

# Australian Attitudes to Unemployment and Unemployed People

**Author/Contributor:**

Eardley, Tony; Matheson, George

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# **AUSTRALIAN ATTITUDES TO UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE**

by Tony Eardley and George Matheson

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This paper is based on a wider study of attitudes to unemployment, including those of employers, commissioned by the former Department of Social Security. The authors would like to thank Michael Pusey for access to the Middle Australia data set, and John Powlay and Anne Gregory from the (now) Department of Family and Community Services for their helpful comments. Responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation remains with the authors.

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Tony Eardley  
Editor

## **Abstract**

Social security support for unemployed people in Australia in the last decade has become increasingly conditional on their demonstrating ever greater job search effort. Yet we know relatively little about whether this shift accords with public opinion. This paper draws on a study of community attitudes to unemployment and unemployed people, commissioned by the former Department of Social Security, based on review and analysis of attitudinal survey data. Overall the evidence is ambiguous. Although, by international standards, Australians take a relatively hard line on the responsibilities of unemployed people to actively seek work, there is little information available about views on the specifics of activity testing. Also, although a majority opposes greater public expenditure on unemployment, they still see an important role for government in addressing unemployment and supporting unemployed people.

# 1 Introduction

Over the past decade, social security policy in Australia towards people of working age has been reoriented towards encouraging recipients of unemployment payments actively to seek work and to improve their prospects of employment through training, education and work experience. Thus payments for most unemployed people have become increasingly conditional on their demonstrating thorough and continuing job search effort.

Although work tests have long been a feature of entitlement to unemployment benefits in Australia, the first distinct elements of this new framework of support emerged from the Social Security Review, established by the Labor Government and conducted between 1986 and 1988. In line with the 'Active Society' policy framework promoted by the OECD (Gass, 1988; OECD, 1990), the new emphasis on active job search was signalled by changes in the nomenclature of payments, from the 'passive' Unemployment Benefit to the more 'active' Newstart and Job Seekers' Allowance. Under the initial Newstart strategy, from 1991, intensive and individualised job seeker interviews were introduced, and sanctions for non-compliance were increased.

From 1994, Labor's *Working Nation* (Australia, Prime Minister, 1994) policy package expanded labour market programs and introduced a Job Compact, which included a system of more intensive 'case management' for the long-term unemployed. In return for this guarantee of a job placement and expanded training opportunities, stronger penalties were introduced for job seekers judged not to have met their obligations.

When the Coalition Government took office in 1996 there was a move away from direct provision of labour market programs and job guarantees, and towards greater levels of obligation on the part of the job seeker, including a strengthening of the administration of the activity test. This included a requirement to provide more details of job search activity in the course of fortnightly registration; an increase in the issuing of Employer Contact Certificates - used to verify job seekers' approaches to prospective employers; and the introduction of the Jobseeker Diary, for recording efforts to find work. Penalties for non-compliance with activity testing were increased again, and a number of measures were put

in place to ensure that unemployed people draw on their own resources before receiving public assistance. Benefit control has also been further intensified through periodic and targeted reviews of eligibility for unemployment payments (Nolan, 1997).

The Coalition's term of office has also seen greater emphasis being placed on the principle of 'mutual obligation', as typified by the introduction of 'Work for the Dole'. Initially this was only for those under 25, but more recently there have been proposals to expand the scheme beyond this age group. In January 1999, the Government also announced that young unemployed people with literacy and numeracy problems would be obliged to undertake remedial courses or face reductions in their benefits.

A further dimension of change has been the progressive contracting out of employment assistance to private and non-profit agencies. Now, not only are the details of a job seeker's activity test a matter of individual agreement with an employment service provider, but the responsibility for recommending a sanction for breaching an agreement often lies with an agency outside the public service. This in particular has disquieted some critics, who argue that the concept of welfare rights has been undermined (e.g. Carney, 1998).

Taken together, these changes represent a major shift away from earlier ideas of generalised entitlement to benefits when out of work. The Government, however, has argued that it is going with the grain of public opinion, and claims widespread support for its reading of the notion of 'mutual obligation'.

Are they right? Does the policy shift over the last decade also represent a movement in public opinion? Do Australians support the idea that benefits should only be available to unemployed people on condition that they demonstrate ever greater efforts to find work? If so, does this apply across the board or only to particular groups of the unemployed, such as young people? How does the public interpret the causes of contemporary unemployment and the responsibilities of government, now that full employment seems a distant memory?

In fact we know very little about how the general public in Australia views the balance between rights and obligations for unemployed people, although there is some attitudinal evidence available on broader questions relating to unemployment and the public provision of support for job seekers. It is on this evidence that this paper is based. It examines the literature and published surveys of attitudes towards unemployment and unemployed people, including comparative studies which place Australian attitudes in an international perspective, together with some secondary analysis of unit record data from various attitudinal surveys. The paper draws on a broader study, commissioned by the former Department of Social Security, of community and employer attitudes towards unemployed people (Eardley and Matheson, 1998).

There are, of course, many difficulties involved in interpretation of attitudinal surveys and opinion polling, especially on a cross-national basis. Concerns have been expressed about the nature and significance of public opinion (Papadakis, 1992), the apparent inconsistencies evident in people's responses to surveys (Miller, 1992; Burgoyne, Swift and Marshall, 1993), and the influence on responses to surveys which can arise from factors such as wording and ordering of questions (Zaller, 1992). Thus some caution is needed in drawing conclusions from the data.

The paper begins by considering the evidence on changes over time in the significance accorded to unemployment as a social problem and the explanations offered for its persistence, including the extent to which blame is accorded to unemployed people themselves. Following that we look at what are regarded as the role and responsibility of government in dealing with unemployment and supporting the unemployed. Section 4 then reviews the limited information available on attitudes towards activity testing for unemployed people and the principle of mutual obligation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the overall findings and points to a number of gaps in our knowledge.

## **2 Views on the Significance and Causes of Unemployment**

Not surprisingly, given the persistently high numbers of people out of work over the last twenty years, polls and surveys show that unemployment is widely regarded as a serious and enduring social problem in Australia. Polls using open-ended questions inviting respondents to nominate the major problems of the day usually find the level of unemployment occurring as one of the most frequently mentioned issues.

Yet its importance in the public mind has fluctuated. The Morgan Poll over the decade from 1982, for example, posed, at least annually, the question 'What are the three most important things the Federal Government should be doing something about?'. The incidence of 'reduce unemployment' among the responses for February each year showed a progressive decline from a high point of 79 per cent in 1983 to a mere 15 per cent in 1990 (Morgan Poll, various dates). An upswing was evidently imminent, however, as the corresponding rates for June and September that year were 54 and 63 per cent respectively. It seems possible that the seven-year trend reflected the movement of the business cycle, as the decline of interest in joblessness as a policy concern was virtually simultaneous to the fall in the rate of unemployment under the Hawke Labor Government.

More recently, a similar question found unemployment amongst the issues most frequently mentioned by 56 per cent of respondents in July 1994, falling (again with the rate of unemployment) to 39 per cent in March 1995 and then rising again to 46 per cent by November 1995 (Morgan Poll, 1995). Another indication that high unemployment is an issue of lasting concern could perhaps be seen in the apparent internalisation of the belief that the rate of joblessness is bad and getting worse. A 1997 AGB-McNair poll found that nearly half (46 per cent) of those surveyed thought that the unemployment rate was higher than five years previously, while only 18 per cent answered - correctly - that it was actually lower (Cleary, 1997).

A common criticism made of opinion poll data of this kind is that it is one thing to agree that a particular problem is a serious one about which

‘something must be done’, but another to support specific policies to address it. It is suggested that expressed attitudes are rarely in accord with observed behaviour, such as that of voting in general elections.

In 1996, unemployment was a major issue in the federal election campaign. As can be seen from Table 1, the National Election Survey found unemployment to be second only to health and Medicare as ‘extremely important’ in people’s accounts of their voting deliberations (Jones, McAllister and Gow, 1996). Unemployment was also rated alongside taxation and immigration as among the few issues where a request for the ‘party closest to own view’ substantially favoured the Coalition over the ALP. This seems to contradict the usual finding that ‘welfare’ issues do not figure as a major element in people’s accounts of their deliberations over whom to vote for (Zaller, 1992). The apparent contradiction can perhaps be reconciled, however, through Smith and Wearing’s observation that unemployment is seen as more of an economic than a social issue:

The more easily a group in need can be subsumed into the category of economic problems, the less easily will the public support expanded welfare provision for that group. The unemployed can clearly be more easily categorised as an economic problem (restoring full employment, getting the country working again) than can the aged, invalids or children. (Smith and Wearing, 1987: 63)

A number of commercial polls have asked about the public’s perceptions of the causes of unemployment. A summary of those conducted by Roy Morgan for the decade to 1985 (Smith and Wearing, 1987: 62-3) concluded that the public shifted its preferred explanation from ‘laziness’ in 1975 to ‘union wage claims’ over the next few years and to ‘world economic pressures’ in the 1980s, as the structural and enduring nature of the problem became apparent. As the same data indicate, however, at no stage during this period did fewer than about a quarter of those polled see wilful idleness as a major contributing factor.

**Table 1: Views on Electoral Issues of Importance, by Party Affiliation<sup>(a)</sup>**

Party closest to own view on...	Labor	Liberal-National	No difference	Don't know
Taxation	21.0	42.1	20.6	16.4
Immigration	19.6	46.1	15.7	18.6
Education	28.8	31.1	23.8	16.4
The environment	29.5	29.7	25.8	15.0
Industrial relations	33.3	41.8	10.0	14.9
Health and Medicare	38.6	38.4	14.0	8.9
Links with Asia	34.5	25.6	20.4	19.4
Defence	15.8	24.5	27.2	32.5
Interest rates	20.2	31.0	24.7	24.1
Unemployment	23.6	47.4	16.9	12.1
Privatisation	24.3	33.6	23.0	19.2
Inflation	21.6	29.5	24.0	25.0
State/Territory issues	13.8	20.5	26.9	38.7

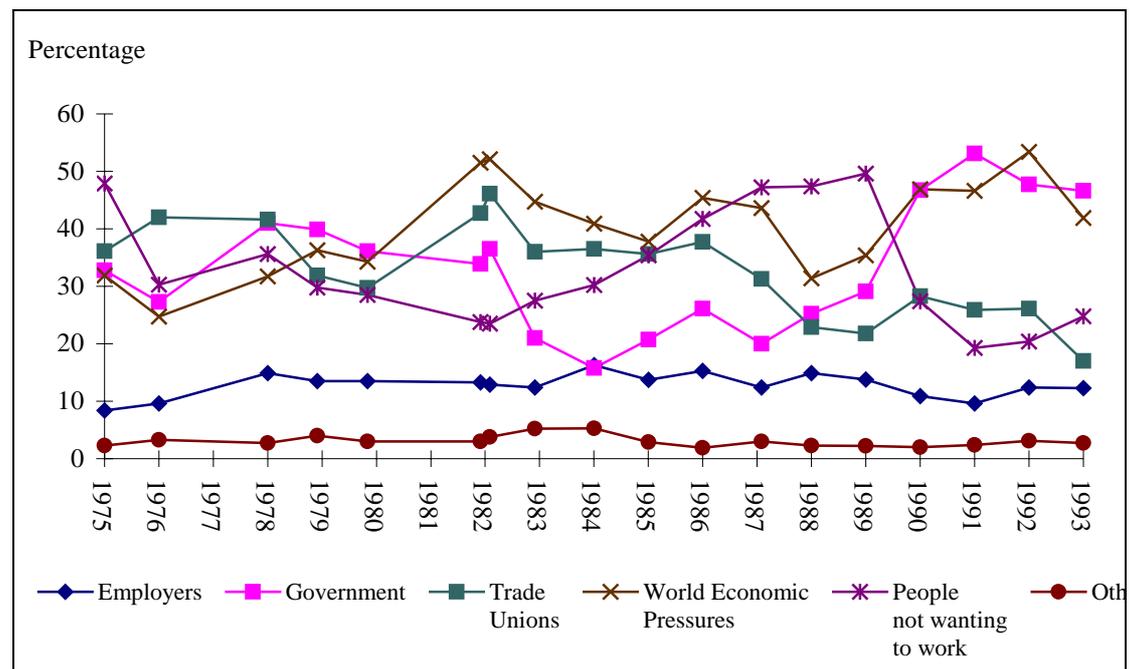
How important is...	Extremely important	Quite important	Not very important
Taxation	44.0	36.1	19.9
Immigration	30.8	36.4	32.8
Education	50.4	33.1	16.5
The environment	41.9	42.0	16.1
Industrial relations	45.9	35.8	18.3
Health and Medicare	67.7	24.6	7.7
Links with Asia	21.4	40.0	38.6
Defence	25.3	36.9	37.8
Interest rates	49.5	33.5	17.0
Unemployment	61.4	28.4	10.2
Privatisation	30.0	42.0	28.0
Inflation	47.5	36.7	15.7
State/Territory issues	15.5	36.4	48.2

**Note:** a) The questions asked were: 'Here is a list of important issues that were discussed during the election campaign. Whose policies - the Labor Party's or the Liberal National Coalition's - would you say come closer to your own views of these issues?' and 'Still thinking about these same issues, when you were deciding about how to vote, how important was each of these issues to you personally?'

**Source:** *Australian Election Study 1996* (Jones, McAllister and Gow, 1996).

Extending this analysis to the early nineties, using published Morgan Gallup Poll data, gives us a broader view of these trends (Figure 1). Throughout the period, the proportion ascribing unemployment to employers remained low and fairly stable, at between 10 and 15 per cent, with a small decline during the last recession. The data also indicate a downward trend since the early eighties in the tendency to blame trade unions and their wage demands. The latter perhaps reflects the more general decline in both union membership and employment in traditionally unionised industries. People may be less inclined to blame the unions the less effective they perceive them to be. Perceptions of causes of unemployment as lying in either government mismanagement or world macro-economic pressures waxed and waned in their popular appeal, but appeared to be on the rise in the latter part of the observation period.

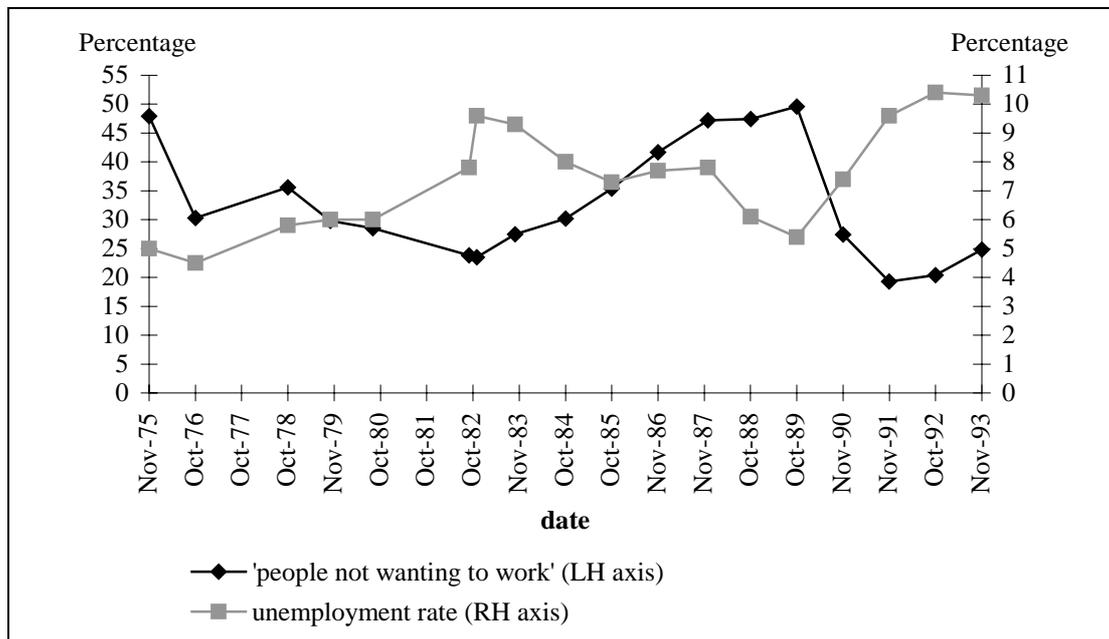
**Figure 1: Public Views of the Causes of Unemployment: 1975-1993**



**Source:** Morgan Gallup Poll, 1975-1993

Perhaps the most significant pattern to emerge from the extension of the data series concerns the belief that joblessness can be put down to people's reluctance to work. This is plotted separately for 1975-1993 in Figure 2, along with the level of unemployment. The scales of the left

**Figure 2: Percentage Blaming Unemployment on Unwillingness to Work, and Unemployment Rate (Persons): 1975-1993**



**Sources:** ABS Catalogue No. 6203, various years  
Morgan Gallup Polls, 1975-1993

and right hand axes are different, but the pattern of movement over time suggests that the two series were mainly negatively correlated, although there were time lags and periods of positive correlation<sup>1</sup>. The relationship is thus not definitive, but it appears that as unemployment rose people seemed less inclined to ascribe responsibility to the unemployed themselves. Then, as the jobless rate fell there was a growth in the feeling that work must be available for those who put the effort into looking for it. The 1980s saw a steady rise in willingness to personalise responsibility for unemployment, to nearly half of those interviewed. This was then followed by a dramatic drop, to under one-fifth in the space of two years in the early part of the recession.

After the end of 1991 the figure began to rise again, although unemployment was still on the increase. It is not clear why this should be so, though we might speculate that the 'active society' concept which was informing changes to social security provision during this period may have percolated through to the public consciousness. Thus unemployment again perhaps began to be seen as a matter of personal responsibility. This was indeed one of the criticisms made of Labor's

<sup>1</sup> The overall correlation coefficient is -0.6.

*Working Nation* policy package. In placing so much emphasis on the supply side of the unemployment problem, through labour market programs, case management and activation of job seekers, *Working Nation* tended to redefine problems resulting from structural changes in the labour market as questions of personal adjustment by long-term unemployed and disadvantaged people (Green, 1994; Stilwell, 1994).

The trend up to the late 1980s has been discussed by Bradbury and colleagues (1988). They noted that in times of high unemployment, unwillingness to work on the part of some unemployed people would be likely to have a negligible effect on the rate of unemployment, as other more motivated job seekers would fill such vacancies as there were. One interpretation of the relationship observable in Figure 2 between the unemployment rate and the percentage of people ascribing unemployment to unwillingness to work would be that the Australian public has come to appreciate this argument. However, it assumes a fairly sophisticated understanding of the link between labour supply and unemployment rates.

Bradbury et al. (1988) also noted that the peaks in the propensity of the public to blame the unemployed tended to occur under Labor Governments and the troughs under the Liberals. The more recent data, however, show both a rise and a dramatic fall in this viewpoint taking place under Labor administrations.

In Beed and McNair's *The Changing Australian, 1983* data set (cited in Graetz, 1987), explanations of unemployment were sought from both a sample of the general work force and a sample of government, business and union elites. They found a notable contrast between the senior bureaucrats and union leaders, who emphasised macro-economic and structural factors, and the business executives and ordinary employees, who saw things in more individualistic terms (Graetz, 1987). Neither Graetz nor the original researchers speculated at any length on the reasons for this difference, but one explanation might be that people's understanding of causation is relative to what they believe they can influence.

One of the explanations frequently put forward for shifts in attitudes towards the unemployed is the role of the media (and politicians) in

creating public furores about 'dole bludgers'. Windschuttle (1980), for example, undertook analysis of media reporting in the late 1970s and directly attributed the high percentage of people blaming the unemployed for their own predicament to these media campaigns against alleged dole cheats and bludgers. He argued that the public was receptive to stories of 'dole bludging' because they represented the conflict between the readers' own desires and the constraints of capitalist society. The conflict between fascination with the idea of breaking the rules of a society and the constraints felt by most people against actually doing so is then played out in the form of moral indignation at deviant activity.

Bradbury et al. (1988) suggested that if this moral indignation stems from constrained desire, those who are most constrained might be expected to also be the most indignant. This hypothesis is supported by the tendency for working class respondents to be more likely than others to blame the unemployed for their joblessness. The Morgan Gallup Poll (1985), for example, found that blue-collar workers were substantially more likely to take this view than white-collar workers.

It is generally argued that this effect is more pronounced when blue-collar workers are themselves facing declining living standards (see, for example, Deacon, 1978, on the UK case). The hypothesis is also consistent with the increase in the blaming of the unemployed during the 1980s, when real wage levels were falling. The shift towards blaming government and world economic pressures after the late 1980s could perhaps represent a response to Labor's policies of fiscal conservatism and deregulation in the face of industrial globalisation, and to 'the recession we had to have' under the Keating administration.

An alternative explanation for working class hostility towards the unemployed is that understanding of other possible causes of unemployment is more limited among blue-collar workers than amongst others. Graetz (1987) has suggested that this is also linked to the role of the media. He argues that working class people are less aware of economic debates on the structural causation of unemployment and are more likely to acquire their understanding of it from the mass media. The media both responds to public desire for exposure of deviant behaviour and fosters belief in personal unwillingness to work as the root cause of joblessness.

Graetz also notes that in the early 1980s the public were particularly likely to attach personal responsibility to young people for their unemployment. This was a sentiment apparently shared, at least in general, by young people themselves, as the Morgan Gallup Poll (1985) found that nearly half (47 per cent) of 14-17 year olds attributed unemployment to personal unwillingness to work. The 1997 'Current Affair' television program involving young members of the Paxton family, which attracted considerable media attention, can be read as an indication of public concern about individuals receiving income support when they are not genuinely seeking unemployment. Yet it is also, arguably, a sign that public doubts about the strength of the work ethic amongst youth can still easily be exploited by the media, in spite of widespread concern about the current shortage of opportunities of employment for young people.

Mendes (1997) has argued that in the 1990s in Australia public opinion on welfare and the unemployed has explicitly been 'conditioned' by right-wing think tanks which are effective in influencing the mainstream media. Thus, in his view, the media assault on the Paxton teenagers and other similar sensational anti-'bludger' stories serve the purpose of legitimising both reductions in welfare provision and the introduction of 'work for the dole'.

Given the ubiquity of the figure of the 'dole bludger' in mass media and popular mythology, it is perhaps surprising how little formal research has been carried out on this subject in Australia. There have been surveys of unemployed people themselves and descriptive accounts of their lives and problems (Van Moorst, 1983, 1984), as well as studies of unemployment as an arena of political-ideological contestation (Windschuttle, 1980; Harding, 1985). Yet Australian research on people's personal or ethical evaluations of their unemployed fellow citizens is scarce.

Some indication of how unemployed people are currently viewed in Australia in relation to various other unpopular social groups comes from a recent Morgan (1997) poll. The survey invited respondents to rate a list of groups whom they would not like to have as neighbours. Unemployed people ranked low on this list, included by only four per cent of respondents, compared, amongst the higher scoring groups, with 'drug

addicts' (65 per cent), 'people with a criminal record' (41 per cent), 'emotionally unstable people' (29 per cent) and 'members of new religious movements' (20 per cent).

One interpretation of this finding would be that the high level of unemployment and its chances of occurring across a wide range of social groups mean that it touches too many people for the individuals concerned to become objects of personal disapproval. Yet, as we have seen, Australians are often ready to blame unemployed people themselves for their circumstances. It seems more likely that being unemployed does not in itself impart as much of a social threat as that offered by the other groups listed.

It would be of interest to see how attitudes towards the causes of unemployment have been affected by the experience of *Working Nation* and then the first two years of the Coalition Government. Unfortunately, Morgan discontinued asking the standard set of questions after 1993, so the series cannot directly be brought more up to date. There are more data, however, on public views of the role and responsibility of government towards the unemployment problem.

### **3 The Role of Government**

Although, as Figure 1 suggests, the inclination to blame government for unemployment seems to have been growing since the mid-1980s, Australians still do not usually appear to rate assistance to the unemployed high in their lists of priorities for government action.

One of the difficulties with interpreting survey data on attitudes to public expenditure arises from the tendency of respondents to favour more government spending on a wide range of items, while simultaneously supporting reductions in taxation (Welch, 1985). There is also a tendency for the answers to questions about taxation to be highly sensitive to the wording, so that questions about the desirability of tax cuts tend to produce greater anti-tax responses than those which mention reduction in social spending as a consequence of lower taxation (Hadenius, 1985).

Braithwaite (1988: 31-2) attempted to deal with these problem in an Australian study using the first of the National Social Science Surveys.

He subtracted the percentage of respondents favouring reductions in each nominated area of public spending from the percentage favouring increases. The differences were then used to rank the issues in order of priority. As might be anticipated, all (except for foreign aid, at minus 24 per cent) were positive, but they varied from margins of 67 and 63 per cent for education and 'dealing with drug abuse' to 16 per cent for 'improving the conditions of Aborigines' and 23 per cent for 'providing assistance to the unemployed'. The unemployed thus seem to be a more popular focus for assistance than foreigners and indigenous Australians, but still rank low in overall priorities for greater intervention.

More recent data show broadly similar patterns. By seeing other priorities as more urgent than unemployment, Australians resemble citizens of most countries (Taylor-Gooby, 1995). Even so, Australian attitudes seem ungenerous by international standards, as indicated in Table 2. This is based on our analysis of data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), a collaborative study by attitude survey research teams in a number of countries.

The Programme involves standardised supplements which are 'bolted on' to existing recurrent population surveys in the countries involved. Survey items are devised in UK English and then translated into 'functionally equivalent' questions in the various national languages (Davis and Jowell, 1989). The table draws on data from the two *Role of Government* modules (1985 and 1990) of the ISSP and show the popularity of increasing, maintaining or decreasing government expenditure on unemployment benefits in those two years.

Table 2 shows that in 1985 nearly 52 per cent of Australian respondents were in favour of reducing spending on unemployment benefits to some extent, compared with only one-quarter of those from the USA and 19 per cent of Britons. By 1990, the Australian majority in favour of reductions had grown to 58 per cent, while falling in all the other countries.

One obvious question is whether cross-national differences reflect something particular to popular attitudes toward the unemployed, or

**Table 2: Comparative Preferences for Spending on Unemployment Benefits: 1985-90**

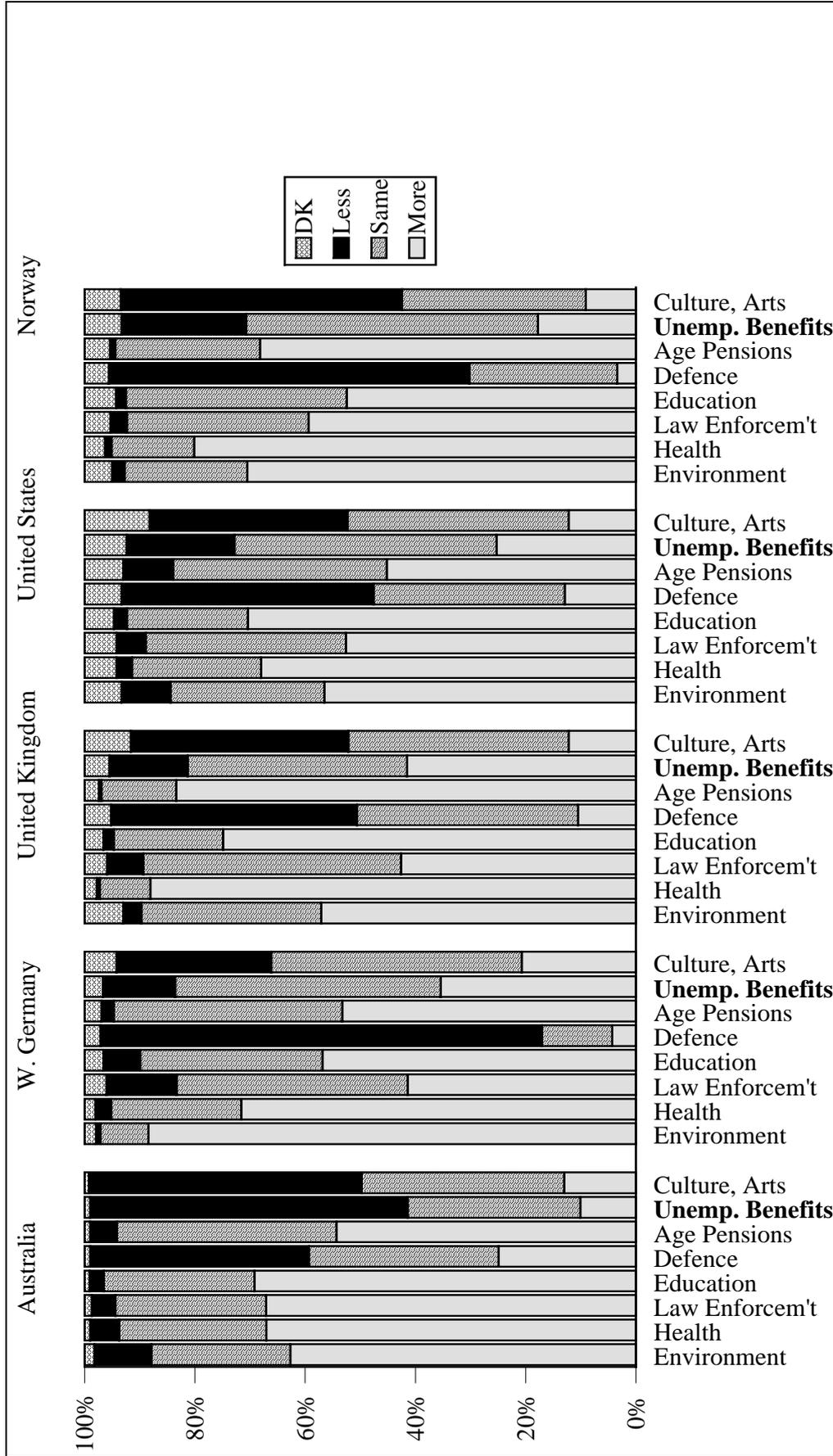
	Much more	More	Same as now	Less	Much less	Number
Australia						
1985	3.7	8.9	35.5	30.1	21.8	1475
1990	1.9	8.4	31.6	39.4	18.7	2375
West Germany						
1985	7.9	26.8	52.1	10.5	2.7	1006
1990	9.4	27.2	49.8	11.1	2.4	2719
Great Britain						
1985	12.5	29.4	39.3	14.7	4.1	1598
1990	7.8	28.5	46.5	13.5	3.7	1114
USA						
1985	7.6	18.0	49.4	17.1	7.8	881
1990	7.2	20.2	51.4	15.2	6.0	1125
Italy						
1985	14.2	41.4	27.0	10.7	6.8	2316
1990	15.4	38.0	31.2	9.4	6.1	978

**Source:** International Social Survey Programme, *Role of Government I and II*, 1985 and 1990

whether they simply correspond to overall national levels of enthusiasm for government *per se*. That is, do the cross-national differences in support for public spending on the unemployed gauge support for the unemployed or support for public spending generally? It is also possible that attitudes are influenced by the generosity of payment levels. Thus if payments are perceived as generous, or at least adequate, preferences which do not involve increasing payment levels might not necessarily indicate a lack of concern about unemployed people.

In order to address the first question, Figure 3 compares spending on the unemployed with other areas of public expenditure in Australia and selected countries, drawing again on the 1990 ISSP. The survey question lists the main areas of public expenditure and simply asks whether respondents would prefer more or less spending on each. It shows that in each national population the mass social services were more popular than assistance to the unemployed: most people supported spending on pensions, health, education, police and 'the environment' (whatever they

Figure 3: Comparative Preferences for Types of Government Expenditures: 1990



Source: ISSP, 1990

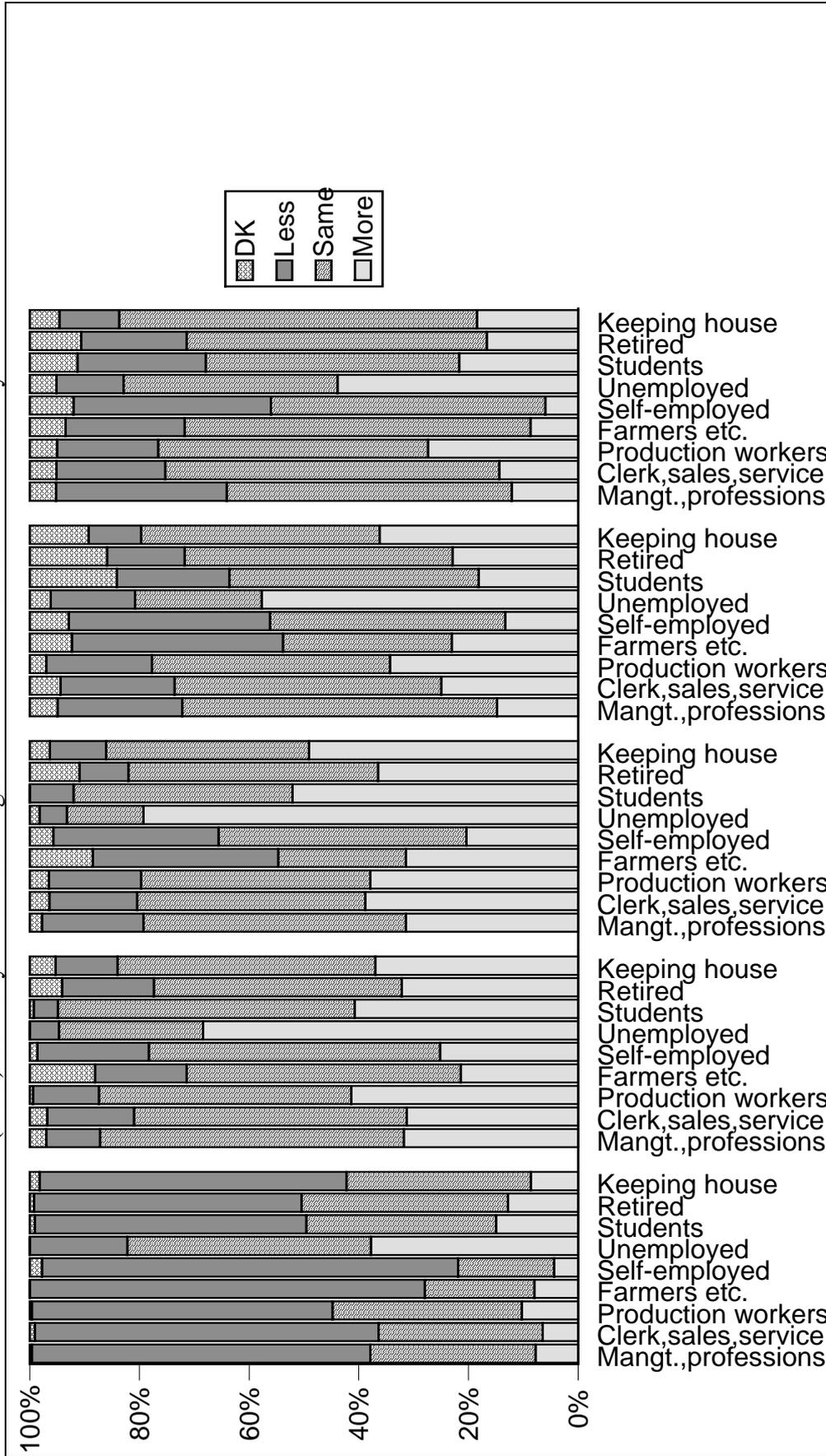
understood by the latter in policy terms). Even so, the apparent hostility to unemployment benefit in Australia stands out. Whereas in other countries the areas in which most people would have preferred less public spending are defence and the arts, in Australia unemployment payments were the primary target for cost cutting.

Figure 4 further breaks down the national responses on unemployment payments by the labour force status of respondents. In comparison with the other countries, Australians overall showed a marked preference for less spending on unemployment benefits, with nearly one-fifth of the unemployed themselves voting for less and below 40 per cent calling for more. The group with the most emphatic preference for less spending was, perhaps not surprisingly, the self-employed (over 75 per cent), a pattern also observable in the other countries, apart from Germany, though to a much lesser extent.

Rates of self-employment vary between countries - a variation which is to some extent reflected in the survey samples. In 1990, the estimated rate of self-employment in Australia was twice as high as that of Norway and 60 per cent higher than that of Germany (OECD, 1992, Tables 4.1 and 4.2). This would have some effect on the aggregate attitudes expressed in the ISSP, but the impact would only be small, as even in Australia no more than about 10 per cent of respondents were self-employed.

So why is it that Australians seem less likely than other nations to support expenditure on unemployment benefits? Is it something about the Australian system of income support for the unemployed? One possibility lies in the main difference between Australia and all the other countries surveyed, namely the absence of insurance elements within the Australian system. Even the United States, where popular opinion has historically been hostile to 'welfare', has an insurance system for (short-term) unemployment. Given that the pattern of opinion for the US (which is normally somewhat similar to that in Australia) was much more like that in the European countries, it seems possible that the survey picked up attitudes towards unemployment insurance rather than to the residual, means-tested welfare payments.

**Figure 4: Comparative Preferences for Spending on Unemployment Benefits, by Labour Force Status: 1990 (continued)**



Source: ISSP, 1990

Saunders (1995) has described how debate about the structure and financing of social provision in Australia throughout the 20th century has included discussion of the possibility of introducing contributory social insurance in areas such as age pensions, unemployment and health. The Social Security Review canvassed the possibility of unemployment insurance, suggesting that ‘a non-contributory scheme may have less legitimacy because there is no explicit perception of the employees having “earned” their benefit through their years in the labour force’ (Cass, 1988: 37). In the end, however, Cass rejected this argument on the grounds that ‘many Australians are unfamiliar with insurance principles, and would feel that they have earned their benefit by paying their taxes’ (Cass, 1988: 37). Castles (1985), on the other hand, has argued that the labour movement’s traditional opposition to contributory benefits has placed a serious obstacle in the way of welfare state financing.

If it is true that comparative surveys are picking up differences in attitudes towards different types of provision, then it appears that the ‘wage earners’ welfare state’ (Castles, 1985, 1994) with its historic reliance on the wage system, backed up with flat-rate and means-tested support in the case of unemployment, may have bred a lack of generosity in attitudes towards public expenditure on unemployment benefits. This is a view which tends to support the characterisation of Australia as a ‘market-oriented’ (Therborn, 1986) or liberal, ‘residual’ welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990), in which the level of social stigma associated with the receipt of social security benefits, particularly unemployment benefits, is greater than under other regime types.

A slightly different interpretation would be that the comparatively negative views displayed by Australians towards unemployment benefits reflect differences in attitudes towards different types of payments. That is, Australians may be expressing negative attitudes towards spending on assistance benefits, which are paid for from general taxation, whereas other national respondents may be offering more positive views of insurance benefits, which are at least partly funded by people’s own contributions. However, this interpretation runs counter to the possibility canvassed earlier that the more generous the payment the less likely people are to prefer increases in the level of expenditure for them. Most European insurance-based unemployment benefits are earnings-related

and thus tend to be paid at a higher level than the assistance-based payments of Australia. Unfortunately the data available from the ISSP surveys do not allow any more detailed exploration of how different funding mechanisms for benefits may affect public attitudes towards them.

The idea that so-called residual welfare states like Australia ascribe a particularly strong stigma to benefit receipt is an argument which dates back at least to the work of Titmuss (1974). Though warning of the dangers of generalising across countries, Titmuss contended that the residual model of social policy fostered images of pauperism among recipients, making them feel like 'chisellers, cheaters, welfare bums, and abusers of the system' (Titmuss, 1974: 45).

The categorisation of Australia as a residual welfare state like the United States has, however, been challenged in recent years (Castles and Mitchell, 1991; Mitchell, Harding and Gruen, 1994; Eardley et al., 1996; Whiteford, 1996). There is also little direct empirical evidence to suggest that stigma is currently a more major feature of social security provision in Australia than in other countries. Furthermore, the limitation to drawing such a conclusion from the ISSP survey data is that like is not being compared with like. The actual levels and type of provision in unemployment differ considerably among the countries surveyed, which is likely to affect perceptions of how much more or less expenditure is desirable. This is a point demonstrated by Taylor-Gooby (1995), who shows that for most European Union (EU) countries the incidence of the belief that the jobless are well protected increases with the proportion of per capita GDP spent on each jobless person.

An alternative approach, given the difficulty of comparing the preferences expressed by populations differently served in terms of existing social expenditure levels, is to ask what people consider to be the appropriate role of the state with respect to employment and unemployment, compared with other activities. Table 3 therefore presents survey respondents' views on the responsibilities of governments in Australia and four other countries in or around 1990. It shows that the predominant views in different countries varied considerably according to the issue. Overwhelming majorities in each country saw providing

**Table 3: Governmental Responsibilities, Comparative Attitudes<sup>(a)</sup>: 1990**

Country	Provide jobs for all	Control prices	Provide health care	Look after aged	Aid industry	Look after unemployed	Reduce income differences	Aid poor students	Provide low-income housing
Australia									
Should be	40.4	81.9	93.1	93.4	82.8	53.3	49.7	86.5	75.3
Should not be	56.9	16.9	6.1	5.8	14.8	42.3	47.4	11.6	20.7
Don't know	2.7	1.3	0.8	0.8	2.4	4.4	2.9	1.9	4
West Germany									
Should be	71.3	67	93.2	92.6	49	74.3	59.4	82.3	75.9
Should not be	24.8	29.2	4.4	5.2	44.7	20.5	33.9	13.5	19.2
Don't know	3.9	3.8	2.3	2.2	6.2	5.2	6.7	4.2	4.9
UK									
Should be	64.3	86.9	96.9	97	89.9	79.9	72.6	90	89.5
Should not be	30.5	9.7	0.9	1.2	6	15.7	22.3	7	6.9
Don't know	5.1	3.5	2.2	1.8	4.1	4.4	5.2	3	3.6
USA									
Should be	40.3	71.1	84.3	82.6	63.8	48.2	40.3	80.9	67.7
Should not be	51.6	22.2	10.3	11.8	26.8	43	50.4	11.6	24.4
Don't know	8.1	6.7	5.4	5.7	9.4	8.8	9.4	7.5	7.9
Norway									
Should be	80.6	89.1	97	97.6	62.8	87.1	67.2	75.1	70.3
Should not be	15.5	8	1.4	1.1	30.4	9	26.6	19	23.5
Don't know	3.9	2.8	1.6	1.3	6.8	3.8	6.2	5.9	6.3

**Note:** a) Question: Should it be the responsibility of government to ...?

**Source:** ISSP, *Role of Government II*, 1990

health care for the sick or ensuring an adequate standard of living for older people as legitimate concerns of government. There were, by contrast, substantial differences from one country to another in the proportions who believed that finding a job for anyone who wanted one, providing a decent standard of living for the jobless and reducing income differences between the rich and the poor, were the kinds of things governments should be doing.

There are indications that these differences might be linked to prevalent institutional arrangements. The United States and Australia, two societies whose institutions are commonly characterised as liberal and market-oriented, showed the lowest rates of support for all three of these propositions, while with respect to full employment and income redistribution, the US had slight majorities *against* any government responsibility. On each of these questions, the US respondents also gave the highest rate of 'Don't know' responses, which could be interpreted as having so little familiarity with the concept as a public issue as to be unwilling to hazard an opinion. By contrast, in Norway, a Scandinavian full-employment welfare state with extensive tax-transfer and labour market programs, more than two-thirds of the sample favoured each of these three areas of responsibility, with 87 per cent agreeing that the government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed.

In these surveys, Australia trailed the field in support for unemployment relief programs. Support in Australia for the proposition that government has a responsibility to provide a decent living standard for the jobless was very low by the standards of most technologically advanced countries, although comparable to that found in the United States. The even lower level of endorsement for the suggestion that government has a responsibility to find a job for everyone who wants one would seem to preclude the explanation that the public preferred an 'active society' approach over a 'passive' policy of income support. However, it is conceivable that this might be traced to cross-national differences in interpretation of what the question is proposing: does the government actually have to give people jobs or simply ensure that economic and social conditions are conducive to full employment?

Some further insight into this may be gleaned from other questions in the 1990 ISSP Role of Government survey, which included a series of possible economic policy initiatives for the respondent's consideration and evaluation. Out of all the countries included, Australia showed the lowest rates of endorsement for 'government financing of projects to create new jobs' and little enthusiasm for most of the alternative proposals for generating or maintaining employment suggested in the survey. On the other hand, Australian figures show considerable support for assistance to industry. One interpretation might be that Australians see it as more appropriate to create employment through aid to industry than by direct government financing of employment projects.

More recent data from the ISSP are not yet available<sup>2</sup>, but some comparable information on public attitudes can be found from other sources. A recent survey carried out by AC Nielsen for the Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre, for example, asked about Australians' views on taxation for certain kinds of social expenditure (Baldry and Vinson, 1998). Table 4 summarises the main results of the survey. Overall, it indicates substantial support for increased spending in certain areas, including job training for unemployed people, even if this resulted in extra taxation. As with the ISSP data, unemployment expenditure remains the least popular of the areas canvassed, though only by a few percentage points, and there seems to be only minority support at present for tax and spending cuts in this area. Again there are problems of interpretation: a lack of support for job training may indicate doubts about its effectiveness at reducing unemployment rather than a wish to reduce support for the unemployed *per se*.

A further source of attitudinal information is the *Middle Australia Project*, carried out from the School of Sociology at the University of New South Wales. In 1996, the project surveyed a national sample of 400 adults identified as 'middle Australians' on the basis of their residence in

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2 However, one piece of analysis drawing on the 1996 ISSP is by Aalberg (1998, Figure 5). This suggests that Australia was only surpassed by Hungary and Ireland in the desire to reduce taxes in spite of the consequences for social services. The figure for Australia was 52 per cent, compared with, for example, 21 per cent in the UK and 31 per cent in the USA.

**Table 4: Australians' Preferences for Taxation and Social Expenditure<sup>(a)</sup>: 1998**

Spending Area	Option best for country				Total
	Increase spending by increasing income tax by one or two cents in the dollar	Keep income tax as is and spend about the same as now	Cut spending by reducing income tax by one or two cents in the dollar	Not known/not stated	
	Percentages				
Education	49	32	15	4	100
Health	48	33	16	3	100
Aged care	48	33	16	3	100
Support for families in need	42	36	18	4	100
Job training for unemployed people	39	36	21	4	100
The environment	37	40	19	4	100

Note: a) The Uniya add-on to the omnibus survey included 969 persons aged over 18 across all States and Territories of Australia except the ACT, interviewed in February 1998. Respondents were asked to assume all tax evasion loopholes were closed, that taxes remained progressive, and changes in tax levels could result in direct changes in public spending.

Source: AC Nielsen Omnibus Survey for Uniya, reported in Baldry and Vinson, 1998

certain Census enumeration districts. The respondents did not represent a fully random sample of the population, but the survey did include some of the same questions as in the ISSP.

Tables 5 and 6 present some frequencies of responses to selected statements and questions from the survey which are relevant to the topic in hand.<sup>3</sup> The survey items selected here are part of a set constructed to build up a composite, attitudinal picture of respondents across a number of areas and are not meant to be taken in isolation. They do, nevertheless, provide a more contemporary, insight into attitudes towards social security for the unemployed.

Table 5 presents a somewhat conflicting picture. A substantial proportion of respondents - between 17 and 33 per cent depending on the question -

3 We are grateful to the project director Professor Michael Pusey for allowing us to present these initial results.

**Table 5: Responses to Selected Statements and Questions from the Middle Australia Project: 1996** (row percentages)

	Agree strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Don't know
The welfare state makes people nowadays less willing to look after themselves	14.9	41.2	15.9	18.7	8.1	1.3
People receiving social security are made to feel like second class citizens	9.3	42.9	25.8	17.4	3.5	1.0
The government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes	7.6	26.0	23.2	30.8	10.4	2.0
Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted to	5.3	32.0	18.5	28.4	12.4	3.3
Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another	2.3	13.2	27.8	32.7	18.7	5.3
It is everyone's responsibility to find a job for themselves, and nothing to do with the government	3.8	26.9	23.6	33.0	11.9	0.8
Young people today should keep on challenging traditional Australian values	10.9	38.9	27.5	17.3	3.8	1.5
Number = 394-396						

**Source:** Middle Australia Project, SPRC analysis

either offered no firm view on the statements or did not know. A majority of those expressing a definite view supported the idea that the welfare state saps personal responsibility - with this proposition receiving the highest level of strong agreement - but also agreed that social security recipients are treated as second class citizens. Just over one-third supported more spending on welfare benefits even at the risk of higher taxes, but more than two-fifths opposed this extra spending. Over one-third also felt that jobs in their area were available to people who looked hard enough, but a larger percentage disagreed.

There was only a small minority (just under 16 per cent) in clear support of the idea that dole cheating is widespread, despite the popular 'dole bludger' rhetoric discussed above. Also, notwithstanding the view that the welfare state undermines personal responsibility, the idea that the Government has no role in helping people to find work received only limited support. Finally, very nearly half of those expressing a view agreed that young people ought to go on challenging traditional values and only just over one-fifth disagreed. This is interesting in the light of employers' attitudes to young people, where it seems clear that such challenging attitudes are not what most employers are looking for in potential employees.<sup>4</sup>

Table 6 presents some attitudinal data on public expenditure from the Middle Australia survey. The same caveats apply here as to earlier discussions of survey attitudes towards public expenditure, in addition to this survey being based on a small, non-random sample. A similar picture emerges, however, to that from the 1990 ISSP, and to a lesser extent from the Uniya survey, in that unemployment benefits are not among the main candidates for increased spending. Expenditure on defence was even less popular than unemployment benefit as a spending area, but otherwise the patterns emerging from the various surveys are fairly consistent.

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4 The study on which this paper is based also reviewed survey data on employers' attitudes to the young unemployed and found that motivation, presentation and 'the right attitude' were the features employers were most often looking for in young people (Eardley and Matheson, 1998).

**Table 6: Views on Government Expenditure from Middle Australia Project<sup>(a)</sup>: 1996** (row percentages)

	Spend much more	Spend more	Spend same as now	Spend less	Spend much less	Can't choose
The environment	17.9	41.9	33.0	5.1	1.0	1.0
Health	26.3	50.3	18.6	3.1	0.8	1.0
The police and law enforcement	12.0	41.2	38.1	6.4	1.3	1.0
Education	27.6	50.4	19.2	1.0	1.3	0.5
The military and defence	3.8	8.4	36.8	30.4	18.9	1.5
Old age pensions	7.4	33.5	50.9	4.6	1.8	1.8
Unemployment benefits	3.3	16.1	49.7	22.7	6.6	.15
Culture and the arts	5.6	23.7	41.0	20.9	7.1	1.8

Number = 391-393

**Note:** a) Question: Please show whether you would like to see more or less government spending in the following areas. Remember that if you say 'much more' it might require a tax increase to pay for it.

**Source:** Middle Australia Project, SPRC analysis

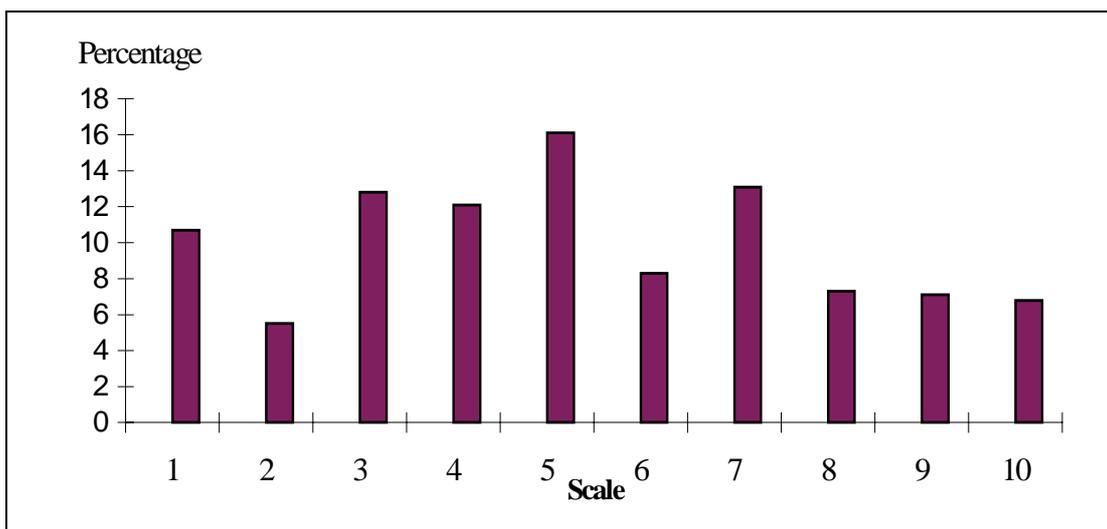
## 4 Activity Testing and Recipients' Obligations

As was stated earlier, there has been little information available on public attitudes towards the specifics of activity testing, or on the way that the relevant government departments deal with unemployed social security recipients. One of the only detailed studies in this area is by Weatherley (1993), who surveyed the attitudes of social security claimants themselves towards compliance with eligibility rules and procedures. Even amongst this group he found considerable support (76 per cent) for the then requirement to lodge the mandatory work effort form, in spite of the survey taking place at the peak of the recession, when there were likely to be 30 or more job seekers for each listed vacancy. Views expressed by claimants were actually fairly similar to those of many DSS staff, such as that the requirement acted as a safeguard against abuse. Weatherley suggested that for some respondents it seemed that meeting these requirements also helped assuage guilt about being unemployed and requiring help – a residual feeling of stigma and shame which the

survey found had not entirely disappeared with the black coats of the 'Sussos'.

A further question from the Middle Australia survey is particularly relevant to this topic. Respondents were asked to record their views on a series of issues by marking a point on a scale between two opposing statements. One set of dichotomous statements concerned the obligation of job seekers to accept any work available. Figure 5 shows the responses on the scale of 1 to 10. Opinion clearly varied considerably, but with a majority (58 per cent) leaning somewhat towards the obligation end of the spectrum.

**Figure 5: Percentage Scaled Responses to Question<sup>(a)</sup> on Obligations of Unemployed People**



Number = 397

**Note:** a) 1 = 'People who are unemployed should have to take any job available or lose their unemployment benefits'. 10 = 'People who are unemployed should have the right to refuse a job they do not want'

**Source:** Middle Australia Project, SPRC analysis

The one recent policy change which has been tested in published opinion polling is the 'work for the dole' scheme, which was introduced in 1997 on a pilot basis for selected, mainly younger, job seekers. In February 1997, the Morgan Poll (1997) asked respondents whether they approved or disapproved of the proposed scheme, first on a compulsory and secondly on a voluntary basis. Overall, 51 per cent said they approved

strongly of a compulsory scheme and a further 21 per cent mildly. Mild disapproval was nine per cent and strong disapproval 16 per cent.

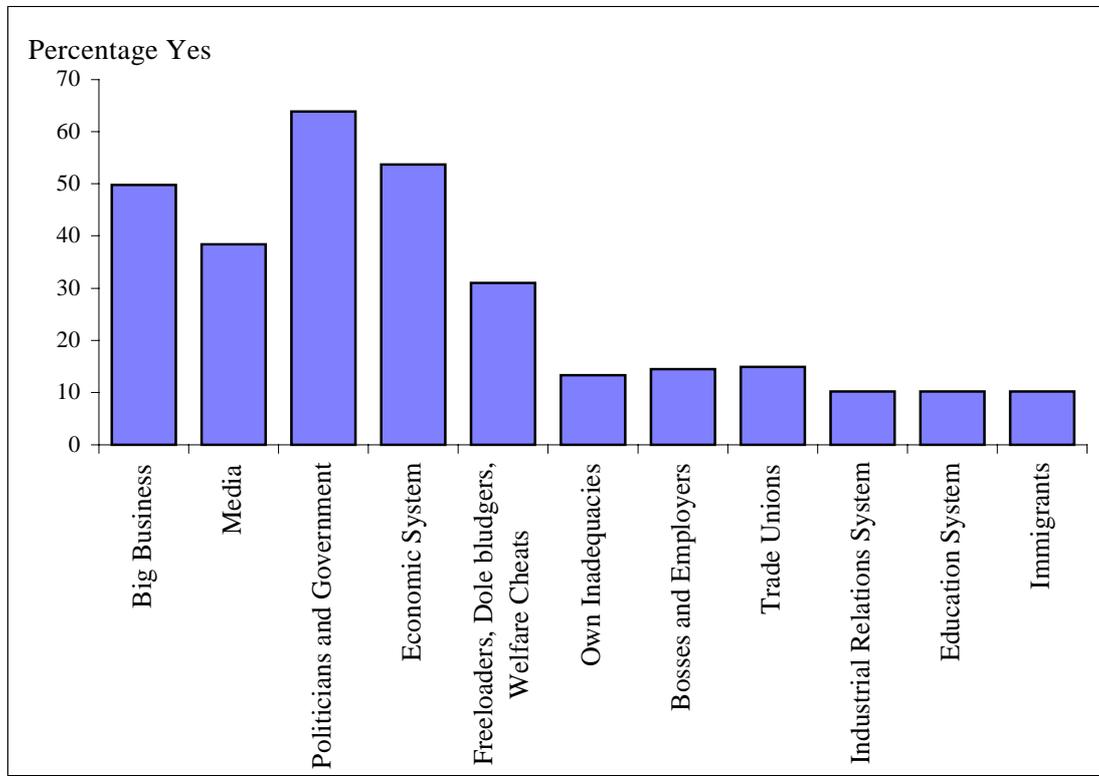
Women were slightly more likely to approve than men (73 to 71 per cent) and the highest approval rating by age (77 per cent) came, perhaps surprisingly, from the 16-19 year age group, including 100 per cent of the young women polled. In terms of occupational groups, there was relatively little difference in overall approval levels except for semi-skilled and unskilled workers, who gave the scheme the lowest approval levels of 56 per cent. The slimmest majority in favour also came from unemployed people seeking work (55 per cent), as opposed to 73 per cent for all those in work. Making the scheme voluntary brought slightly higher levels of approval overall.

Clearly such a poll has limitations as an indicator of detailed public attitudes. Respondents would have had little idea of the actual operations of the scheme and were commenting on a concept rather than a set of concrete proposals - and one which had been strongly promoted in the media by the Government. As a labour market program, 'Work for the Dole' has a number of limitations (see Hawke, 1998). Nevertheless, in line with the other data discussed above, it does appear that a substantial majority of the Australian public favours, at least in principle, a greater degree of obligation on the part of young unemployed people.

The last question to be examined here asked respondents how they felt about what is happening (based on earlier questions) to 'middle Australia'. Possible answers were 'angry and resentful', 'a bit unhappy', 'calm and satisfied' and 'don't know or none of these'. Respondents indicating they felt angry or unhappy (64 per cent) were further asked to whom these feelings were normally directed. Figure 6 gives the percentage 'yes' responses. People were able to offer more than one target of their anger or unhappiness, so percentages do not add up to 100.

Respondents who felt unhappy with the state of middle Australia were most inclined to direct their resentment towards politicians and government, big business, the economic system and the media. Less than one-third nominated freeloaders and welfare cheats as objects of their

**Figure 6: Targets of Anger or Unhappiness About What is Happening to Middle Australia**



Number = 255

**Source:** Middle Australia Project, SPRC analysis

anger, but this was still a substantially higher proportion than those directing anger towards other targets, including trade unions, employers and immigrants. Thus it appears that the ‘dole bludger’ remains an object of blame and anger for a substantial sector of the population.

## 5 Discussion

At the beginning of this paper we posed a number of questions about public attitudes towards unemployment and unemployed people. In particular we asked whether recent governments have been moving in line with public opinion in imposing increasingly strict conditions for the receipt of unemployment payments and reinforcing the idea of ‘mutual obligation’.

The literature on Australian attitudes to unemployment and unemployed people is not extensive and is particularly lacking on community attitudes to the details of activity testing, even though the level of such testing and

the penalties for breaches of compliance have intensified considerably in recent years.

The information that is available comes mainly from surveys and opinion polls on public attitudes to broader questions about the causes of unemployment and its importance as a social issue, the role of government in dealing with unemployment and preferences for spending on unemployment benefits compared to other areas of public expenditure. The data sources examined suggest that unemployment remains an important focus of public concern, although its importance relative to other issues has fluctuated - often, it appears, in line with movements in the business cycle.

Although there has not been much detailed study of personal attitudes towards unemployed people, Australians do seem to have had a noticeable propensity to attribute at least part of the responsibility for joblessness to people's own unwillingness to work. A number of commentators have argued that the media and politicians have a major responsibility for encouraging these attitudes through publicity campaigns against so-called 'dole bludgers'.

The tendency to identify unwillingness to work as a major cause of unemployment seems to have decreased sharply in the late 1980s. It is not entirely clear why this should have happened, but there was a fairly close correlation over much of the period since the mid-1970s between the apportioning of blame to the unemployed and the overall rate of unemployment. This suggests that public views shift according to how far people regard work as being available for those who want it. However, after 1991 there was another apparent rise in willingness to personalise responsibility for unemployment. This leads us to speculate that the 'active society' discourse promoted by government during this period may have encouraged people again to see unemployment as a matter of personal responsibility.

These broad surveys of opinion, of course, conceal variations in views according to socioeconomic background and age. In particular, working class people tend to exhibit more hostility to the unemployed than other groups, and young people tend to be seen as the group most likely to be responsible for their own unemployment.

In spite of this tendency to apportion blame, Australians do have some sympathy with unemployed people, resist the notion that they are all welfare cheats or should assume full responsibility for their predicament, and see a role for government both in helping them to find work and in providing them with an income when out of work. These views should not necessarily be seen as contradictory, but more an example of the complexity of the packages of attitudes and opinions - what Offe (1993) has described as the 'moral repertoires' - upon which people draw in formulating their responses to issues of public welfare and governance.

Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the view that, by international standards, Australians appear to take a relatively hard line on the responsibilities of unemployed people - especially the younger unemployed - to actively seek and accept work. A majority also seem disinclined to support increases in public expenditure on unemployment benefits. We have speculated that Australia's system of means-tested income support for the unemployed and its lack of insurance-based payments may have tended to foster a degree of hostility to what comes to be regarded as 'welfare'. On the other hand, it could represent a perception that levels of income support are already adequate, or alternatively that people would prefer the problem of unemployment to be solved - since it consistently figures high on the list of public concerns - rather than see extra spending on benefits *per se*.

The apparent widespread support, in principle at least, for the 'Work for the Dole' scheme suggests that the notion of obligations arising from the provision of support for unemployed people is one which has broad community backing, particularly when applied to young people. Yet the limited data from opinion polls on this topic tell us little about why people support the scheme, what they think it actually involves or what it might be expected to achieve.

The main information gaps identified by this study relate to broader community views and attitudes. For example, although it is clear that unemployment remains a matter of deep public concern, there is little detailed information available on what people think the Government should be doing to solve the problem. Also, in spite of evidence for support at a general level for obligations on recipients of unemployment allowances, we know very little about how far people believe activity

testing should go: which categories of unemployed client should or should not be obliged to demonstrate their job search effort; in what ways and in what circumstances job search should be demonstrated; how effective job search could be combined with other activities such as voluntary work and education; and what support exists for the level of sanctions now operating for non-compliance.

Some of the answers to these questions may reflect people's views about the 'genuineness' of the difficulties facing unemployed people. Thus it would help to know how far such views are influenced by personal experience, by current or previous acquaintance with unemployed people, or by secondary sources such as the media or other contacts. Attitudes towards unemployed people may also be affected by perceptions of how long some groups of job seekers remain unemployed. It is not clear whether people are aware of the level of 'churning' among unemployed people or whether they believe that the same people are unemployed for extended periods.

Some of these issues are being addressed in a new survey currently being undertaken by the Social Policy Research Centre on *Coping with Social and Economic Change*, the first results from which will be available in mid-1999. However, attitudinal surveys can only go so far in answering these questions. In-depth exploration is also required in order to understand how people exercise their 'moral repertoires'. As Dean (1998: 148) has put it, in a qualitative study of welfare values, the concern is not only about the expressed opinion of respondents, but also 'about the way in which those opinions [are] constructed out of everyday experience and discourse'.

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