, his popularity fell to a very similar level as the Prime Minister. This association with failure is clearly likely to be much more frequent if he does become PM.



Appendices

International Social Trends Monitor

Technical details

This quarterly study is carried out simultaneously in the US and the five biggest countries in the European Union: Germany, Spain, France, Italy and Great Britain. Interviews are conducted by telephone using CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) among a representative sample of adults aged 18 years or more in each country. Data are weighted to reflect the known profile of each country's population.

In February 2006, Ipsos MORI interviewed a total of 5,984 interviews across the sample countries. The fieldwork dates and interview numbers were as follows:

France (1,006): 15-16 February 2006

Spain (1,000): 10-16 February 2006

Germany (1,006): 14-17 February
2006

USA (1,006): 13-18 February 2006

Italy (966): 10-15 February 2006

Great Britain (1,000): 10-19 February
2006



International Social Trends Monitor

How do we compare?

This quarterly study by the Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Unit tracks political and social attitudes in Europe and the US.

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Key findings from February's report include:

- Concern over unemployment is lowest among Britons (11%), with Germans nearly seven times as likely to be worried about it (71%).
- Crime, healthcare and immigration are the three most important issues for Britain, in contrast to many European neighbours, where there is greater emphasis on the economy.
- Confidence in the government to tackle Britain's main problems is among the lowest seen, and overall support for Labour is actually on a par with the now ousted Berlusconi government in Italy.

"It is sometimes said that you have to go abroad to know your own country, and this research allows a trip of the mind across the channel for British analysts of public attitudes. As more comparative survey data is built up over time, the results will be of considerable interest to policymakers and analysts."

Nick Pearce, Director ippr



International Social Trends Unit

For more information on becoming a subscriber, research timings and costs contact Bobby Duffy on 020 7347 3267 or bobby.duffy@ipsos-mori.com

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Data is available online at <http://www.mori.com/polls/political.shtml>

Eurobarometer

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Eurobarometer 56.1 “Social precarity and social integration” (October 2001) available online at
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European Social Survey

European Social Survey 2002 and 2004 data available online at
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CIA Factbook

World values for distribution of family income - Gini index table
<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/fields/2172.html>

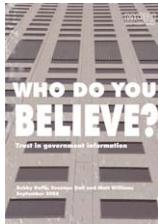
Luxembourg Income Study

LIS key figures – Income inequality measures
<http://www.lisproject.org/keyfigures/ineqtable.htm>

Publications

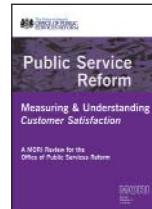
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Please take a look below and email your full postal address to info@ipsos-mori.com - naming the publication/s you would like. If possible, we will send this to you in electronic format.



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Investigates the issue of trust in government statistics and information, highlighting the key drivers of trust and possible steps to increase credibility.



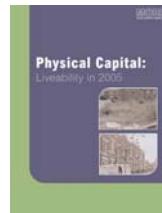
Public Service Reform

This report for the Cabinet Office explores how to measure and understand customer satisfaction, drawing on our own data and a range of models from the public and private sector.



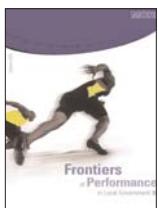
Newspaper Readership

Examines how newspaper readership is related to social and political attitudes.



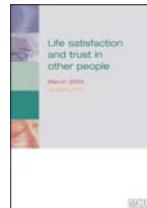
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Ipsos MORI has revisited the liveability issue — and its analysis is encouraging. Research suggests work by central and local government over the past four years is now being recognised by the public — but there is still a long way to go.



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Ipsos MORI

Social Research Institute

79-81 Borough Road
London
SE1 1FY
United Kingdom
Phone: +44 (0)20 7347 3000
Fax: +44 (0)20 7347 3800

Kings House
Kymberley Road
Harrow HA1 1PT
United Kingdom
Phone: +44 (0)20 8861 8000
Fax: +44 (0)20 8861 5515