

# People's Choice for The Welfare State

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## Abstract

*What is the people's will about the future of the welfare state? According to the revealed preference in opinion polls etc., people seem to prefer a high burden and high security welfare state in the trend of economic globalization and its negative insecurity effects today.*

## Introduction

What are the preferences of the peoples living in the advanced welfare nations today on the social balance between economy and welfare? The theme of this article is to examine this question so as to understand what people hope for as a desirable society today. We will start from the general preference for the direction of the welfare state by looking at the known preferences of peoples. It concerns the scale of the welfare state they prefer today. Although some reservation is made, people's preference today in general seems to be rather for a higher welfare and higher burden society. In evaluating their attitudes, we will also observe some difference among nationalities.

## REVEALED PREFERENCES

### —Higher welfare and higher burden

Before we examine the people's attitude, we have to recognize the importance of the government's effort to call for discussion among the people. If the governments had tried this in the past decade, people could have formed their will on this question more fully and precisely today. George and Miller et al. (1994), discussing the growing welfare demand today, referred to the importance of the people's will as the final cause. Having foreseen an age when the conflict between economic growth and social welfare would become harsh, the Economic Council in Japan at the beginning of the 1980s pointed out the necessity for the formation of national consensus on the overall social image: "The scale of public spending, including social security, will inevitably increase in the longer run, ...but the extent of the people's burden, which will also inevitably increase, will have to be consented" (p. 241)<sup>1</sup>. But this proposition for a national discussion was not realized in its genuine sense. The argument in the following years has been led almost entirely by the government, who argued mostly for restraint of spending from the budgetary viewpoint and for containing the welfare burden so that it would not hinder economic growth. Of course, they were the elected representatives but as pointed out before, the nature of this question, how to reform the overall society, demands the participation of the whole people in the discussion. There was not sufficient discussion on the part of the people. As mentioned before, this was because of the difficulty of moving away from the traditional ways of thinking up to the 1970s, when economic growth

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<sup>1</sup> *Japan in 2000*, 1982. Long Term Prospect Committee in the Economic Council.

and welfare growth were both realized together.<sup>2</sup>

Given the importance of the question, governments have not been successful in alerting their peoples to the comprehensive nature and scale of the welfare state issues. This failure is mostly due to their incompetence in understanding the true nature and scale of this question. They were either compelled or wished to believe that when the state faced the malfunction of the market, which was caused by the profit squeeze or harsher global competition, there was no other way but to restore the firms' power or reduce the firms' burden. Even if it had been the correct answer, what was important was to reach this conclusion through popular consent. The governments might have been busy meeting the pressing problems, but they could have posed the core question as to what balance the people wished between growth and redistribution both in the 1980s and 1990s. But with their mind occupied by the "survival" ethos, they have failed to do so. Although the citizens are ultimately responsible for determining society's future, because the necessary information is mostly in its hands, the governments' failure has made it difficult for the people to tackle this question.

Lacking such a comprehensive, general argument on their side, the following may not be the outcome of conscious comparison between economic growth and social welfare, fully considering the related materials. But we can still get some useful suggestions about how they feel and think about the present welfare state and its future. Because of the availability of some materials we will also refer to some countries other than the four, but our attention will be mostly focused on the four

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<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, an additional reason for Japan would be, ironically, its exceptionally high economic performance in the 1980s through export expansion.

countries here, too.

### 1 : Major issues : High general support and different attitudes in some respects

#### *Welfare provisions*

The high general support for the welfare state has not changed in Sweden and the UK for the past two decades.<sup>3</sup> In 1984 in Sweden two thirds of the people supported the maintenance or expansion of the public sector and three quarters answered that government intervention was necessary to correct the inequality generated in a market society. In 1983 those who said the social welfare was what they were most proud of in their country were 62% in Sweden and 42% in the UK (Mishra, 1990, p.64). In 1996 the figure for “very or somewhat proud of social security system” was the same and 65% in Sweden and 48% in the UK in 1997.<sup>4</sup>

But in comparison with other options, pride in the social security system ranks rather low in the UK and high in Sweden. Instead, armed forces and history are ranked high in the UK.

Table 1 Proud of Welfare State (%)

	1983	1997
Britain	42	48
Sweden	62	65

Source : Mishra 1990 and Jowell et al, *British Social Attitudes*, 1997, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Most figures in this article are of the British, but as we are used to the word “the UK”, we will use it often here, too.

<sup>4</sup> “. . .the Scandinavian welfare states continued to enjoy strong support in the early 1990s” (Nordlund, 1997, p. 244).

Table 2 Proud of, 1997 (%)

	Britain	Sweden
social security system	48	65
fair and equal treatment	53	43
economic achievement	43	17
armed forces	88	33
history	89	69

Source : *British Social Attitudes*, 1997, 1998.

As to what kind of social welfare policies are the responsibilities of the government, those who chose pensions, employment and medical care as an essential or important responsibility were as high as around 70 to well over 90% in Sweden, the UK and US (Table 3). One significant difference between countries was that the high percentage of those who answered “essential” was 73.5% in the UK compared to 41.9% in the US (Onodera, 1996). In Japan the percentage of “definitely or probably” was : looking after old people, 83%, everyone can have a job, 49%, and providing medical care, 82% (ibid.).

But for unemployment benefit, the figure was very different ; 42% in Norway, 32% in the UK, and 14% in the US.<sup>5</sup>

This difference in the support for unemployment benefit is also significant in the high and low-income groups. This benefit was supported by 43% of the low-income group compared to 22% of the high-income group

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<sup>5</sup> ISSP 1990 survey, Svallfors (ed.), 1995, p. 35 and Jowell (1993). According to statistical surveys in Sweden (1992) and Norway (1990), the attitudes toward different expenditures in social welfare in the two countries were similar in medical and health care, support for the elderly people, support for families with children and employment policies. For the question if they would support increased or unaltered public expenditure for the respective items, all of these scored high around 80 to 90%. Support for elderly people scored 96% in Sweden and 99% in Norway (Nordlund, 1997, p. 237).

**Table 3 Government's responsibility, essential or important, 1985 (%)**

	Sweden	UK	US
Looking after old people	96.0	88.2	81.4
Everyone can have a job	93.8	85.4	71.6
Providing medical care	94.6	94.6	77.5

*Source* : Tom W. Smith, "The Polls, A Report, The Welfare State in Cross-National Perspective", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 51, Fall, 1987.

in Britain. This difference was also observed in Norway, with the higher support at 52% of low-income group compared to 30% of high-income group in 1990 (Table 4). These figures were similar in Sweden and the UK in 1997, too (Table 5).

**Table 4 Difference in support between income groups, 1990 (%)**  
Definitely the government's responsibility to provide :

		Britain	Norway
Health care :	low income group	85	86
	high income group	85	76
Pensions :	low income group	84	88
	high income group	70	78
Unemployment benefits :	low income group	43	52
	high income group	22	30

*Source* : Svallfors (ed.) 1995, p. 42.

In the UK, this difference coincides with the result that 52% thought the unemployed were already well protected, compared to 16% in Norway (Svallfors ed. 1995, p. 41). In the UK, the support for increased taxes and larger spending on health, education and social benefits has greatly increased during the decade since the early 1980s, from 32% in 1983 to 61% in 1995 (Jowell et al. 1996, p. 187). Spending priorities show that health and education are the two major needs of the people in these years.

**Table 5** Income and the Attitudes to the unemployed, 1997 (%)

Decent unemployment benefit : Definitely government's responsibility

	Sweden	Britain
High income group	34	18
middle	39	24
low	46	42

Source : Jowell et al, *British Social Attitudes*, 1998, p. 68.

Support for health care has grown from 63% in 1983 to 78% in 1987 and remained high at 77% in 1995. Support for education has constantly grown from 50% in 1983 to 66% in 1995 (ibid. p. 196).

In the US 67% answered that the social security system in the US faced serious financial problems that must be dealt with by congress in the next year (the Gallup poll, July 1998). Providing more revenues by increasing social security taxes on people who are working today was much favored by 57% compared to cutting expenditure by reducing benefits, by 21% (March 1998), (Gallup website, Social and Economic Indicators, Social Security).

Japan and the US had divided opinions as to which to prioritize, when in trade-off, inflation or unemployment, but twice as many people in the UK preferred reducing unemployment (Table 6).

**Table 6** Priority, inflation or unemployment (%)

	UK	Japan	US
inflation	28.3	37.9	39.2
unemployment	63.5	37.6	44.5

\*UK, US : 1985, Japan : 1996

Source : UK, US ; Smith, 1987, Japan ; Onodera, 1996.

*Income difference*

The attitudes toward income difference are less similar in these countries than toward welfare provisions (Table 7). The post tax income difference has more or less increased in all of these countries; In the UK, the sense of inequality about income distribution constantly grew from 1983 to 1995. Those who felt there was too much income difference between high and low income groups was high at 72% in 1983 and grew to 87% in 1995 (Jowell et al., *British Social Attitudes*, 13<sup>th</sup> Report, 1996, p. 87). In the US, “About one-quarter of Americans consider themselves to be have-nots” (Gallup, 1998, Social Audit). Have-nots here are those who have difficulties in making ends meet even for the basic necessities such as food, clothing, housing, etc. Those who answered that they “worry about household finances all or most of the time” was 26% in 1976, increased in the depression to 35% in 1984, and decreased in the prosperity to 21% in 1998.<sup>6</sup>

But such recognition does not necessarily correspond to stronger demand for income equalization. As to the level of desirable income difference, in the US only one out of five people supported equal income distribution and one out of six, upper limit to income. Although still being a minority, this figure is larger in the UK and Japan. 30% in the UK and

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<sup>6</sup> Japan EPA (1998) concludes that because of the smaller income difference than other nations, Japan still had room for market-oriented reforms (p. 52). But even if this were true, income difference has different significance to the peoples in different countries with different cultures. Tachiki refers to a poll that in Anglo-Saxon Countries such as the US or UK more than 60% preferred a competitive society, in Germany and France 50% preferred an egalitarian society, and in Japan 42% were undecided (Nikkei March 21, 1999). These replies suggest the need to take into account the cultural preference of the extent and content of income difference.



39% in Japan supported equal distribution, and 39% in the UK and 36% in Japan supported an upper limit (Svallfors (ed.) 1995, p. 92). Japanese and UK societies seem to show quite a different preference from the US in this matter.

**Table 7 Preferences of Income Shares, 1991 (%)**

	Equal Shares	No Desert	Income Ceiling
Britain	30	16	39
Japan	39	18	36
US	19	14	17

Equal Shares = agree strongly or somewhat with "The fairest way of distributing wealth and income would be to give everyone equal shares".

No Desert = agree strongly or somewhat with "It is simply luck if some people are more intelligent or skilful than others, so they don't deserve to earn more money".

Income Ceiling = agree strongly or somewhat with "The government should place an upper limit on the amount of money any one person can make".

*Source*: ISJP (International Social Justice Project) Documentation and Code book, in Svallfors (ed.) 1995, p. 92.

As to what is the proper income difference between the highest rank occupation, such as cabinet minister, and the lowest, such as unskilled worker, the answers in the US, the UK and Netherlands were between four to six times, whereas the answers to the same question between elite and manual worker were between three to four times (Svallfors (ed.) 1995, p. 95). Compared to the vast difference of income in reality, this similarity is somewhat amazing.

To the question whether it is the government's responsibility to reduce income differences, those who answered definitely yes was 39% in Norway, 42% in Britain in 1990, and 25.4% in Japan in 1996 (*ibid.* p. 36 and Onodera, 1996). 14% of the upper income class and 30% of the middle-income class agreed to it in Britain, but a much higher percentage of 32% of the upper class and 46% of the middle class agreed in Sweden

(Jowell et al. 1998/99 (ed.) p. 68). In the US, the cause of poverty was recognized either as lack of effort (43%) or as circumstances beyond control (41%). As for the rich people, their success was recognized as being result of strong effort (53%) or circumstances (32%). The US economic system was recognized as basically fair by 74% of “haves”, but by 51% of “have-nots”. Opportunity was recognized to be plenty (87%) in 1998, and “more than in the past” was 43% and “about the same” 36% (Gallup, 1998).

In the US, government was expected to have the main responsibility for helping the poor by 32% of the people. But 28% answered that the poor themselves were responsible. Although half the population in the US recognizes that the income difference is due to hard work, those who answered that wealth should be more evenly distributed were relatively higher at between 60 to 70% throughout the years 1984 to 1998. 79% of those who recognize themselves as “have-nots” support more equal distribution of money/wealth, while 59% of “haves” do, too. Whether as mainly responsible or not, those who thought government should help the poor were 65%. The measures to be taken were better education (38%) and more job and skills training (29%). Financial aid was supported only by 12%. Redistributing wealth by heavy taxes on the rich was opposed by the majority, 51% in 1998, about the same figure of half a century ago in 1939, 54%. But those who support it grew from 35% in 1939 to 45%, coming close to those against in 1998. Being traditionally a self-help country, but under the rapidly increasing income difference, the US people appear to have come to be more divided in their opinions than ever (Gallup, website).

*Future prospect : Higher welfare, higher burden*

Generally, the peoples seem to accept higher benefits and a higher burden. In a survey in 1996, the willingness to pay higher taxes for better social services throughout different income quartiles were roughly : 80-70% in the UK, 70-50% in the US, 50-40% in Sweden, 30-20% in Germany, 20-30% in France. We can also generally observe that people in higher taxes countries prefer lower tax and people in lower tax countries think they can afford more (Bonoli et al. 2000, Figure 4. 4). The 1998 research showed similar figures at 80-70% in the UK and 50-40% in Sweden. According to the Japan Research General Institute's "Opinion Poll on Society and Life" (1997), 46% approved "higher welfare, higher burden", 43% "moderate welfare, moderate burden", and 9% "lower welfare, more self-help" (p. 9). Similarly, the opinion poll by the Social Security Council at the Prime Minister's Office (Dec. 1992-Jan. 1993) showed that 50% were for the maintenance of the present social welfare provision and a higher burden, and 15% for increased provision and higher burden.<sup>7</sup> Onodera report based on the 1996 International Social Survey Program shows that 45% was for higher welfare and higher burden, and 26% for lower welfare and lower burden (Onodera, 1996, p. 54).

The higher income group, in particularly, is expected to pay more. In the UK, those who felt that the tax for the high-income group was too low increased significantly from 32% in 1983 to 56% in 1994. 66% of the middle-income group in 1994 thought their tax rate was "about right", and 76% of the low-income group thought it too high (Jowell et al. 1996, p. 15). In general, the high-income groups in Europe and the US seem to

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<sup>7</sup> Japan EPA, *Kokumin Seikatsu Hakusho*, FY1996, p. 221

judge themselves as being able to pay more tax. To the question if the tax level on the high income group is too low, the bottom quartile's answer in 1996 was Yes by 67% in Sweden, 64% in Germany, 46% in the UK, 45% in France, and 44% in the US, and the top quartile's Yes answer was not much different, 58% in Germany, 46% in Sweden, 41% in the UK, 39% in France, and 33% in the US<sup>8</sup> (Bonoli et al. 2000, table 4. 1).

The ratio of those willing to pay more tax decreases generally as the ratio of social welfare spending to GDP increases. But as in the case of the UK and Italy, although both have the ratio of this spending at around 20%, those who support a higher tax burden in the UK is close to 80% compared to less than 60% in Italy (Svallfors (ed.) 1995, p. 23). As their income levels are similar (GDP per capita, 1996, Keizai Koho Center, 1998, p. 17), this difference must be explained by some kind of cultural difference. If we generally regard the ratio at which more than 50% accept higher tax burden as the limit to the welfare state, it would be when social spending reaches around 30% of GDP (cf. *ibid.* p. 37).<sup>9</sup>

Overall, we can conclude, first, that support among the peoples for the maintenance and strengthening of the welfare state is generally still high in those countries examined. Second, judgment on the acceptable income difference is not much different in Europe and the US. Third, social

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<sup>8</sup> But there remains the possibility, as the authors explain, that quite a lot of rich people (because this quartile occupies one fourth of the total population in the research) might not have regarded themselves as rich and may have mistakenly answered yes. To get a more accurate view, we will have to divide the top quartile into smaller parts. What has to be considered in addition is the "firms' attitude". The same person who answered yes to higher tax in general (both for personal and corporate income) as an individual might say no as an executive of a firm.

<sup>9</sup> Public social protection expenditure as proportion of GDP in 1990 was 33.9% in Sweden, 20.3% in the UK, 14.8% in the US and 11.6% in Japan (UK, 1988) (OECD, 1996, *OECD Economies at a Glance*, 107-8).

spending at 30% of GDP seems to be roughly the common upper limit of welfare spending. Fourthly, there is a difference between countries as to the role of government in addressing income difference, and also a difference as to the support for the respective welfare spending. As such support probably reflects the growing insecurity in the rapidly changing work and welfare conditions, we can foresee that it may well continue to be so in the near future under the globalizing economies.

## **2 : Related issues — polarization, victimization, cultural difference, and trust in government**

Except for the main issues above, we should also pay attention to such characteristics of the peoples' attitudes as below. First, polarization of "work incentives" is observed in some parts of the societies such as the UK. On the one hand, working people are working harder. Hours worked per week (employees) increased from 1985 to 1995. Those who work 40 hours or more increased from 26% to 31%, 60 hours or more from 2% to 3%. A part of this change can be explained by business cycles. In prosperous years the employers tend to increase production by having their workers work longer rather than by employing new ones. Thus, the figure for 40 hours or more dropped in the recession years of 1990-1993 to around 26-28% (Jowell et al. 1996, p. 84). Such intensified and longer work hours have caused many cases of KAROSHI in Japan. On the other hand, work incentives of some lower income people seem to be declining. It is shown in the steady decline in the willingness of the unemployed to take "unacceptable" jobs between 1983 and 1994. The answer "very willing" declined from 24% to 9%, "quite willing" from 31% to 29%, and "not willing" increased from 41% to 61% (ibid. p. 78). Comparing stable

and unstable types of jobs, workers in the former type might fall into this overwork trap so as not to lose their stable jobs in an age of job-insecurity.

Secondly, although the general opinion may be for maintaining or strengthening welfare provisions, the difficult conditions of today may lead the middle and upper income groups to obtain their security in the short run by victimizing the lower income people, such as cutting short their welfare benefits. In the globalizing world, not only the minorities but also the vast majority of the middle-income group would be more vulnerable to more frequent job losses and changes in more competitive conditions. But the reaction of the middle- and upper- income people facing such an insecure environment might first be to secure safety for themselves. When they are exposed to this vulnerability long enough, it becomes clear that this self-help way does not necessarily help them in the longer run, it will eventually lead the people in the every stratum of the society to strengthen the welfare provisions.

Thirdly, different attitudes in the countries above may well reflect cultural differences. Thus, Shiratori points to the influence of cultural characteristics on the welfare state regimes (Rose and Shiratori, 1986, p. 5). What, how much, and how welfare goods and services are to be supplied related closely to the overall social structure of each country, its culture, history, family structure, etc. An understanding of the totality of the welfare state does require an awareness of the historical traditions and values prevailing in each society. We can observe two extreme types in the two distinct types of mentalities of Sweden and the US. Allardt points out the close feeling between government and people as a unique factor of the Swedish type welfare state: "For centuries people have not felt themselves as being outside the political system. The difference

between public and private, so crucial in many debates in the Anglo-American countries, was of minor importance in the Scandinavian countries" (ibid. p. 111). This democratic character is often further attributed to the solidarity fostered in the severe natural conditions that hardly allowed even serfdom to settle down. The concept of solidarity is given the principal position in society: "The uniqueness of the Scandinavian countries consists not of the size of the non-market sector but rather of the way in which services and benefits are organized, the rules of entitlements, and the absence of a connection between financing benefits and the entitlement to receive benefits" (ibid. p. 108). The relatively small population may also have been an advantage for this solidarity.

This philosophy of solidarity would naturally lead to a welfare state that aims to assure a normal standard of living for everyone: "The old liberal belief in the responsibility of the individual has been replaced by collective responsibility to help everyone maintain a normal standard of living" (ibid.). In a market economy, solidarity among the members of society tends to be weakened under its competitive ethos of market mechanism, and the objectives of the welfare state tend to be limited to the minimum safety nets. How much Swedish and Scandinavian type societies can resist this trend under growing globalization pressures and can give practical expression of the spirit of solidarity or security for the fundamental conditions for life by mutual efforts will show the possibilities for the solidaristic welfare states today.

In contrast, Glazer understands the characteristic mentality of the US as individuality: "Americans tend to see social relationships in terms of individual concerns and individual responsibilities. Only those who cannot look after themselves are expected to rely upon the state...in Scan-

dinavia there is a great sense of social solidarity” (Rose, 1986, pp. 7-9). Where does this difference originate? If we could attribute the latter’s characteristic, at least partly, to its severe natural conditions and its smaller population, the former’s could also be attributed to its abundant natural resources, less severe climate, and larger population. Another factor to be addressed would be its historical emphasis on the mentality of independence, which was actually the founding motto of this nation both in the Pilgrim years and the Independence war. Although the native Indians and imported African people were excluded from it, its identity has thus been established as “liberty” and “freedom”. “Self-help” has been given in this country an especially strong, positive, and even religious meaning: “There is a strong American bias in favor of programs for what are conceived to be independent individuals, against the programs for the dependent” (ibid. p. 42).

Such historical, mental and geographical characteristics shape the images of social welfare. In Europe “a social policy descends from the heavens in which its complete form can be glimpsed”. In the US “it arises from immediate needs with no necessary hint that a larger picture is to be completed” (ibid. p. 48). Meanwhile, charity is often suggested as a complementary measure for public assistance in many societies, particularly in the US. Having been cut off from the historical feudal traditions, Americans could start their society believing in individual faith and power alone. Without having had to face the critical social conflicts against the feudal age, their naive faith in individualism could last for more than two centuries. Based on, and restricted by, such a religious character of its foundation, kindness and help to the needy were understood and carried out largely in line with this individuality, and so by there individual wills.<sup>10</sup> Although this tradition was challenged in the



“socially-produced” difficulties in the 1930s, it still is an important factor in the US welfare state.

Fourthly, as we suggested before, the difficulty of the welfare question in terms of its scale and complexity may hinder the smooth formation of national consensus. In Japan in the last year of the depressed 1990s those who agreed to the mainstream idea of the government, and the financial and industrial world — that in order to recover from depression the growth of unemployment is inevitable — was only 34%, and 51% disagreed. 62% answered that firms should put higher priority on securing employment than profit seeking (Asahi Shimbun, opinion poll in August 1999). This result shows that the majority of people does not agree with, or at least do not understand, their leaders' ideas. Even if the government is a democratically elected one, if it fails to have people understand its policies, it may not be much different from dictatorship. The vagueness of a new social paradigm as a result of the difficulty of the question may thus create distrust in government. Distrust in government's policies then may well delay the formation of consensus. As for the US, those who trusted in government most of the time decreased from 76% in 1964 to 25% in 1994 (Giddiness, 1998, p. 51), and those who had confidence in the Presidency a “great deal” or “quite a lot” was 72% in 1991 and 49% in 1999 (Gallup, Social and Economic Indicators). When detached from the

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<sup>10</sup> The total amount of private donations in the US was 150 billion dollars, which was a little less than one tenth of the federal government's budget, and 400 times as much as the total private donations in Japan. The government helps donations by allowing a high rate of exemption of the personal income tax (Nikkei, Jan. 7, 1999). But the difficulty of personal or private charity is that as it is done voluntarily, it is too unstable in its scale and continuity to save needy people at the proper time.

<sup>11</sup> This article is to be a part of a forthcoming book, *Economic Globalization and the Citizens' Welfare State*, Ashgate, 2001.

people, the leaders may carry out more unfavorable policies, which will very likely put people off politics even more. Obtaining a hopeful and feasible alternative social ideal can only solve this problem. Until then the difficulties of the people will continue, even at times taking the appearance of socially pathological phenomena.<sup>11</sup>

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