

Understanding Society

The Perils of Perception

Summer 2009

Public services & perceptions: an interview with Liam Byrne MP

Using patient experience to
performance manage in the NHS

The case for flexible targets: the
recession and support for the
unemployed

A global perception gap?

A new era in policing: focusing on
confidence

Public reaction to the expenses
scandal



Our Events

Families in Britain Today: the impact of changing family structures and what the public think



On 21 April 2009, Ipsos MORI and Policy Exchange held an event launching the joint report *Families in Britain: the impact of changing family structures and what the public think*.

The report aims to be a starting point for debate on policy, charting the changing nature of the family and what that means for the parent, child and wider society. Our own Ben Page and Shadow Minister Maria Miller MP presented the research findings and highlighted key opportunities for policy makers in light of the challenges suggested by the current demographic, social and attitudinal terrain, and what the public thinks of these options.

Perils of Perception

October 2009

In October the Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute will launch its report *The Perils of Perception*. The event will debate the risks associated with perceptions-based measures which should be considered in tandem with their positive impact – encouraging services and government to consider what they do from a user's perspective.

For more information about our upcoming events, please contact anna.dicamillo@ipsos.com

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Foreword

Welcome to the latest edition of the Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute's regular newsletter. It may seem strange for a public opinion organisation to be pointing out the difficulties involved in measuring perceptions (and we certainly wouldn't argue against focusing on the needs of the citizen), but over the last few years we have shown that a simplistic use of perception targets is not enough, and involves significant risks. Instead, we need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of what drives public attitudes, so that we can deliver the improvements in services that citizens and government both want to see.

The power of perceptions has been clearly demonstrated in recent weeks in the public outcry over MPs' expenses, and we are still working through the real impact this will have on the way we are governed. Of course, this government under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown has always been aware of the potential for people-power, and should be applauded for the emphasis it has placed on putting the citizen at the heart of its public service reform strategy (even if we actually first started working on consumer focus issues with the Conservatives under John Major). The Minister who has been driving this forward is Liam Byrne, and

we are very fortunate that here he tells us why the government has concentrated on this, and what they aim to achieve.

We know, though, that to bring about these improvements it's not just a case of tracking the numbers, but of understanding the factors that drive them – some of which will be out of the control of government and individual public services. In this newsletter we give you a sneak preview of some of the challenges involved from our upcoming report *The Perils of Perception*, and then examine in more detail three specific policy areas: health, community safety, and employment.

As we carry out more research for governments across the globe, it may be partly reassuring that Britain is not the only country grappling with this issue. According to our latest international figures, think yourself lucky if you live in Australia, Canada or Sweden, because everywhere else people are pretty grumpy about the direction their country is taking.

Unfortunately, it appears that levels of personal happiness are lower in Britain than many other countries. More worrying for the government is that a large and growing majority think the country is getting worse; when considering

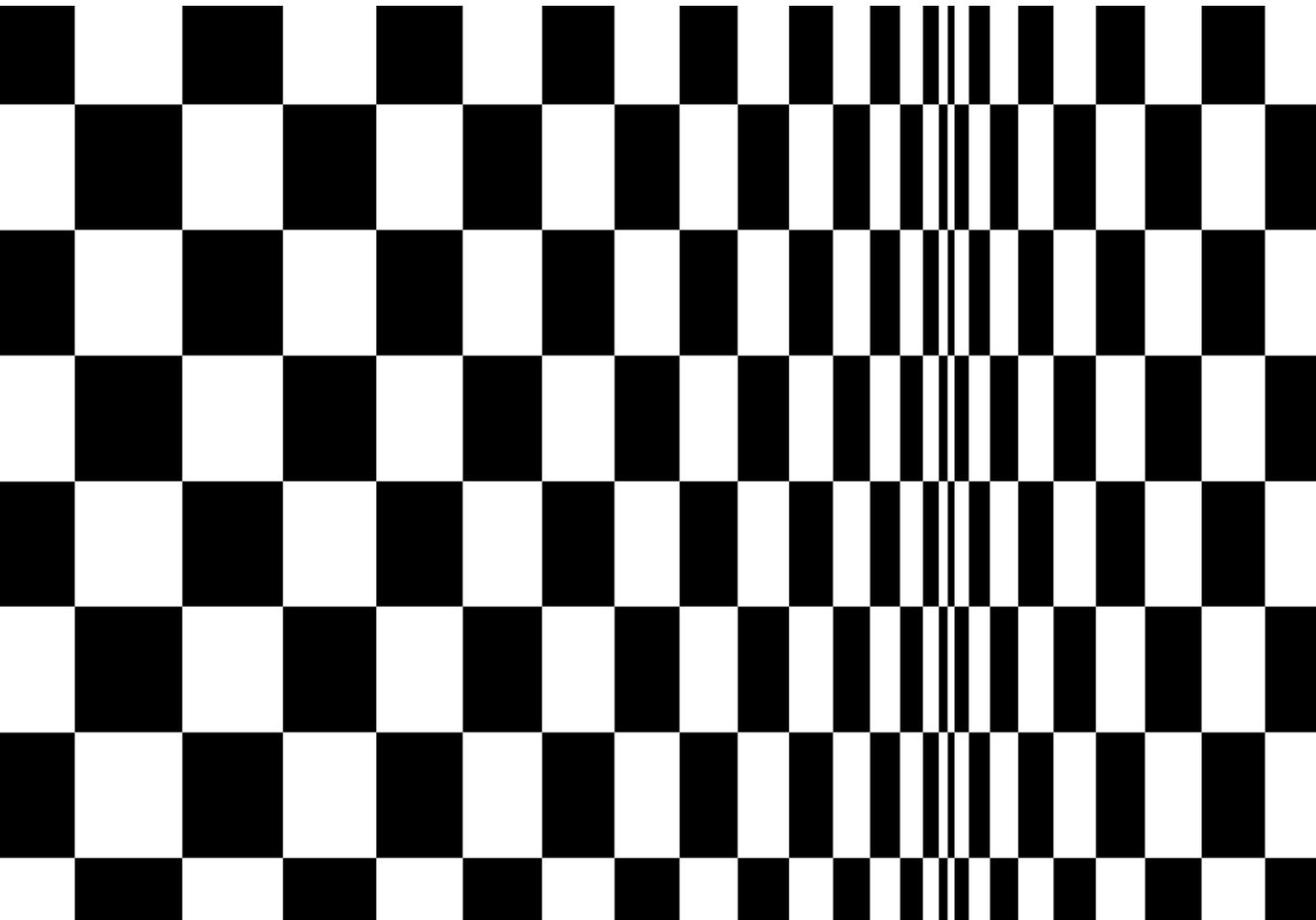
perceptions, it is always worth remembering that two-thirds of Britons think the country is actually "broken". This might just be our national character (again the reactions to the expenses row gives some clue to this, ranging as it does from a cynical shrug to some delight in the opportunity to be disappointed), but whatever the cause, it does not bode well for Labour's prospects at the next election. This is borne out by our latest Political Monitor, also discussed inside.

But whichever party is in power, perceptions of services and government will remain vitally important. Our focus, in this newsletter and our work more generally, is to make sure those making decisions have the best and most actionable information. We therefore hope you find this newsletter interesting, and as ever we always want to hear about your views of our work and the issues raised. Please email me or any of the Ipsos MORI team if you would like to discuss this in more detail. ■

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The perils of perception

Bobby Duffy



So what are the problems with perception targets? Bobby Duffy, Managing Director of the Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, takes us through some of the main challenges, and what managers and policy makers can do to overcome them.

The huge growth in the use of public opinion data has been one of the defining features of public service reform in recent years. Government and public service leaders are now just as likely to find their success and failure judged by public satisfaction surveys or feelings of safety as by actual waiting times or crime rates.

In 1998, when Public Service Agreements (PSAs) were first brought in, only one was based on public perceptions from the 600 targets set (yes, 600 – the accusation that early New Labour governments were overly target-driven does seem to have some truth in it). Now over a quarter of the 30 current PSAs include perception-based measures, as do a fifth of the 188 National Indicators of local government performance.

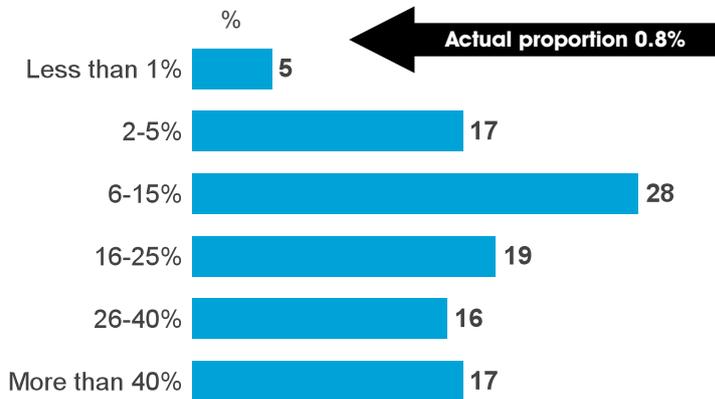
This is a positive move, as it encourages services and government to consider what they do from the user's perspective, rather than counting outputs that may have little impact on those they are trying to serve. But it also brings its own risks. We explore these in detail in our forthcoming report on *The Perils of Perception*, but five key problems are outlined below.

Perceptions are not reality...

The first is that people can just be wrong in their perceptions, which can colour their view of how important issues are. A key example that we've seen for many

Over-estimation of teenage pregnancy

In your opinion, what proportion of girls under the age of 16 years in England get pregnant each year?



Base: 1,986 British adults aged 15+, Capibus, 18-24 July 2008

Source: Ipsos MORI/Brook

years is the significant over-estimation of the number of immigrants coming to the UK (the average estimate is twice the actual level), but a more spectacular one is shown in the chart above. The public's average estimate of the proportion of girls under 16 getting pregnant each year is 23%, almost 30 times the actual proportion of 0.8% - and there is even a sizeable group who think more than 40% of under-16s get pregnant each year! Clearly, this is not a sensible guess, but where direct experience is limited, perceptions can wildly diverge from reality – the rhetoric of feral and promiscuous teenagers in Britain does have an effect on opinions.

This takes us to the second problem with perceptions – the role of the media. The extent to which the media set or reflect concerns has been debated for decades, but our research does provide support for a clear agenda-setting role. Taking a crime-related example, there is a clear correlation between recent increased media coverage of knife crime and peaks in public concern about the issue. This is not surprising, given the

relentless comment in the summer of 2008 about, for example, an “epidemic” and how stabbings were now “common” in Britain. But it does become an issue when the coverage is disproportionate; while it is notoriously difficult to get a single set of definitive knife crime figures (which is part of the problem), all the data suggests that the sense of increased threat created in the media is not justified by the actual increase in risk. This is especially important given that TV news and the local press are now more trusted sources of information about crime than the police.

The third problem is the relationship between ratings of services and political views. For example, our analysis suggests that the greatest single driver of satisfaction with the NHS as a whole (as opposed to individual hospitals – a point we will come onto later) is not the quality of the care you receive but which political party you support. Unpicking cause and effect in relationships like this is clearly difficult, but political views and overall ratings of the government do seem have some independent impact on

ratings of services, especially when they are tracked at the national level. This is a tricky subject for public service leaders, given the supposed separation of politics from service delivery, but it shouldn't be ignored, particularly when the waning popularity of the government overall will make other perception targets harder to meet. One approach to minimising this kind of effect is to keep targets as local and specific as possible, which is seen in many of the current PSAs.

Communications are of vital importance in driving overall perceptions

Fourthly, we have to consider the level of expectations. Clearly if expectations are rising at a faster rate than performance, perceptions can deteriorate even in the face of objective improvements in services. Another key theme of the reform of public services has been their "consumerisation", with people being encouraged to expect similar treatment to that provided by private services. In one way, this is certainly a good thing, as higher expectations force public services to stay on their toes. But we also need to bear in mind that the aims of private and public services are very different: in the end private services don't want to make us satisfied and improve our quality of life (as public services should), they want to create loyalty and further demand. Given that public spending growth in the next few years is going to need to be tighter than the tightest it got in the 1980s, the most important question for the future of perception measures is how quickly public expectations will re-calibrate to this new reality.

And finally, our work over many years points to the important influence that the nature of a local area can have on the perceptions held by people living there – and, specifically, how we can predict satisfaction levels very accurately knowing only factors such as deprivation, ethnic diversity and even the physical characteristics of an area. This means that there is a lot which is beyond the control of service leaders – and so we need to be careful when interpreting simple league tables of absolute satisfaction levels. The concept of 'value-added' is now widely accepted in other areas like educational achievement, but it needs to be taken into account more than it currently is when interpreting perception measures.

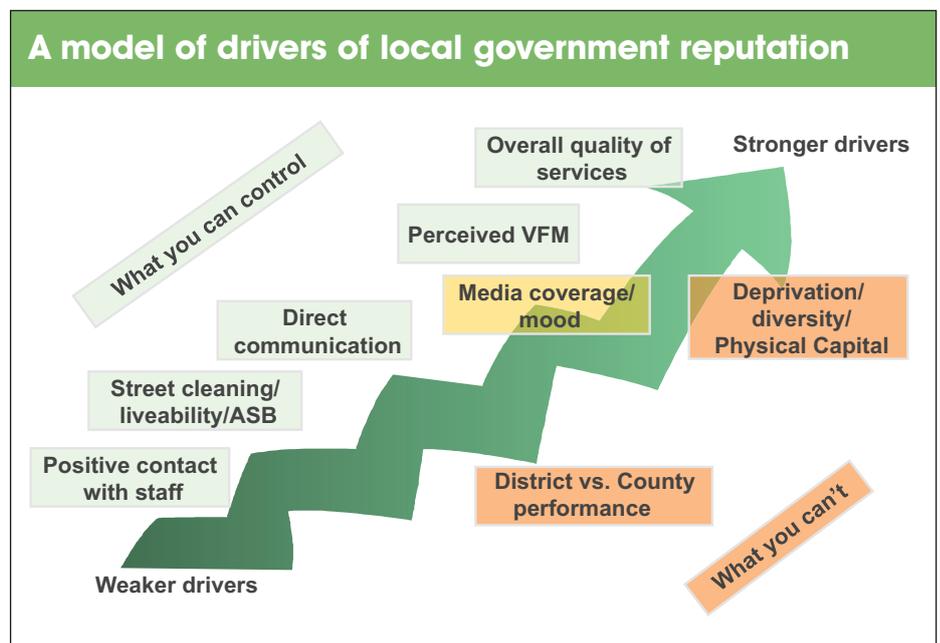
What service leaders can do

This all might sound a bit hopeless – but it isn't, as there is a lot that service leaders can do. This starts with having clear models of what actually drives perceptions for each target measure. There are various research approaches that can identify which aspects of

services are most related to perceptions to highlight actionable findings - for example, that being treated with dignity and respect is by far the most important determinant of overall satisfaction with hospital inpatient care (as shown in the next article).

But we also need more rounded models, which aren't just based on survey data. For example, we've built up a model of the factors driving local government reputation over a number of years. This draws together both drivers that service leaders can control – the perceived quality of services and value for money that a local authority offers are the two greatest drivers of overall satisfaction - and those which they can't, such as the deprivation or diversity of the area they serve.

This model also points to the vital importance of communications in driving overall perceptions. We see time and again the clear relationship between satisfaction with a local authority and the extent to which residents feel informed about the services it provides.





Again, cause and effect can be difficult to untangle here, but it remains the case that no council that is thought to communicate well is poorly rated overall, and this has to be an area for all public services to improve.

And even the simplest of communications can be very effective if done right – as you can see in the experiment we carried out in policing quoted later on in this newsletter. Our work also emphasises the importance of front-line employees as communicators - there is a clear link between levels of staff advocacy and the way in which the organisation is perceived.

Our upcoming report will outline more practical steps that can be taken to help improve perceptions. But finally, we also need to ask whether this focus will still be relevant in a year or so – that is, whether a future Conservative government would be quite so concerned about measuring progress through perceptions. This is clearly difficult to judge at this stage, but while surveys and consultations may be under pressure in a new “age of austerity”, it may prove difficult for any political party to row back completely from a citizen perspective – especially if this actually allows public services to focus on priorities more efficiently. Indeed, a number of recent Conservative

statements have emphasised the need for an even greater outcome focus, and for example a year-on-year improvement in patient satisfaction is one of their seven key health outcomes. It seems despite their perils, perceptions could be here to stay. ■

These issues will be covered in more detail in a major Ipsos MORI report to be released later in the year. To express an interest in the report or for more information, please contact bobby.duffy@ipsos.com.

Using patient experience to performance manage in the NHS

Dan Wellings

One high profile service grappling with the introduction of perception-based measures is the NHS, after the recommendations of the Darzi Review. Dan Wellings, Head of our Public Health team, examines the implications.

Performance management, with a particular emphasis on monitoring the quality of service, is becoming of even more paramount importance in the NHS in the wake of Lord Darzi's Next Stage Review and the advent of World Class Commissioning. A number of consultations have been taking place across the country looking to establish both relevant metrics and how these can be used to ensure organisations are delivering the best quality of care.

Many of the measures proposed will not be new to people working in the NHS. They are relatively straightforward and reflect previous practice and data

routinely collected. It is clear that when measuring the success of smoking cessation services, for example, one of the key metrics will be to look at how many people quit smoking as a result. When measuring the performance of a cervical screening programme it seems evident that increased uptake of services will be an indicator of success.

However, traditional outcome data like this is not the end of the story in the new NHS. Patient experience is one of the three cornerstones highlighted in *High Quality Care for All*. If we take the example of cervical screening again we can see that uptake is only a partial measure of success. Recent research by Ipsos MORI for Tower Hamlets PCT has shown that the experience of patients in cervical screening can have a significant bearing on future uptake. If a first time experience is unpleasant for the patient this can have a detrimental effect on

whether or not they engage with services in the future. This correlation between experience and uptake is key and shows how important measuring both is to ensuring that quality is at the heart of the NHS. Patients are customers now and to judge success we need to ensure that the customer is getting what they want.

“For the first time we will systematically measure and publish information about the quality of care from the frontline up. Measures will include patients’ own views on the success of their treatment and the quality of their experiences.”

High Quality Care for All – NHS Next Stage Review

The upshot of this is that performance management in the NHS will be judged, in part, based on what patients think of services. At first glance, this seems a simple enough concept. We can ask patients how satisfied they were and use this measure over time to judge how effectively services are delivering this. However, as argued in the first article, on closer inspection measuring perception data such as this throws up a number of challenges, and we can see how they specifically impact on the NHS.



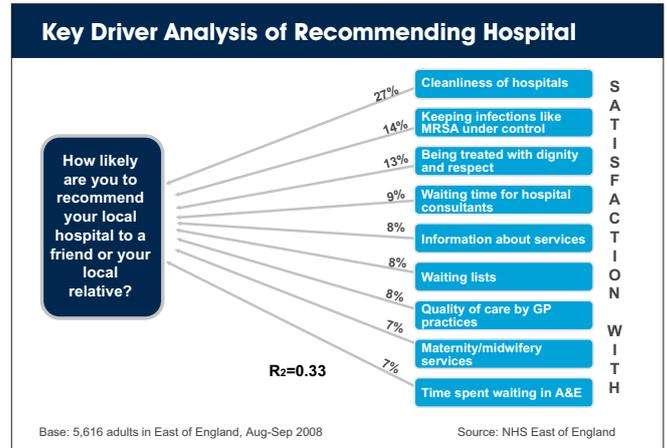
The first and perhaps key challenge is trying to understand what makes a patient satisfied with their experience. Was it that they felt they were being treated with dignity and respect or that they thought the hospital was clean? Were they offered a choice? Was there car parking available for friends and family to visit? Did they have to wait for treatment? If so, was the waiting time acceptable? What is acceptable? Looking at these questions it is immediately clear that different criteria may be more or less appropriate in different circumstances. When someone needs a repeat prescription from their GP what makes a “good” experience will be very different from when they are admitted to A&E with a serious condition. So the first thing we need to ensure is that we understand what type of experience we are measuring and make certain we understand the key drivers that are relevant to that particular service. In other words, what do patients want? Understanding this will allow improvements to be made because not only can we highlight areas of underperformance but also their relative importance to the end user.

Let’s look at an example of how we can do this. We know that measuring the extent to which patients would recommend a service is a good measure of overall perceptions. We can track this advocacy over time to measure performance. However, this measure on its own will not allow us to understand what is behind shifts in the data. We recently conducted a Key Driver Analysis for the East Of England SHA looking at different criteria that affect patients’ likelihood to recommend a hospital. We can see from the chart what drives satisfaction and the relative importance of these drivers. This, coupled with effectively used qualitative research, allows managers to

focus on patients’ top priorities – in this case cleanliness/infections and being treated with dignity and respect. It is building models like these, and the example for local government illustrated earlier, that really allow managers to focus on the issues that make a difference.

Another key challenge for health services in particular is when we should ask for patients’ perceptions. Do we ask in real-time? This method is less likely to be influenced by faulty recall. However, if someone is in a state of distress whilst in hospital do they want to be asked about how they feel they are being treated? Does asking someone about the level of service they are receiving peri-treatment actually cause more distress? Asking someone after their experience is subject to recall bias but also has the benefit of allowing for reflection. Both methods have pros and cons. The key is to ensure that any biases are constant, i.e. that the method is the same each time.

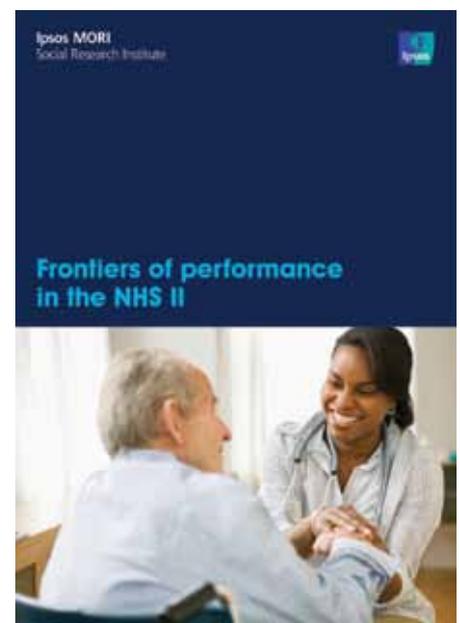
Finally, when we are analysing the data we need to be careful when making comparisons between different areas. This was emphasised in the first article, and one area where we have discovered its effects is in health. Serving a homogenous population is generally more straightforward than serving a population which has a greater range of needs. We know from previous research that the higher the degree of ethnic fractionalisation the greater the likelihood of lower satisfaction scores. When this is taken into account we can see that a PCT, which looks at first glance to be



performing badly, is actually doing rather well.

So measuring patient experience is only going to become more important to the NHS, but if we want to produce data that will lead to better services we will have to pay attention to what it really means and how it can be used. ■

These issues are covered in more detail in our Frontiers of Health report – contact dan.wellings@ipsos.com for a copy or to discuss in more detail.



Perceptions and public service reform:

Liam Byrne MP

Ben Page



Ben Page, Chief Executive of Ipsos MORI, interviews Rt Hon Liam Byrne MP, who until the recent reshuffle was Minister for the Cabinet Office and responsible for co-ordinating the improvement of public services. Ben asks Liam what government has learnt through its experience of public service reform, and what he hopes to achieve by putting the citizen at the heart of the reform programme.

Q. After 12 years in power, what have you learnt about public service improvement?

I would say that I've learned two things in particular. First, you need to be clear about your purpose. Our purpose is clear: a revolution in social mobility, now on the move for the first time in three decades, and our ambition to see a country of strong communities living by fair rules.

But the second is that for the next decade, Whitehall "diktat" has limited impact on improving public services. Today, improvement is being driven at the frontline: public service professionals and users themselves, co-designing improvement in thousands of different ways every day. The job at the centre is therefore to enable this innovation to flourish by giving more power to the professionals and citizens and listening and learning from them to guide our overall approach. For example, today, Procter & Gamble say that half of their innovation and growth ideas come from reaching outside their organisation, which is something that would never have happened 20 years ago.

Q. One of the key changes in public service delivery over the past 12 years has been the increased emphasis on using perception measures to gauge performance. Why is this so important?

In setting the public service framework, the Government is looking to improve measures of public confidence, perceptions and experience.

Let me explain why. We want to shift significant power and responsibility away from central government, strengthening local accountability over services, and ensuring that delivery of services is responsive to local circumstances and

priorities. The best systems in the world treat each citizen as a unique individual, with his or her own family's distinct needs, and then tailor the service to meet these personalised requirements. So public services that aspire to be truly personalised must put the power to shape those services much closer to the individual citizen.

One of the most practical means by which users of public services can be given a greater collective say over priorities is through the effective use of satisfaction and opinion surveys. World class public services make far greater use of these types of approaches, they actively encourage feedback from the people who use them and then use this feedback in very tangible ways. That is why many national performance agreements with services now explicitly include the citizen's viewpoint as a key indicator of success.

Once organisations are collecting this data it is then possible to give real weight to the views of the parent, patient, student, tenant or victim of crime. For example in schooling, Ofsted inspectors have over the past few years been required to look at how the school is regarded by parents. NHS Trusts are increasingly looking to capture real-time patient feedback. As was recently announced, indicators are already being devised that will assess not only the effectiveness and safety of nursing care in the NHS, but also

how compassionately care has been delivered.

This is only becoming more important in the current climate. Government must make every pound go further, which means working with citizens to find the most effective and efficient ways to deliver improved outcomes.

Q. Aren't both you and the Conservatives effectively offering the same vision of "consumer empowerment, choice, efficiency, plurality in provision, contestability" etc?

My assessment of Conservative policy is that it is something of a patchwork quilt of policies that are not rooted in a vision of public services but by a different set of political calculations: talking up parents and talking down local authorities in education; talking up doctors over patients in health. There are however two fundamental differences between us which will result in a very different choice for voters at the next election.

First, investment. The Conservatives are pledged to spend less than us on public services. For instance, from this month they would cut £5 billion of services - in police, universities, welfare services and charities funding - to give a tax cut to pensioners with savings (even when 60% don't pay tax). Both parties will advocate rooting out waste in spending - we've already made £26.5 billion in efficiency savings and will announce more to come. But the Conservatives reject the belief that it is crucial to invest in public services through the downturn as an essential strategy for the upturn. So they will oppose bringing forward capital spending and investing in new skills and industries.

Second, on the role of government. It's true that we believe that power should be

decentralised to the lowest possible level. However we also believe that standards in public services should be a guarantee, not a gamble. For example, our insistence that GPs all over the country should extend access to patients and that underperformance in schools should not be tolerated. These interventions are rejected by the Conservatives whose market based approach would result in a postcode lottery for many with declining outcomes overall.

Q. Based on your experience over the last few years, how do you feel central government departments need to change in future?

As I said earlier, increasingly, government's priorities will be setting standards and entitlements - and then getting out of the way. Excellent services will enable all individuals and communities, not just the privileged few, to grasp new opportunities for the future. This for us is the role of the state - to ensure that everyone in our society is enabled to realise their potential. But we will also continue to insist minimum standards of service are met across the board, so that in parallel with offering greater freedoms, we will intervene much more sharply in those services that fail to deliver decent minimum standards.

One specific thing government can do is to lead an information revolution to enable parents, patients and citizens to share information and experiences on the performance of schools, hospitals and police forces. Local crime information will be made regularly available to every household, including through local crime maps. Parents will have full and better access to school performance data. People take it for granted that they will access other people's reviews and ratings before buying something on eBay or Amazon, and yet we do not

yet have systematic access to other people's experiences when choosing a GP practice or nursery. The internet has given a powerful voice to consumers to give feedback on private sector services - that feedback is now spreading to public services and must be embraced.

Achieving all of this will demand a more accountable, co-ordinated and higher performing Civil Service. Whitehall doesn't yet work cooperatively enough - despite PSAs now requiring joined-up working, behaviours have been too slow to follow. And in the next few years, the Service will need to have a sharper focus on outcomes, innovation and value for money. Policy making that incorporates front-line insights can also help ensure that policy is practical, effective and relevant, which means every civil servant deepening their understanding of frontline delivery. Finally, in difficult economic times, new approaches will be even more vital to improve the efficiency and quality of services, tackle strategic challenges like an ageing society, and build new kinds of services for a new global economy. This does not mean micro-managing the detail of implementation but rather setting out priorities and how they will be achieved, and ensuring that Whitehall becomes a catalyst for innovation. Sir Gus O'Donnell, Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Office Civil Service, and I are currently driving this agenda forward and we have also reorganised the Cabinet Office to strengthen our focus on innovation.

So our call for strong government should not be confused with a call for big government - but government can act as the builder of a coalition for change. ■

Ben Page interviewed Liam Byrne MP in May 2009.



The case for flexible targets

Suzanne Hall

Of course it's not just perceptions that make it difficult for departments to hit their targets. A sudden change in external circumstances can also have a real impact on their delivery. Here, Suzanne Hall, Head of Employment, Welfare and Skills, looks at one of the implications of the recession for the Department for Work and Pensions.

It's one thing to set stretching targets in times of economic prosperity, which the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) set out to do with its PSA to maximise employment opportunity for all. It's quite another to deliver the opportunities that this demands for groups traditionally excluded from work during a time of recession and rising unemployment among the workforce as a whole.

This target was rooted in the belief that those who can work should do, due to the economic and social benefits that employment is seen to bring. Within this, it sought to bring traditionally vulnerable groups such as the elderly, lone parents and carers into the workplace by promoting flexible working policies, re-training and up-skilling through initiatives such as Apprenticeships and Train to Gain. They also set about restructuring the benefits system from one that is passive to active, for instance, the change from Incapacity Benefit to the Employment and Support Allowance.

These aims were also endorsed by the public and in recent research we have conducted for DWP, the importance of work has been repeatedly emphasised with over four in five agreeing that 'suitable work is good for everyone, even those with a long term illness or disability'. It is also reiterated in our qualitative and deliberative research in which members of the public mention the many benefits of employment. Aside from the purely financial, work is believed to give people a sense of purpose and achievement. It widens social networks, sets a good example and raises aspirations of what is possible.

However, this target is going to be even harder to hit now that the UK is in the midst of a severe, and possibly long-lasting, recession. As unemployment rises, Jobcentre Plus staff are going to be under increasing pressure not only coping with higher footfall, but dealing with new types of customers from professional backgrounds. Presuming the vacancies are there (admittedly a big question), it will be easier to get the new wave of unemployed back into work, due to their skills and experience, than helping the harder groups this PSA was designed for.

Furthermore, we know from our research that it is the first three months of worklessness that are critical. After this time, confidence levels drop and people

become harder to place. So maybe the emphasis should be on getting the recently unemployed back into work as soon as possible.

And this is something which employers may prefer. Already we know that of those businesses that don't offer flexible working, seven in ten state that it is because it is incompatible with business needs. Additionally, many smaller employers – the bulk of the economy – are hard pressed to offer the training and support that more vulnerable groups badly need to help them make that transition back into work. If employers don't need to offer these kind of provisions due to the larger pool of candidates eager for work, then should we expect them to do so of their own accord?

There are, of course, some exceptions. Some employers view it as their responsibility to work with the government to help it meet its objectives and place a real emphasis on helping those in most need to acquire the skills necessary to function in the modern economy. However, the real risk now is not just that DWP's aim to maximise employment opportunity for all will fall by the wayside as the recession sees priorities placed elsewhere, but that those who have been traditionally excluded from the labour market will continue to suffer. ■

Contact suzanne.hall@ipsos.com for more details about our work in this area.



A global perception gap?

Gideon Skinner

Britain isn't the only country struggling with problems with perceptions. Across the world there is a mismatch between a positive view of our own personal, local lives, and a largely negative stance about the country we live in. To some extent this is a natural human bias, but what else might it mean for governments trying to understand what they should do to improve their citizens' lives? Gideon Skinner, Research Director, writes.

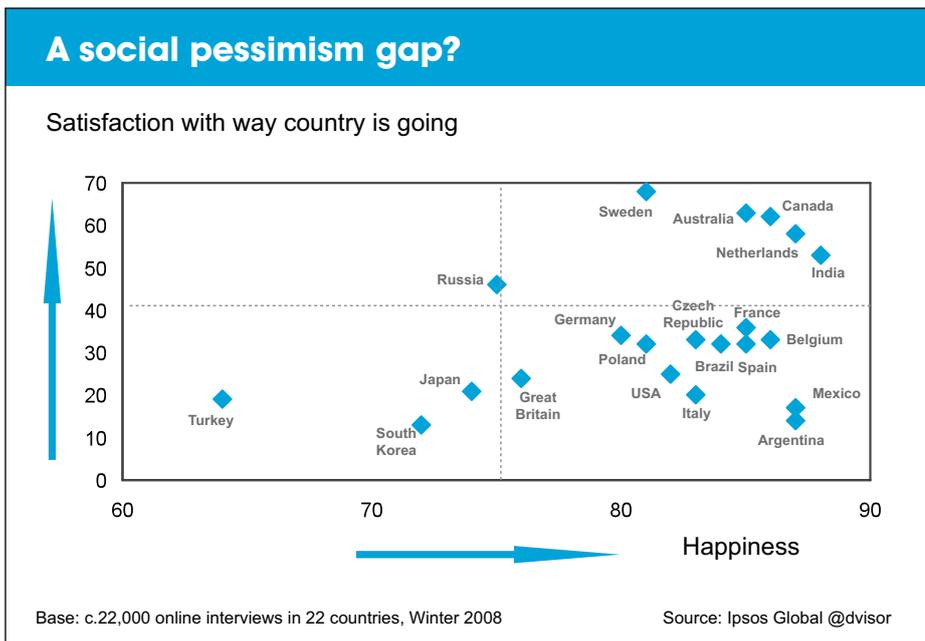
International surveys show that a 'social pessimism gap' exists in most countries around the world. Data from Ipsos' Global @dvisor study, a large online survey of 22,000 interviews across 22 countries, clearly demonstrates that people are

much more happy about their own personal lives, and their own financial future, than they are about their country as a whole. For example, on average 80% say they are happy with their lives, but only 35% are satisfied with the way things are going in their country.

Having said that, the scale of this social pessimism does vary in different countries, as the chart overleaf demonstrates. A group of five countries show us the way to go: Sweden, Australia, Canada, India and the Netherlands all manage to combine high levels of personal happiness with confidence in the way their country is going. On the other hand, there is a particularly large gap between personal happiness

and social pessimism in the LATAM economies of Argentina and Mexico, and also richer countries such as the US and Italy. And yet perhaps most worried should be the governments of Britain, Turkey, Japan and South Korea, where there is both dissatisfaction with the direction the country is taking and low levels of personal happiness.

Some of this gap will be due to an optimism bias, simply our human tendency to take a glass half-full approach when looking at our own lives. There are also a number of powerful factors which can explain the glass half-empty view we take of society as a whole. As set out earlier in this newsletter, these will include the impact of the media, a difference



in views between local and national services, a lack of trust in politicians and official statistics, changing expectations and mis-estimations. However, could it also be that governments are missing the point and not responding to the issues that really make a difference to their citizens' lives?

It is not always possible to second-guess the public's priorities. Jobs are certainly the number one issue across the world at the moment, but there are country-by-country variations, and not always in the way that objective indicators might predict.

In particular – difficult as this may be to say in the current climate – could it be that it's not just “the economy, stupid”? In recent years there has been a growing

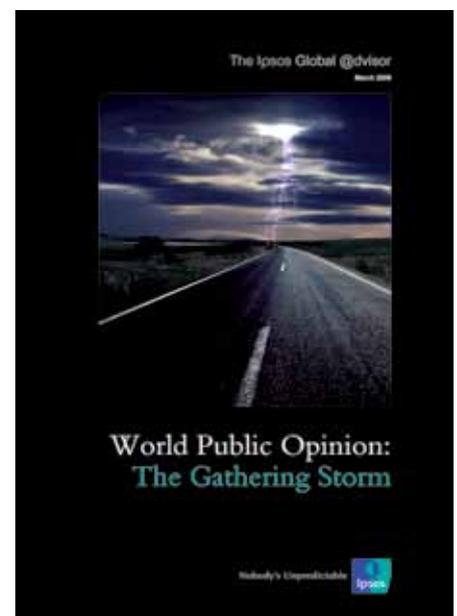
interest in the use of well-being indicators as appropriate targets for governments and social policy, from Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Measure to David Cameron's call for a focus on general well-being, and the initiatives from OECD on *Measuring the Progress of Societies* and the EU on thinking *Beyond GDP*. There is an increasing understanding that measurement of people's income alone does not give a full picture of the state of their lives, but that a wide range of other factors – social, cultural, political, environmental and emotional – all need to be taken into account.

Furthermore, it is not always possible to second-guess the public's priorities. Jobs are certainly the number one issue across the world at the moment, but there are country-by-country variations, and not always in the way that objective indicators might predict. For example, inequality (as measured by the Gini coefficient) is high in Brazil and Argentina, and these countries also have relatively high levels of concern about poverty and social inequality. And yet compare the US with France and Germany. Where is actual

inequality highest? The US. But where is concern about inequality highest? France and Germany. All this suggests that citizens' perceptions are influenced by a wide range of social and cultural factors, and not just the obvious.

Humans are complex, a “chaos of thought and passion”, and we often don't even know what is best for ourselves. And perhaps, we should also ask ourselves whether our expectations and judgements of government are always reasonable. But if governments are going to measure their performance against perception-based targets – and in the modern world this seems very sensible – then understanding what shapes these perceptions is vital if politicians and public services do not want to hold themselves hostage to factors beyond their control. ■

These findings are taken from Ipsos MORI's recent report *World Public Opinion: The Gathering Storm*. For more details please contact gideon.skinner@ipsos.com.



A new era in policing

Annabelle Phillips



Our previous *Closing the Gaps* report highlighted the stark differences between the public's perceptions of the current state of crime in Britain and the "reality" of the official statistics. Here Annabelle Phillips, Head of our Crime and Justice research team, looks at some of the reasons behind this "perception gap", and how it can be closed.

Over the past year the Flanagan Review, the Neighbourhood Crime and Justice Group's review 'Engaging Communities in Fighting Crime' and the Policing Green Paper have all focused heavily on the

need to improve public confidence in policing and the way crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) are being dealt with. The key recommendations and suggestions are consistent with the themes covered in our own *Closing the Gaps* report and provide a clear steer for local activity:

- Increased accountability
- More effective communications
- Improved customer care
- Better partnership working between police, courts, local authorities and communities

This has resulted in a move towards a single public perceptions-based measure of confidence. Police forces have now been given very ambitious targets for increasing confidence among residents. If these are to be achieved forces and local authorities need genuine understanding of local people's needs and expectations to deliver increased public confidence.

Measuring confidence

The issue of how best to measure "public confidence" has been the subject of various papers with a range of

suggestions, and this is clearly essential to explore: before assessing how to improve public perceptions, local agencies must be clear about what perceptions they wish to shift. With the introduction of new perception-based targets for police forces in recent months, though, the BCS measure to inform PSA 23 has tended to supersede previous ones:

It is the responsibility of the police and local council working in partnership to deal with anti-social behaviour and crime in your local area. How much would you agree or disagree that the police and local council are dealing with the anti-social behaviour and crime issues that matter in this area?

An important lesson this points to, as highlighted in the first article, is the local/national split: that people will generally give more favourable opinions when asked about the local situation compared to the national, as shown in the chart below. The questions to inform PSA 23 are focused on the local situation and so police and partners should therefore have more potential for shifting attitudes

on this measure (and feel a sense of ownership for doing so) than less tangible, wider perceptions which reflect national newspaper headlines and the general mood of the country.

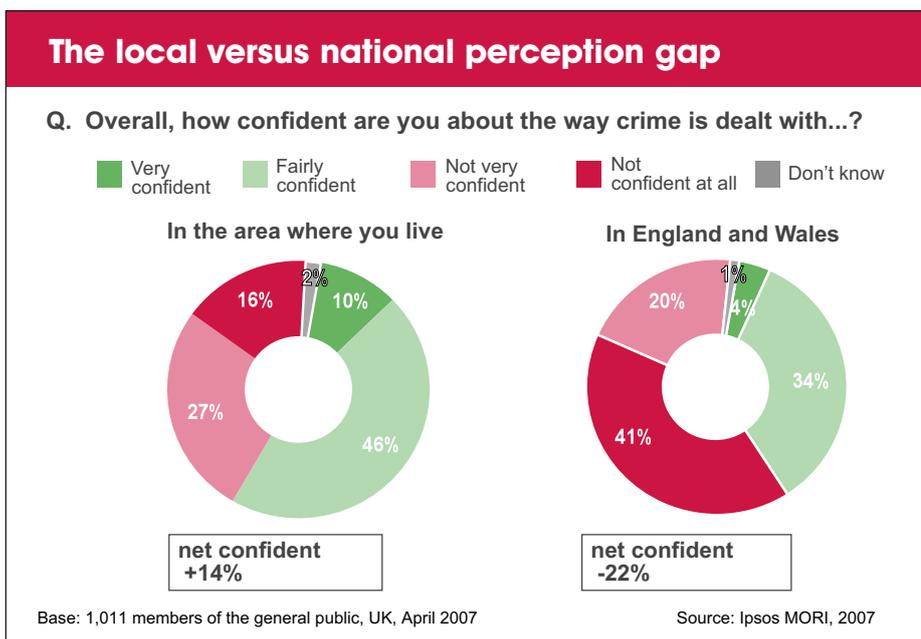
Having said that, one potential area for confusion is the bringing together of the police and local council within the same question. From a research purist's perspective this makes it impossible to pick out whether people are referring to the police or the local authority in their response, or indeed both. While joint measurement provides another incentive for increasingly close local partnership working, there is a concern that by including the concept of the "local council" in the question, the public are asked to take into consideration an agency that they may not associate with dealing with crime/ASB, and more pertinently from a police perspective, an agency which is typically less well regarded.

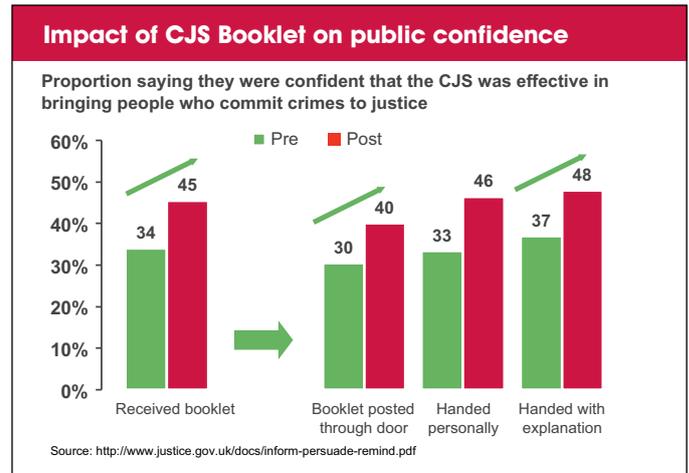
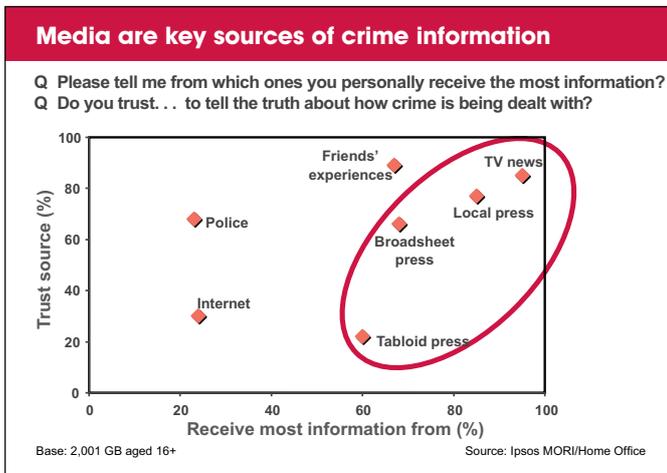
However, despite these differences, and worry about how partnership working will happen in practice, our research

shows that when people are asked specifically to rate how their council consults upon, deals with and communicates around the key local crime/ASB issues, then responses are not that different from those for the police. Indeed, this strongly demonstrates that the public are less concerned about who delivers the service, but that the service is delivered effectively. They want to know what is happening in their area, that offenders are being apprehended, and who to contact if they have a problem. Telling local people what is being done in their area will help to bring them on board, ultimately increasing confidence and helping the police meet their PSA targets.

It's not just the local-national issue that will have an impact on this perception target. A number of the other factors raised throughout this newsletter also have an impact on people's perceptions of crime and ASB, including:

- Local area characteristics. For example, our *Frontiers of Anti-Social Behaviour* report showed how local levels of deprivation are a strong predictor of how local people will perceive ASB, whilst factors such as population density and 'churn' are also important.
- People's personal interaction with the police, wider criminal justice system and other partners will have a significant bearing on attitudes. *Closing the Gaps* identified customer care as a key influencer of perceptions, and various other studies have shown the impact that these contacts can have on perceptions of the police.





- Similarly, the impact and influence of one’s own staff cannot be underestimated. While people who have close friends and/or family who work in the police or local council are more likely to feel that they are successfully tackling ASB and crime locally, previous Ipsos MORI research has highlighted that frontline police can often be critical about the workings of the criminal justice system overall. In any case, it is vital that local neighbourhood police teams are giving positive messages as the public face of efforts to tackle crime and ASB locally.
- Despite people’s trust in and desire for more direct communications from the police (an issue we shall return to below), the media are also an essential component to understanding public confidence, in policing as in many other public services. It is a fact that people will continue to receive a major share of their information around crime and policing from the local and national media, and it is important not to ignore the “halo effect” of good publicity. For example, the positive reaction to police handling of the London and Glasgow attempted terrorist attacks had a positive knock-on effect on perceptions of police performance. And we have

seen the reverse. At the time of the Steven Lawrence controversy, the Metropolitan Police were heavily criticised in the media for “institutional racism”. As a result, the image of the Met suffered on the issue of racism but we also found that it suffered in other, seemingly unrelated, areas.

So what can police forces and local councils do to deal with these challenges? Well, as we argue elsewhere in this newsletter it’s not all doom and gloom, and there are specific actions that local public services and policy makers can take to make the most out of perceptions indicators. These are also discussed in more detail in our upcoming report, *Building Confidence in the Fight Against Crime*, but one issue we would like to highlight here is the increasing evidence base that shows how confidence can be increased via direct communications. For example, for the Office of Criminal Justice Reform’s “Inform, persuade, remind” programme we undertook a randomised control trial to evaluate the impact that receiving information booklets has on public knowledge of, and confidence in, the criminal justice system.

This carefully-controlled study showed those who received the leaflet were significantly more likely than those who

did not to hold a number of more positive attitudes a few weeks after receiving the booklet. They were more likely to:

- demonstrate greater knowledge of crime levels;
- accurately estimate average sentence lengths for serious sexual offences (information contained within the booklet);
- think that current sentence lengths are appropriate;
- agree that the criminal justice system is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice.

So even in the area of crime, which has one of the biggest “perception gaps” between public views and reality, local public services can take a two-pronged approach to closing that gap. First, build a model to understand the real drivers of perceptions and the priorities the public want you to concentrate on. But also take steps to improve these perceptions and close that gap, where direct, open, locally relevant communications will be key. ■

For more details about our report *Building Confidence in the Fight Against Crime*, available in the summer, or to order a copy, please contact annabelle.phillips@ipsos.com.

Public reaction to the expenses scandal

Julia Clark

The events of recent weeks highlight the inarguable importance of public perceptions, and the extent to which these perceptions have power over how this country is governed. The MPs' expenses scandal has seen public attitudes towards MPs reach new lows, as seen in our recent poll for the BBC: 62% now believe that MPs put their own interests ahead of the interests of their party, constituents or country, compared to 45% in 2006; more than two-thirds (68%) also agree that "most MPs make a lot of money by using public office improperly".

All parties are suffering as a result of the situation, but the Government appears to be faring worse than most, with our latest Political Monitor (at the end of May) putting Labour on just 18%, tied with the Liberal Democrats, and 22 points behind the Conservatives who are on 40%. This is the lowest score we have ever recorded for the Labour party, and is undoubtedly related both to the expenses scandal as well as to the fact that the local and European elections mean smaller parties get an unusually high amount of coverage and benefit from it. As a result of the Telegraph's daily revelations, many MPs have already announced their intention to stand down at the next General Election, and still more are paying back money for 'mistakes' and 'errors in judgement' in their expenses claims.

But this current situation goes beyond concerns about individual MPs and our perceptions of MPs in general; it is making us question the political and electoral system in its entirety. All of the main parties have discussed ideas for reforming both MPs' expenses as well as the electoral system. This state of affairs now extends far beyond the term 'scandal', and instead begins to approach a complete reassessment of our core political values. Part of the reason for

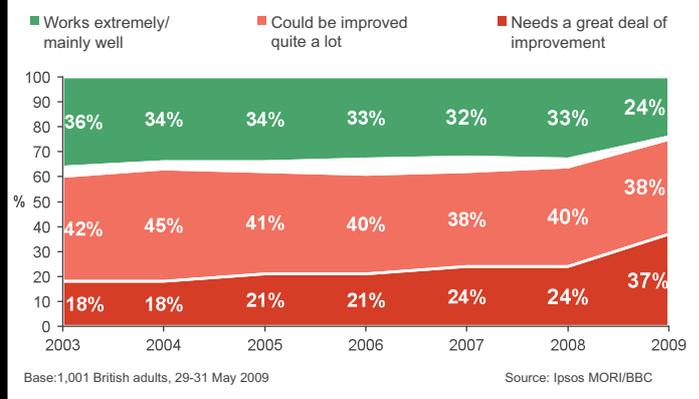
this is that we have seen scandals in the past that were very damaging to the image of MPs (for example, under John Major's ailing government in the mid-90s), but these scandals were not always cross-party. The current situation is not only a cross-party issue, but is also being perceived as a problem of the system as a whole, as much as of individuals. The public concur – four in five (80%) agree with the statement, "It is not just politicians who are at fault for the expenses scandal. Our parliamentary system is to blame".

It is certain that we will be seeing a new expenses system voted in; it is also possible that we will see some changes to the parliamentary and electoral system more broadly. Three quarters (75%) of the public think that the present system of governing Britain needs a lot of improvement and 48% believe that at least half (if not more) of MPs are corrupt. This has already impacted on the local and European elections, and will certainly impact on the next General Election, as people vote out MPs because of individual expenses issues. Our poll for the BBC suggests that half (52%) of people say they would vote for a candidate for a party they do not support, in order to avoid voting for an individual caught up in the expenses scandal - even if that individual was from their preferred party.

However, the silver lining in all of this (for politicians anyway) is that it still all does come down to perceptions, and the

Expenses scandal has shifted usually stable perceptions towards British way of government

Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing Britain?



public's perceptions vary depending on a national vs. local context. Despite the fact that three-quarters (76%) of us do not trust MPs in general to tell the truth, this figure falls to fewer than half (44%) who distrust their own local MP. In fact, two in five (40%) do trust their local MP to tell the truth (double the number who trust MPs in general to tell the truth) – so as mentioned earlier in this newsletter, here again a more positive local picture contrasts with a very negative national picture.

In the same way that it is easier to believe the worst about a public service you haven't used, it is also much easier to distrust someone you know little about. The way for politicians to push past this crisis is for them to re-connect with their constituents. Now is without a doubt the scariest time for MPs to be out doorstepping, but it is also the most important time to be doing it, and possibly one of the main routes to beginning to rebuild some public trust. ■

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