

*UPS AND DOWNS:*

*Is there an issue-attention cycle in Britain?*

*by*

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*No. 89*

*1992*

**STRATHCLYDE PAPERS ON GOVERNMENT AND  
POLITICS**

**(Series Editor, David Judge)**

**NO. 89**

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**ISSN 0264-1496  
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## **Ups and Downs:**

### **Is there an issue-attention cycle in Britain?**

#### **Abstract**

In his much cited article 'Up and down with ecology' Anthony Downs (1972) drew attention to the cyclical nature of public attention to domestic issues in the United States. Although using the ecology (or environmental) issue as an illustration, he was clearly concerned to make a general statement about public attitudes and behaviour concerning important domestic issues. Downs based his model of the issue-attention cycle on his *perception* of the ecology issue in particular and domestic issues more generally rather than a quantitative analysis of issue salience. By using evidence from opinion surveys in Britain, this article seeks to apply one test to the model, and to explore whether other possible models fit the pattern of public attention to issues. It is found that the Downs model does have a good fit to a few issues, including the environment issue in the late 1980s, but that most issues are better characterised by models which relate public concern to the level of a problem or to partisan debate about the issue.

## Introduction

In his much cited article 'Up and down with ecology', Anthony Downs (1972) drew attention to the cyclical nature of public attention to domestic issues in the United States. Although using the ecology (or environmental) issue as an illustration, he was clearly concerned to make a general statement about public attitudes and behaviour concerning important domestic issues. Downs based his model of the issue-attention cycle on his *perception* of the ecology issue in particular and domestic issues more generally rather than a quantitative analysis of issue salience. His article is frequently quoted in textbooks, but rarely tested. By using evidence from opinion surveys in Britain, this article seeks to apply one test to the model, and to explore whether other possible models fit the pattern of public attention to issues. In applying a model developed in the American context to Britain, it should be noted that Downs (1972, 39) assumes that American culture, at least until the 1960s, was much more optimistic about the possibility of solving problems than 'older and perhaps wiser' cultures.

In his model Downs focuses largely on the level and nature of public attention rather than the actions of government in response to that attention. He divides the issue-attention cycle into five stages:

1. *The pre-problem stage.* This prevails when some highly undesirable social condition exists but has not yet captured much public attention, even though some experts or interest groups may already be alarmed by it . . .
2. *Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm.* As a result of some dramatic series of events . . . or for other reasons, the public suddenly becomes aware of and alarmed about the evils of a particular problem. This alarmed discovery is invariably accompanied by euphoric enthusiasm about society's ability to 'solve this problem' or 'do something effective' within a relatively short time . . . .
3. *Realizing the cost of significant progress.* The third stage consists of a gradually spreading realization that the cost of 'solving the problem' is very high indeed. . . .
4. *Gradual decline of intense public interest . . . .*

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As more and more people realize how difficult, and how costly to themselves, a solution to a problem would be, three reactions set in . . . discouraged . . . threatened . . . bored . . . And by this time, some other issue is usually entering Stage Two; so it exerts a more novel and thus more powerful claim upon public attention.

5. *The post-problem stage.* In the final stage, an issue that has been replaced at the center of public concern moves into a prolonged limbo - a twilight realm of lesser attention or spasmodic recurrences of interest (Downs, 1972, 39-40).

### *Do all issues go through an issue-attention cycle?*

In this article we are particularly concerned to establish whether such recurrences of interest do occur in all areas and what different forms they take. Downs is rather ambiguous about whether he considers that an issue-attention cycle applies to 'most key domestic problems' (Downs, 1972, 38) or whether 'Not all major social problems go through this issue-attention cycle' (Downs, 1972, 41). He suggests that there are three specific characteristics which apply to major social problems which go through his issue-attention cycle:

- (1) only a minority of the public is directly affected, though that may be large in absolute terms;
- (2) 'the sufferings caused by the problem are generated by social arrangements which provide significant benefits to a majority or a powerful minority of the population' (this may be in the form of tax levels);
- (3) the problem has no intrinsically exciting qualities, or no longer has them (excluding temporary manifestations such as urban riots).

However, the environmental issue, the focus of Downs's article does not neatly fit the first characteristic he specifies in that environmental problems impact on everyone. Indeed, Downs (1972, 46-9) suggests that the issue will be protected from 'the rapid decline in public interest typical of many other recent issues' for the following reasons:

- the greater visibility of environmental pollution.
- environmental pollution threatens everyone.
- scapegoats exist in the form of top firms or industrialists.

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- the possibility that much of the pollution problem can be resolved by technological change and hence avoid the 'traumatic difficulties of major institutional change'.
- much of the costs can be passed on through higher prices rather than increased taxation.
- the possible emergence of a private industry with vested interests in anti-pollution products;
- the ambiguity and all-encompassing objective of 'improving the environment' makes successful coalition-building easier.

Despite these advantages, Downs predicted that public concern about environmental issues would suffer a gradual decline, though one slower than other recent domestic issues and therefore enabling the possibility of achieving some significant improvements in environmental quality.

We will be testing the proposition about the existence of a cyclical effect for all policy areas, both domestic and non-domestic.

#### *Does public concern decline even when problems are unresolved?*

Downs (1972, 41) assumes that the decline in public attention occurs despite the fact that the problems are 'still largely unresolved'. The fact that his list of 'many pressing social problems' still applies in the early 1990s in the United States and arguably also in Britain would appear to give support to his contention: 'Poverty, racism, poor public transportation, low-quality education, crime, drug addiction, and employment, among others' (Downs, 1972, 41). In other words, Downs assumes that the decline in public attention is *independent* of changes in objective indicators of the problem. This is an important general point about the Downs model: with the important exception of any triggering events in stage 2, the level and nature of public attention is *independent* of indicators of the level of the problem. Downs (1972, 39) is quite explicit about this: 'Public perception of most "crises" in American domestic life does not reflect changes in real conditions as much as it reflects the operation of a systematic cycle of heightening public interest and then increasing boredom with major issues.' In this article we will explore whether public concern about all issues declines regardless of whether or not they are resolved.

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### *Does the model assume government action?*

What is not fully clear from Down's explication of the stages of the cycle is how far he envisages that some form of policy and organisational response is launched by government to deal with the issue (or the public interest in the issue) before interest fades away (see Peters and Hogwood, 1985). He does seem to suggest that the environmental issue has special characteristics which make it more likely that action would be taken before public interest declines (Downs, 1972, 46-50). In general, though, it is unclear whether stage 2, 'realizing the cost of significant progress' is envisaged as occurring before or after there has been some policy and organisational response. Often the types of costs which Downs sets out only become apparent after the passage of legislation and attempts to implement it. Yet whether the realisation of costs arises before or after policy selection makes a lot of difference, since in the latter case the initial surge of interest will have become institutionalised into programmes and agencies that will not automatically self-destruct when costs become apparent or interest declines.

However, Downs does not equate lack of resolution with lack of any response by government. Indeed, in his discussion of the post-problem stage he states:

However, the issue now has a different relation to public attention than that which prevailed in the 'pre-problem' stage. For one thing, during the time that interest was sharply focussed on this problem, new institutions, programs and policies may have been created to help solve it. These entities almost always persist and often have some impact even after public attention has shifted elsewhere (Downs, 1972, 41).

In other words, where there has been some form of governmental response, however, ineffective, the issue-attention cycle is asymmetric, since following the initial surge of interest there are government organisations with a continuing interest in the issue. However, Downs does not follow through the implications of this institutionalisation for future upturns in the issue-attention cycle and the forms these take apart from his brief remark that:

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Any issue gains longevity if its sources of political support and the programs related to it can be institutionalized in large bureaucracies. Such organizations have a powerful desire to keep public attention focused on the problems that support them (Downs, 1972, 49).

The effect of inertia and incremental budgeting may mean that it does not necessarily require a great deal of supportive public attention to ensure that a programme is continued. The upswing in the issue-attention cycle may be accompanied by increased activity in the form of public employment, money and new organisations, as well as the attention of top political decision-makers, whereas on the downswing the public employment and money commitment may remain. The political attention paid by top decision-makers may decline, but the existence of a continuing programme and problems arising from its implementation and interaction with other programmes will absorb some of their attention, if only at the time of the annual budget review.

#### *Future cycles?*

The nature of the (non) resolution of issues and the (non) response of government to public interest in them and the implications for future reopening of an issue can be seen by considering the various ways in which an issue can be processed by the political system (see also Eyestone, 1978):

#### *Non-responses*

- Evaporation of the problems without any government action (e.g. an one-off short-term crisis).
- Once political pressures have died down or awareness of the costs of the response has risen the government announces that it proposes to take no action. This may itself follow the announcement by government of a detailed investigation as its immediate response.
- Allowing the issue to be considered at length, but with little sense of urgency, so that a decision is never made to move from no-decision to decision, and the issue can be said to have 'evaporated' from the political agenda.



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### *Responses*

- The government response exactly matches the nature of the problem and causes no unforeseen costs, so that political demands for further action die down completely. The response may be either of the type which completely eradicates the problem, (e.g. certain diseases arising from poor public health) or caters for a continuing problem (the problem of caring for the elderly could never be eradicated short of eradicating the elderly).
- Some response by government, but insufficient to remove political dissatisfaction so that the proponents of the policy will continue to look for opportunities of reopening the issue.
- Reopening of interest in the issue because of the direct resource costs of the programme introduced to deal with the problem (actual as opposed to hypothetical costs as above). This has arisen with agricultural and social programmes in the United States, Britain and Europe.
- 'Issue displacement', whereby the 'solution' to the original issue is now perceived as a problem requiring attention (Hogwood and Peters, 1983). Amongst the most notorious examples of this is public housing, but the very environmental issue which Downs discussed is an example where the original response to the ecological issue (which failed to resolve that issue completely) had by the end of the 1970s come to be perceived by some political groups as giving rise to a problem of overregulation. There was a reawakening of the original concern in the late 1980s. Poll tax, intended as a 'solution' to the 'problem' of the rates came to be rated by the public as a problem of greater urgency than rates had ever been.

Following Downs (1972, 41), who argues that 'problems that have gone through the cycle almost always receive a higher average level of attention, public effort, and general concern than those still in the pre-discovery stage', we would expect to find that the total level of concern about a policy area after a peak would be higher than the total level of concern prior to that peak.

### *How long is a cycle?*

Downs is not specific about how long a complete cycle will take, stating simply that the five stages 'may vary in duration depending on the particular issue involved' (Downs, 1972, 39). However, a

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cycle must take a minimum of a few months to allow for the period of gradual decline. We have to allow, though, for the possibility that a cycle of interest which does not conform to Downs's outline may be even shorter. Some cycles, particularly those where there are 'spasmodic recurrences' in the post-problem stage may last for a period of years. For a proper test of the Downs model we therefore need data which is fine grained (at least monthly) to identify issues with short cycles and to identify the timing of turning points, but which also spans a period of several years on a consistent basis to ensure that long or repeat cycle issues are picked up.

#### *Spontaneous or politically generated cycles?*

The Downs model is largely one of spontaneous upsurges of concern to which government may or may not respond. However, public concern may be a consequence of government actions, either in conformity with a perception of a problem as argued by government or in negative reaction to an announcement of government policy. Awareness of the timing and content of major government announcements as well as of 'objective' indicators of problems will be necessary in interpreting the timing of upsurges in public concern about issues.

A related issue, of far too great a scope to control for in this article, is the role of the media in highlighting or campaigning in relation to particular issues. Downs (1972, 42) refers to this in the context of competition for coverage:

Every day, there is a fierce struggle for space in the highly limited universe of newsprint and television viewing time. Each issue vies not only with all other social problems and public events, but also with a multitude of 'non-news' items that are often far more pleasant to contemplate.

In some cases it will be possible to establish a substantial upsurge in media attention to an issue which implies a positive feedback role for the media in increasing or maintaining levels of public concern. Even where 'objective' indicators of a problem clearly move in step with indicators of public concern, that public concern may only be articulated because the indicators of the problem are

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receiving substantial coverage in the media. This may be particularly important during periods when public attention shows sharp rises or sharp drops in concern.

### **Alternative models**

Rather than simply test whether or not the Downs model applies in all cases, it might be more constructive to put forward alternative models which have *a priori* plausibility in explaining some or all issues which arise in British politics.

#### *Chronic problems*

This model would take the point from Downs that some issues are not resolved, but would argue that as a result public concern about them does not automatically decline even while the level of the problem remains high. Rather, public concern remains high while the problem remains high. For issues where the level of the problem fluctuates there will be corresponding fluctuations in public concern. However, this cyclical effect is not the same as a Downs issue-attention cycle, since the Downs model implies that there will be an attention cycle even where this does not match any objective indicators of change in the problem. In other words, the chronic problems model is one of attention *dependence* on indicators of the problem.

#### *Acute problems*

Pursuing the medical analogy, some problems are of extreme importance but also of relatively short duration, either because they are 'solved' by government or otherwise come to a relatively quick conclusion. Public concern soars very sharply when the problem manifests itself, without any preliminary build-up period. Once the problem is removed or otherwise comes to an end, public concern collapses to zero, rather than declining gradually. The collapse of concern is not because of boredom or realisation of the difficulties of solving the problem as in the Downs model, but because the problem has, at least in its immediate manifestations, disappeared. As far as public concern is indicated, there is no post-problem 'twilight' stage where there is a residual level of concern at a higher average level of concern than in the pre-discovery stage, though at a lower level than at the peak (cf. Downs, 1972,

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41). Clearly, there is a danger that such acute problems might be overlooked if they are of such short duration, which is why monthly data are used in the analysis below. The acute model is again one of *dependence* on problem indicators, but in contrast to the chronic model each cycle is short and self-contained. As with the Downs model, there is the possibility that underlying problems may persist, and in the acute model may lead to further spikes of attention when further crises arise.

#### *Electoral cycle issues*

In contrast to models driven by external events, the electoral cycle model stresses political dispute as the driving force leading to upsurges of concern about issues among the general public. In the Downs model the timing of the cycle is independent of general political cycles. The electoral cycle model assumes that political debate about issues is at its most intense at the time of General Elections when parties set out their own policies, perhaps including new proposals, and attack the stance of the opposition. (Clearly when using data on *relative* concern about issues this model cannot by definition apply to all issues.) Once the election is past, concern will gradually fall away, only to pick up at the next election campaign. Such a model would be expected to apply particularly to *position* issues where there is disagreement about the desirability of a policy, and less to *valence* issues where there is consensus about the desirability of reducing a problem, though perhaps argument about the best means to use and the relative competence of the parties competing for office (see Butler and Stokes, 1969, 236).

#### *Low-level persistent issues*

Some issues may show evidence of public concern which is persistent and never cycles through dramatic upturns and downturns. Even when there are extremely high levels of concern about other chronic or acute problems these low-level persistent issues are never entirely squeezed out. Because they are low-level, much of the month to month apparent variation is statistical 'noise'.

#### *Non-issues and latent issues*

Some issues may simply not register at all in surveys asking which are the most urgent problems facing the country. There is a danger

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that if issues are not specifically listed, then respondents are not prompted to refer to them. However, an issue which is of concern is likely to appear on the list after a lag, either as a result of unprompted mentions or because those conducting the survey include it because of political developments. Issues which have shown no evidence of public concern may simply be latent issues which may still be in their initial Downsian pre-problem stage. However, issues which have shown no measurable (or at least measured) level of public concern over a period of twenty years are substantially different in nature from issues which have gone through one or more Downsian cycles or conform to one of the alternative models outlined above.

### *Do models apply exclusively?*

It is not suggested here that such models are exhaustive of all issues, nor that they are necessarily self-contained. One point to explore will be whether issues appear to move from one model to another.

### **Using public opinion survey data**

Data from surveys of a sample of the general public give us some indication of public concern but not necessarily of serious attention by decision-makers, though politicians are obviously concerned about opinion polls. Some issues which may be preoccupying key decision-makers may not be perceived as urgent by the general public, and we will find examples of such issues below. The data give an indication of concern among the *general* public; they do not necessarily give an indication of concern among specific publics or interest groups. An issue may still be actively pursued by groups even when relative concern among the general public has declined. However, Downs himself appears to have been talking about attention among the general public, so survey data provide a meaningful test of his model.

The Gallup surveys, approximately monthly, used in this article ask about the most urgent problem facing the country (and from 1973 the second most urgent problem). They therefore give some indication about *relative* concern about issues. The absolute level of concern about an issue may stay high, but the number of people listing it as the most urgent problem may decline if another

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urgent issue arises. We will see some evidence of this from the figures, particularly as affecting unemployment. However, by looking at the two most urgent problems we will allow for this to some extent. Relative salience is in any case of interest because of the argument that the capacity of the public, politicians and the media for handling issues is limited and that only a few issues will receive attention at any one time.<sup>1</sup>

What are listed in the *Gallup Report* are often broad policy areas (e.g. international affairs, health) rather than specific issues in a narrower sense, such as nurses' pay. Specific issues, as opposed to the salience of broad policy issues, may differ from the pattern of relative interest in their broad policy area. Issues in this narrower sense may conform more closely to an issue-attention cycle (though Downs himself appears to be talking about broad policy areas).

One problem about testing the Downs model using opinion survey data on public concern about issues is that opinion survey data does not normally enable the identification of the *nature* of that concern. There may be similar *levels* of concern at stages 2 and 3 of the Downs model, but concern at stage 2 will be about the threat posed by the problem, and concern at stage 3 will to a greater extent be about the cost of dealing with the problem. It will therefore not be practicable to test for a transition between stages 2 and 3 from the data utilised in this article, but it will still be possible to test for an overall pattern of a surge in public concern, followed by a levelling off and then gradual decline and 'limbo'.<sup>2</sup>

The specific question asked in the Gallup surveys refers to 'the most urgent problem facing the country'. Responses will be affected by the perceptions of respondents about whether a problem should be characterised as an individual one or part of a problem facing the country. For example, a person who has recently been divorced or widowed may characterise her problem as one of personal circumstances rather than as social security benefits being an urgent problem facing the country. Characterisation of a problem as one 'facing the country' may depend on whether the issue is explicitly listed as such in the survey.

The *Gallup Reports* list responses under specific headings. However, problems may not neatly fit into unique categories. For example, concern about inflation may be coded for most respondents under the heading of 'Cost of Living', but may appear under

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the heading of 'Pensions' for others. The same events may be characterised as symptoms of different problems: urban riots could be characterised as symptoms of poverty or racism (not on the standard Gallup list) or law and order (which is).

There are particular problems about using Gallup data for the purpose of assessing public concern about issues. Problems not separately listed by Gallup in the survey will not appear in the *Reports* until Gallup itself realises that an issue is *prime facie* a matter of public concern, or this shows up in the responses under 'Other'. This may mean that Gallup misses out on some surges in concern on non-listed issues altogether, or picks them up too late for the purpose of analysing any transition between any 'pre-problem' stage and 'alarmed discovery' (see discussions of 'Europe', 'Housing and Poll Tax', 'Ireland' and 'Environment' below).

In interpreting charts for individual problems below it should be noted that in some years Gallup does not list all issues where ratings are low, but includes them in the 'Other' category. In general, very low or even zero ratings were reported in the early 1970s and from 1991, and in intervening years there was considerable variation in the reporting of low levels of expressed concern. More categories were normally reported for responses for the two most urgent problems rather than the single most urgent problem, which is one of the reasons why this set of responses is used in this study.

As with opinion polls reporting support for political parties, these surveys including questions on concern about urgent problems are subject to sampling error. Approximately 95% of reported results can be expected to lie within 3 per cent of the views of the electorate as a whole (leaving aside all the other difficulties discussed above). One in twenty sets of results can be expected to show an even larger discrepancy; given that this study covers a period of twenty years, this would imply that twelve sets of results are 'rogue'. Some of this 'statistical noise' could be filtered out by averaging, say, three months of data, but this would also have the effect of dampening out the 'spikes' associated with problems conforming to the acute model set out above.

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### **Economic issues**

Overall, it is economic issues, with the important exception of acute international crises, which are normally the most important political issues as indicated by public concern. Within that category unemployment and inflation have been dominant until the late 1980s.

### *Unemployment*

Unemployment at any one time only directly affects a minority of the population and therefore has one of the characteristics of issues which Downs says go through his issue-attention cycle. Fig.1 certainly shows a cyclical pattern for concern about unemployment, but is it a Downs cycle? There are a number of reasons to argue that it is not. Most importantly, the level of concern about unemployment does vary according to indicators of the level of unemployment itself. Unemployment was at a low point at the end of 1973 and rose to a temporary peak at the beginning of 1978. Concern about unemployment rose sharply between 1974 and 1976, and then fell as unemployment fell to the middle of 1979. The pattern was complicated by the temporary upsurge of other issues, particularly strikes. As unemployment began to rise, concern about unemployment rose very sharply in 1980, much more sharply than the increase in unemployment. By the beginning of 1981, concern about unemployment had reached a plateau, even though the rate of unemployment did not peak until 1986.

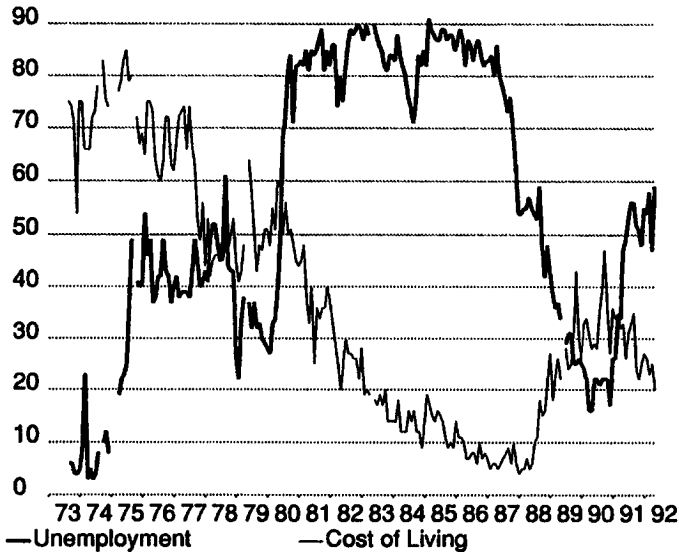
This pattern indicates both an *acceleration effect* (concern about unemployment rises and falls after turning points much more sharply than the unemployment rate itself) and a *saturation effect* (once around 90 per cent of the population thought that unemployment was one of the two most urgent problems facing the country there was very little room for increases in the number who had it as a main concern).

An important consideration in rejecting the applicability of the Downs model to unemployment is the impact of issues which interrupted concern about unemployment. There was a noticeable downward spike in 1982, coinciding with concern about international affairs during the Falklands War, and another in 1984-85 at the time of the miners' strike. What is worth emphasising is that concern about unemployment was restored to its previous position once those events had come to an end. The public was not perma-



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% rating as one of two most urgent problems



*Fig. 1*

nently diverted from its concern about unemployment. While unemployment remained high the public did not get 'bored' by unemployment as a problem; concern remained at extremely high levels while unemployment remained high. Concern only fell when unemployment itself began to fall, and picked up when unemployment again rose from 1990. Unemployment therefore conforms to the chronic problem model rather than the Downs model.

### *Cost of Living/Prices*

Fig. 1 shows that inflation also follows a cyclical pattern, largely though not entirely in opposite phase to unemployment. To an even greater extent than with unemployment, concern about inflation rises and falls in line with the rate of price increases. Concern about the cost of living peaked in July 1975, whereas the annual rate of inflation peaked in August 1975. As the annual rate of

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inflation fell to 7.4 in June 1978, this was broadly matched by a decline in concern about inflation, though the picture is complicated by rising concern about unemployment and the impact of concern about strikes. Concern about inflation rose as inflation itself again peaked at 21.9 in May 1980, though the highest concern was actually immediately after the Conservative's post-election budget in June 1979, which sharply raised Value Added Tax. After May 1980 concern about inflation fell as inflation itself gradually fell to a low of 2.4 in July and August 1986. As inflation rose to a new peak of 10.9 in September and October 1990, so too did concern about inflation, though the pattern is complicated by spikes of concern about the poll tax. As inflation has fallen since then, so too has the trend of concern about inflation.

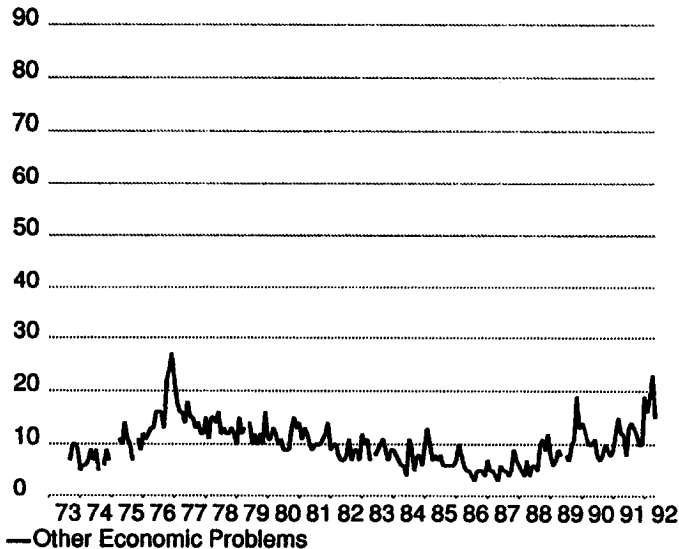
While the level of concern about inflation has been affected by spikes as other issues have temporarily received attention, the extent of matching of both trend and level of concern with the actual rate of inflation is striking. Inflation clearly does not conform to a Downs issue-attention cycle, but does conform to the chronic model. In contrast to unemployment, which showed sharper rises and falls of concern than the level of unemployment itself, changes in concern about inflation match more closely changes in the rate of inflation. Thus the long gradual decline in the rate of inflation from 1980 to 1988 was matched by a long gradual decline in concern. The reason for this difference from unemployment may be that inflation directly impacts on everyone, whereas unemployment at any one period directly affects only a minority, and therefore the attention of the majority is more alerted by 'announcement effects' of redundancies and media coverage.

#### *Other economic problems*

The 'other economic problems' category is a residual one, which includes balance of payments, the level of the pound in international exchanges, the growth rate of the economy, and interest rates. The portmanteau nature of this heading therefore makes it difficult to track concern with individual indicators in the same way as unemployment and inflation, but is noticeable that there was a sharp peak at the time of the IMF loan crisis involving balance of payments and sterling difficulties (see fig. 2). As balance of payments problems appeared to have reduced, concern about

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% rating as one of two most urgent problems

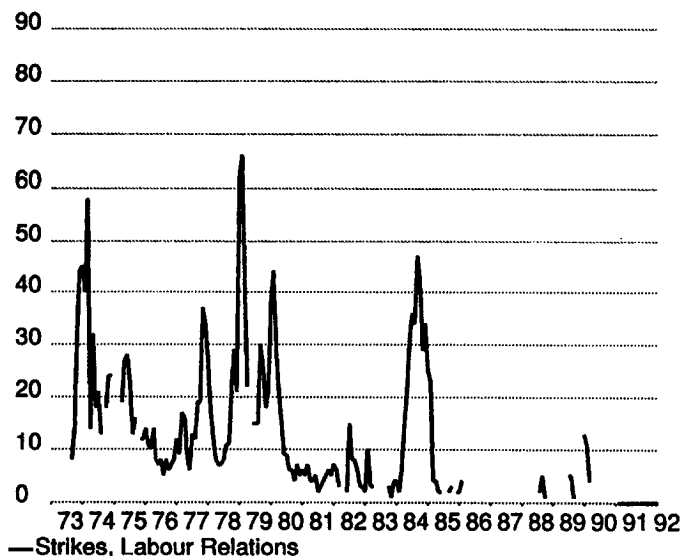


*Fig. 2*

'other economic problems' fell until the mid 1980s. There was a marked increase in concern in 1988 and 1989, which may reflect the doubling of interest rates between May 1988 and October 1989 and emerging evidence of an end to the period of economic growth of the mid 1980s. Despite by then falling interest rates, concern rose sharply in late 1991 and early 1992; this may reflect concern about the continuing postponement of a much heralded end to economic recession. Insofar as there is some evidence that concern about other economic problems is related to changes in economic conditions, this set of problems does appear to conform to the chronic model. However, after both 1976 and 1989 the fall in concern was much faster than the fall in the economic indicators which gave rise to the concern, giving some support to the argument that once coverage of the immediate crisis or increase had passed there was a falling away of expressed concern.

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% rating as one of two most urgent problems



*Fig. 3*

### *Strikes, Labour relations*

Concern about strikes and labour relations follows a pattern which is clearly related to published indicators of industrial action, in particular the number of days lost through strikes (see fig. 3). The impact of the miners' dispute 1973-74, the 'Winter of Discontent' 1978-79, and the miners' strike 1984-85 can all be clearly seen, with sharp rises in concern as the disputes began, and equally sharp drops as they came to an end. In the 1970s there was always an underlying level of concern about this issue even when major disputes came to an end. With a decline in the total level of days lost, this background concern has disappeared, with concern being reported at zero in 1991 and early 1992. This does not mean that strikes and labour relations have moved into the category of non-issue. Rather this issue appears to fit most closely the acute model, with major disputes likely to continue to result in sharp increases in concern, which will die away when the specific dis-

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pute comes to an end.

### *Fuel shortage*

Fuel shortages have been listed as of concern only in 1973-74 during the miners' dispute and the three-day week, which also followed the Arab-Israeli War and subsequent supply problems and price rises. In December 1973, concern about fuel shortage as one of the two most urgent problems soared to 50 per cent. There was also a brief period of concern in 1979, peaking at 15 per cent in July 1979, following a second round of OPEC price rises. Fuel shortage appears here to reflect only concern about short-term difficulties in getting petrol for cars and fuel for heating, rather than longer-term concerns about British and world energy reserves.

## **International issues**

### *International affairs*

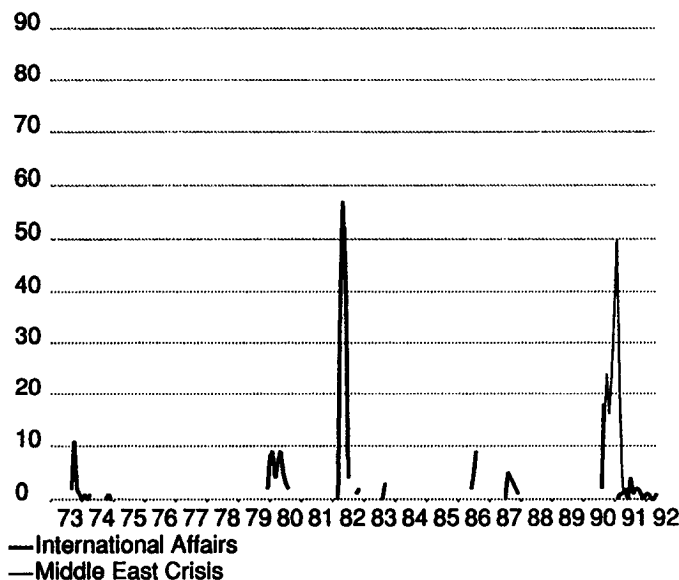
The two main peaks shown in fig. 4 suggest an 'acute' model as being the most appropriate for international affairs. The Argentine invasion of the Falklands and the despatch of the British task force led to concern about international affairs rising from 0 per cent in March 1982 to 57 per cent in May 1982. Following the recapture of the Falklands, concern fell from 45 per cent in June to 4 per cent in July. This abrupt decline reflected not 'boredom' with the issue but the termination of the triggering event. Longer-run issues about the status of the Falklands did, of course, exist prior to and subsequent to the public concern surrounding the invasion.

Concern about the Gulf War 1990-91 follows a broadly similar pattern allowing for the decision of Gallup to start coding the 'Middle East crisis' as a separate problem from August 1990. The pattern of concern clearly followed the likelihood of British involvement, showing a dip in October 1990 during the 'phoney war' phase. Following the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, concern about the 'Middle East crisis' collapsed, even though a wide range of problems affecting Iraq and Kuwait continued.

Other less dramatic spikes of concern tend to confirm the acute model for international affairs. The 1973 spike clearly relates to the Arab-Israeli war, the 1979-80 spike to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The small 1986 peak appears to be

## *Is there an issue-attention cycle in Britain?*

% rating as one of two most urgent problems



*Fig. 4*

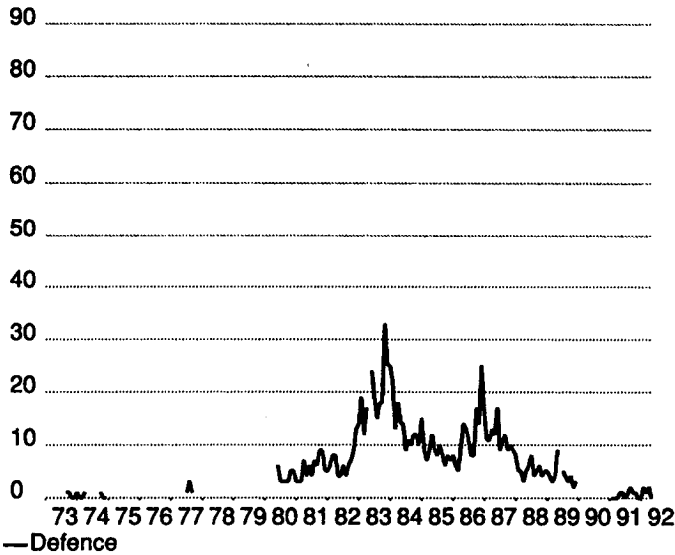
related to the row about South African sanctions, which were opposed by the British government.

One remarkable absence is any dramatic increase of concern about international affairs as an urgent problem at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, which had been preceded by the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. This certainly received substantial media coverage, especially during the Soviet coup in August 1991. One explanation may be that the British public did not regard these developments as a 'problem' but as a positive development. It should also be noted that the question asked refers to the most urgent problems 'facing the country', which invites viewing world events through British spectacles which only see the impact on Britain.

There used to be separate categories for Commonwealth (up to the early 1970s) and for Colonial Affairs (in the 1960s). In the early 1970s concern about both international affairs and the Com-

## *Ups and Downs*

% rating as one of two most urgent problems



*Fig. 5*

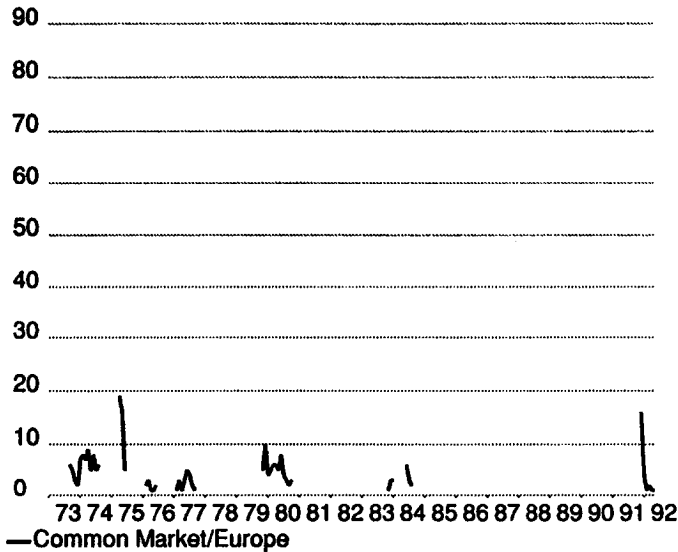
monwealth was normally low, but in some months concern about the Commonwealth actually exceeded concern about international affairs.

### *Defence*

Prior to the 1979 General Election, defence was virtually a non-issue (see fig. 5). There were election peaks in 1983 (main peak after the election, coinciding with the arrival of cruise missiles at Greenham Common) and 1986-7 (main peak before election). The build-up to the 1983 peak coincides with the CND campaign against cruise missiles. However, there was no election peak in 1992, after Labour had effectively abandoned its unilateralist position, and the threat from the Soviet Union had diminished with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. The implication is that 'concern' about defence as an urgent issue was related to the party debate, including the Labour Party's policy on nuclear disarmament.

## *Is there an issue-attention cycle in Britain?*

% rating as one of two most urgent problems



*Fig. 6*

ment and Conservative attacks on that policy. This issue does not neatly fit the Downs model or the chronic model. The main pattern most closely fits the election cycle model, which stresses the gap between parties and electoral campaigns focussed on that gap. However, events, specifically government actions, influenced the scale and exact timing of the peak in 1983.

### *Common Market/Europe*

Peaks of concern about the 'Common Market' (the heading used in the 1970s) or 'Europe' (the heading used in the 1990s) can be clearly related to particular events or debates concerning Britain's membership of the European Community (see fig. 6). There was an upsurge of concern at the time of the February 1974 General Election. In 1975 there was a peak of concern at the time of the referendum on continuing EC membership. The surge of interest in 1979-80 reflects coverage of Mrs Thatcher's demand that the



## *Ups and Downs*

EC should refund some of 'our money'. Interest in 1984 peaked at the time of the elections for the European Parliament. By the early 1990s Gallup appears to have ceased to record Europe as a category. Hence, when Gallup started to record it again at the end of 1991, concern appears to come out of the blue at the time of the Maastricht summit on European Unity (a one-off listing for June 1991 showed 7 per cent considering Europe to be one of the two most urgent issues). This reflects the point made earlier that Gallup itself reacts to, rather than simply records, perceptions of increased importance or interest in issues. Following the Maastricht Summit, concern about Europe as an urgent issue plummeted. Europe as an issue appears to conform most closely to the acute model.

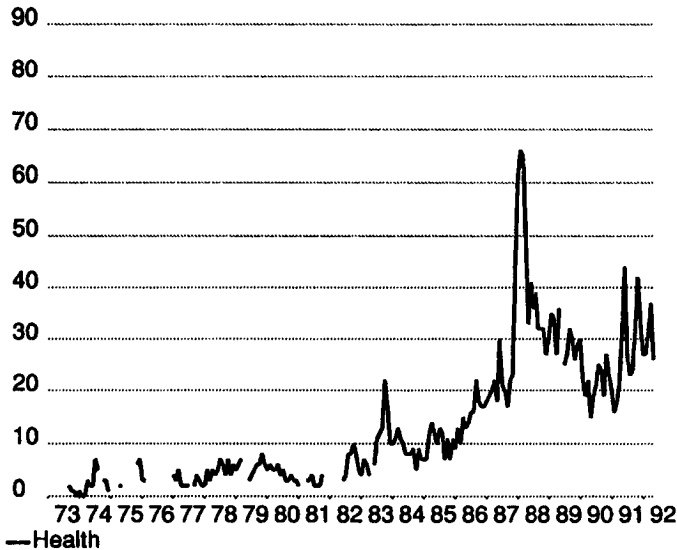
### **Social issues**

#### *Health*

At a time of massively increased newspaper coverage of the 'NHS crisis' in 1987-88, some commentators with a long-standing interest in health policy pointed out that apparent crises in the NHS were nothing new (see Day and Klein, 1988). However, from fig. 7 it can clearly be seen that the 1987-88 peak was quite distinctive in its scale from previous upsurges in public concern. The level of concern peaked at 66 per cent in February 1988. There had been a previous smaller peak at the time of the 1987 General Election, at which Labour had campaigned on the NHS highlighting, as in 1992, cases of children whose operations had been delayed. There appeared to be a falling away of concern after the general election, but then there was a massive surge of concern at the end of 1987 at a time when an industrial dispute involving health workers took place and there was substantial coverage of ward closures, waiting lists and other difficulties in the hospital service. The timing of this surge in concern cannot be directly linked to abrupt changes in any of the indicators of NHS resources or throughput. One relevant background factor is that the increase in the numbers of nurses and doctors had levelled off in the early 1980s, and the number of ancillary staff was falling, partly as a result of competitive tendering. The 1987 surge in concern does seem to have some of the characteristics of Downs's stage 2: 'alarmed discovery'.

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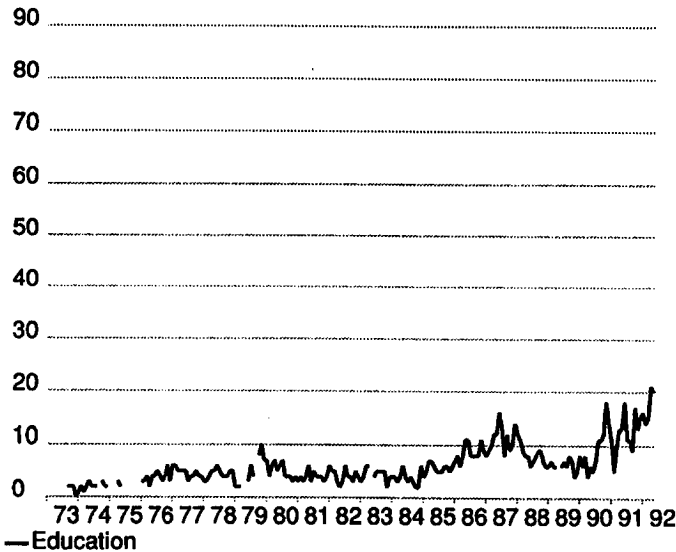


*Fig. 7*

The level of expressed concern fell abruptly after the government settled the pay dispute, announced increased expenditure on the NHS, and announced that it would be carrying out a review of health policy. The decline in concern, though, has been to levels higher than those before the upsurge of concern, again conforming to the Downs model. The subsequent upsurges of concern can be related to the announcement of the government's plans for the NHS (1989), the introduction of the first phase of those reforms (April 1991), concern arising from media coverage of difficulties faced by the some of the first round of NHS trusts (October 1991), and the general election campaign of April 1992, which featured the NHS as a major issue. While it is not easy to determine whether the NHS issue has gone through a complete cycle, it does appear to be one of the best candidates for a Downs issue-attention cycle.

## *Ups and Downs*

% rating as one of two most urgent problems



*Fig. 8*

### *Education*

Until the late 1980s education appeared to have the characteristics of a low-level persistent issue, which never rose to very high levels but which never disappeared as an issue of concern even when particular events resulted in very high levels of concern about other issues (fig. 8). The subsequent upsurge of concern appears to be reactive to government plans and policies, rather than the Downs model which implies that government action, if it occurs at all, will be in response to a previous upsurge of public concern. Concern rose during the 1987 General Election campaign, at which the Conservatives announced proposals for major reforms in local authority education. The actual passing of the Education Reform Act 1988, which introduced a national curriculum for schools, devolved school budgets and provision for schools to opt out of local authority control, did not result in any notable upsurge in concern. Subsequent surges of concern appear to be associated

with the implementation stage of that legislation and the General Election campaign of 1992. Education therefore does not fit neatly any of the models outlined earlier. The issue appears to have moved from low-level persistence as a result of radical changes by government itself sparking off concern.

### *Housing and Poll Tax*

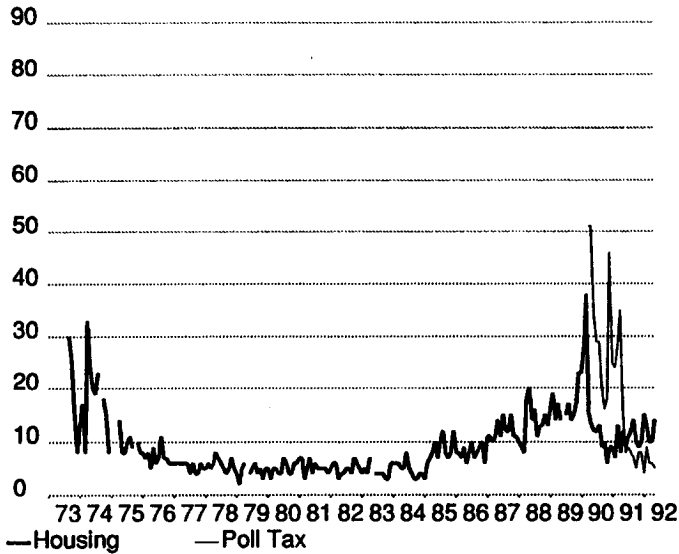
The interpretation of trends in concern about housing is complicated by Gallup including rates under the same heading. Presumably as a result of the poll tax (community charge) being a direct replacement of the rates, Gallup initially classified the poll tax under the heading of housing, even though the whole point of the poll tax is that it is personally rather than housing related. Thus the apparent surge in concern about housing in 1990 may relate to concern about the imminent introduction of the poll tax rather than the surge and then the subsequent fall in house prices in England, especially in the south of England (see fig. 9). The other major surges in concern about housing were in 1973 and 1974. The last major rating revaluation in England was in 1973 and this period also saw a major boom and then fall in house prices.

Poll tax is a distinctive issue which does not neatly fit either the Downs model or any of the models outlined above. In 1986 a majority of those surveyed favoured replacing rates with a community charge. However, it can be seen that replacement of rates was not considered by many to be one of the most urgent problems facing the country. As the introduction of the poll tax in England and Wales in April 1990 loomed, the issue surged in importance, peaking at 51 per cent in March and April 1990. (The poll tax had been introduced in Scotland a year earlier, reflecting the introduction of poll tax there in response to reaction against a rating revaluation.) Immediate concern fell away, only to re-emerge in December 1990 after the replacement of Mrs Thatcher. Concern fell as it became clear that an urgent review of the poll tax was taking place, though as the next year's bills loomed there was a surge of concern in March. The reduction in poll tax bills financed by an increase in VAT and the announcement in April 1991 of the replacement of the poll tax by a new council tax resulted in a sharp fall in concern about the poll tax as one of the two most urgent problems facing the country.

The poll tax is almost the mirror image of many of the

## *Ups and Downs*

% rating as one of two most urgent problems



*Fig. 9*

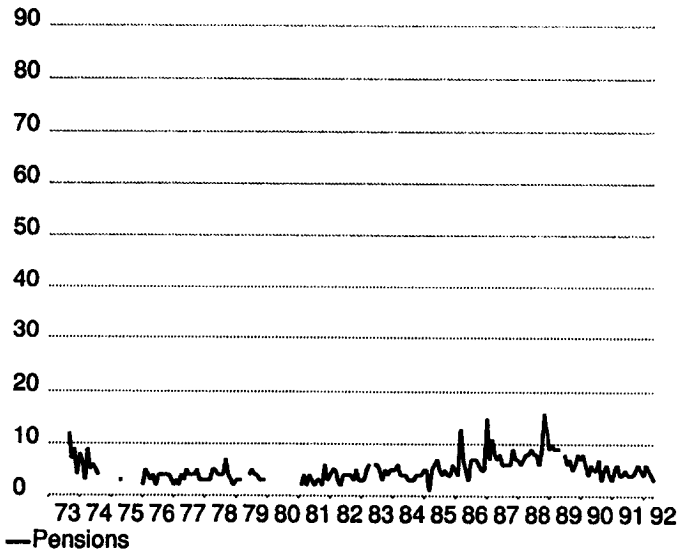
assumptions of the Downs model. The problem as perceived by respondents considering poll tax to be an urgent problem was a particular action taken by the government, not the need for the government to take action to deal with a social problem which had somehow come to public attention. The level of public concern remained high until it became clear that the government was abandoning what it originally intended to be a solution to its perception of the problem of rates.

### *Pensions*

As can be seen from fig. 10, for the bulk of the period since 1973 pensions have rarely reached a level of concern above 10 per cent, but have also rarely disappeared as an issue of concern even when there were major acute issues such as the Falklands War (there was a noted dip during the miners' strike in 1985, though). Pensions therefore does seem to be a candidate for a low-level persis-

## *Is there an issue-attention cycle in Britain?*

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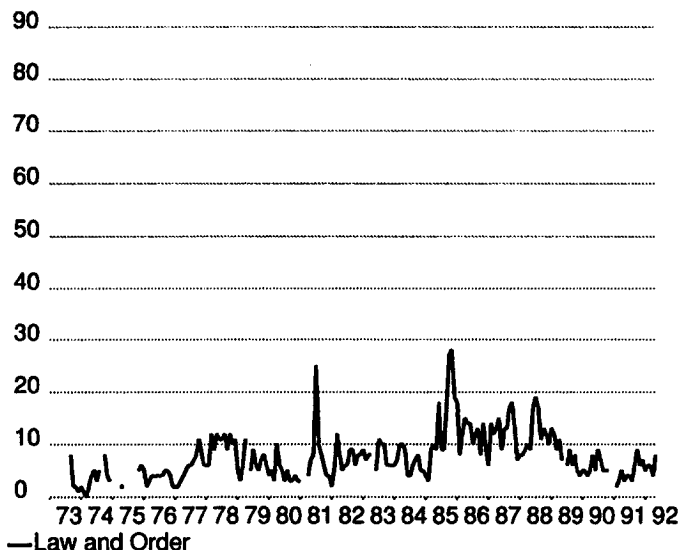


*Fig. 10*

tence issue. The level of concern was markedly higher in 1974 and 1975 in a period of very high inflation which could erode the value of pensions substantially in a matter of months. The overall level of concern was notably higher also in the period from 1986 to 1987 (though in assessing relative issues account has to be taken of the decline in unemployment as an issue of concern. There were three notable spikes of concern during this period. This period saw the government's review of social security benefits which, although not affecting the basic pension, did originally propose the phasing out of the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme (SERPS). The policy finally adopted saw the erosion rather than the abolition of SERPS and also included incentives for employees to shift from state and company pensions to personal pensions. The period 1986 to 1988 also saw a shift in the date for annual uprating of pensions, and low increases in cash terms at a time of low inflation.

## *Ups and Downs*

% rating as one of two most urgent problems



*Fig. 11*

Social security benefits were separately listed from 1977 to 1979 and showed concern falling from 6 per cent at the beginning of 1977 to 2 per cent and fluctuating thereafter between 2 and 5 per cent. The heading does not make it clear whether the problem was seen as the inadequate level of social security benefits, the high cost of social benefits, or problems concerning particular categories of benefit or recipient.

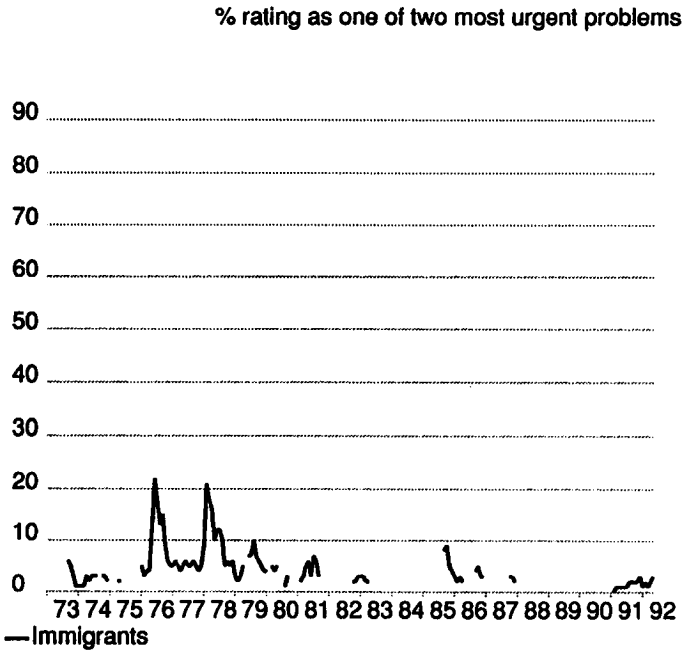
### **Home issues**

#### *Law and Order*

Law and order is an issue which does not neatly fit into any single model (see fig. 11). There clearly is a low-level persistent concern underlying surges of concern, the most dramatic of which are clearly associated with particular events and therefore conform to

### *Is there an issue-attention cycle in Britain?*

the acute model. The spike of concern in July 1981 is directly related to the riots in Toxteth, Liverpool and Moss Side, Manchester. The peak in October and November 1985 is related to riots in Handsworth, Birmingham, and Brixton and Broadwater Farm, London (with a policeman being killed at Broadwater Farm). The preceding peak in June 1985 may be related to the publication in the previous month of a government White Paper proposing greater police powers. It is worth noting that concern about law and order has risen and fallen, and has not consistently risen with the reported crime statistics as would be expected under the chronic model.



*Fig. 12*

#### *Immigrants*

Concern about 'immigration' is intermittently reported by Gallup (see fig. 12), but the pattern does generally appear to conform to the acute model. Peaks of concern appear to be related to scares



### *Ups and Downs*

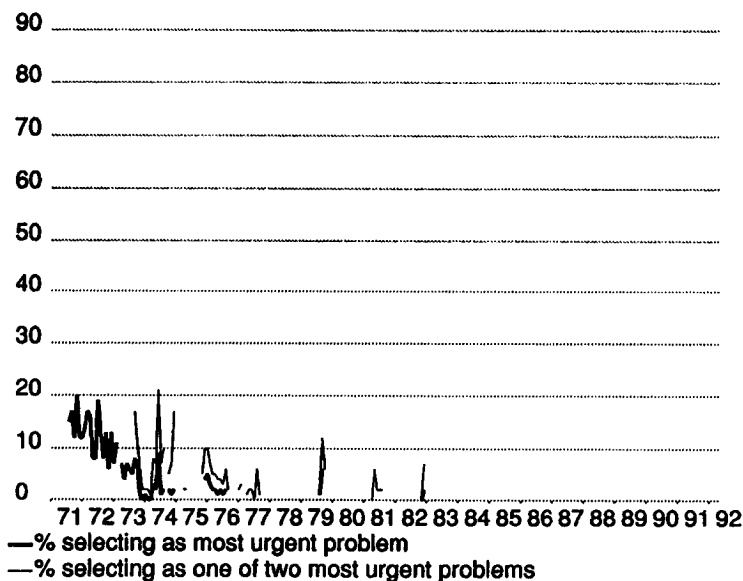
about surges of immigration or to announcement of proposed government action to deal with these apparent surges. A surge in May and June 1976 followed a speech in April in which Enoch Powell warned of the erosion of Britain by implantation of large unassimilable populations and his revelations at the end of May from a confidential Foreign Office report describing immigration rackets in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The February-March 1978 peak of concern followed an interview in which Mrs Thatcher said that people were concerned that they may be swamped by an influx of people with a different culture and called for a halt to immigration except for compassionate cases. In March 1978 a Commons Select Committee called for tighter immigration control. The September-October 1985 surge coincides with the riots in Birmingham and London. The minor surge in 1991 coincides with an increase in applicants for political asylum status and government proposals for regulating the processing of asylum seekers.

#### *Ireland*

Northern Ireland as a problem (listed by Gallup under the entry 'Ireland') clearly shows up the way in which selection of a time period can affect which model appears to have the best fit (see fig. 13). If the period since late 1973 is taken, the acute model seems to fit best. However, if we look take in a couple of extra years we capture the earlier more substantial build-up of concern following the introduction of internment without trial in August 1971 and an acceleration of intercommunal violence. In contrast to the other figures shown in this article, fig. 13 starts in 1971 and shows both those rating Ireland as the single most urgent problem and those rating it as one of the two most urgent problems. Gallup did not record Ireland as a heading until August 1971, again reflecting the way in which its surveys react to rather than track the development of public opinion. This upsurge of concern is compatible with Downs's 'alarmed discovery' stage, since the underlying problems of Northern Ireland were not new but had simply been excluded from the Westminster agenda. Subsequent falling off of relative concern did not reflect a diminution of the underlying problems but is compatible with Downs's argument that when the costs and difficulty of dealing with a problem are realised people become discouraged and bored. Further, the problem has at least two of the three characteristics which Downs specifies: it directly

## *Is there an issue-attention cycle in Britain?*

### Ireland



*Fig. 13*

affects only a minority of the population, and the underlying issues (power-sharing within Northern Ireland or a role for Dublin in matters affecting Northern Ireland) are not intrinsically exciting to those outside Northern Ireland other than particular events and outrages. Subsequent surges of concern then appear as spasmodic recurrences of a Downs cycle rather than simply disconnected event-related spikes as under the acute model. The June 1974 surge of concern is clearly related to the 'loyalist' workers' strike in protest against the power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive and the resulting collapse of the executive.

Most of the subsequent peaks reflect specific terrorist incidents or government responses. The December 1974 peak reflects the Birmingham Pub bombing. The December 1975-January 1976 peak reflects the ending of internment without trial in December 1975 and the killing of ten Protestants in single massacre by the IRA and the subsequent despatch of the SAS to Ulster. The August

## *Ups and Downs*

1976 blip reflects the killing the previous month by the IRA of the British Ambassador to Dublin. The September 1979 blip reflects the killing by the IRA in two separate incidents of Lord Mountbatten and eighteen British soldiers. The May 1981 blip (to only 6 per cent considering this one of the two most important issues facing the country) relates to the hunger strike, election as MP and death from self-starvation of Bobby Sands and the subsequent IRA revenge killing of five soldiers. A slight exception to this pattern was the 7 per cent level of concern in December 1982 following the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in October, and the opening of the Assembly, boycotted by the SDLP and Provisional Sinn Féin, in November. Thereafter, Gallup, in true Downsian manner, has become bored with the issue and no longer reports it in this series.

## **Transport and the Environment**

### *Roads and transport*

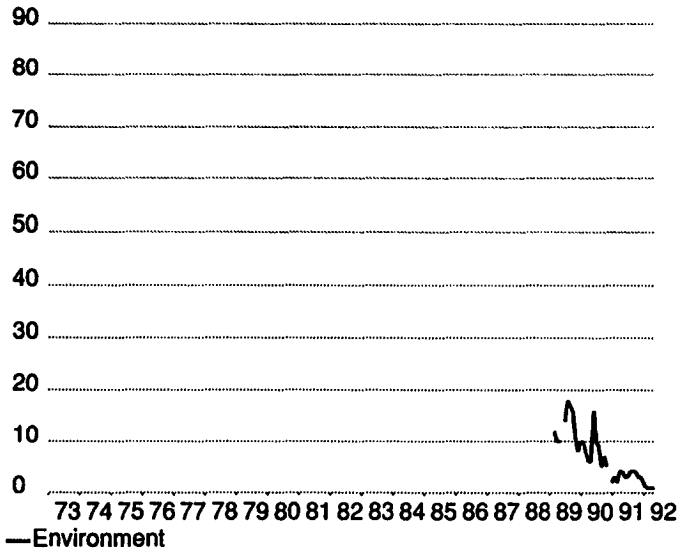
By the very nature of non-issues, obtaining survey data on non-issues or latent issues is problematic, since if they are not perceived as a problem then they may not be listed as a heading. One listed issue does come close, however. Between 1971 and 1974, Roads and Transport was included as a heading. Throughout most of this period, ratings of zero were faithfully recorded. Concern did soar to a whole 1 per cent in November and December 1974. The low to non-existent level of relative public concern does not, of course, mean that transport was not a very important issue for the Department of Transport and for the various interest groups with a specialist concern in transport policy.

### *Environment*

The virtual non-issue status of the environment in the early 1980s is illustrated by the fact that Gallup did not include it as a heading. As a consequence, as with Poll Tax, Ireland and Europe, Gallup failed to pick up any build-up of concern in the pre-problem stage, and it was only in March 1989 once the issue was receiving substantial media and government attention and had clearly reached the stage of 'alarmed discovery' that Gallup began to record concern about 'Environment' as an issue (see fig. 14). After peaking

## *Is there an issue-attention cycle in Britain?*

% rating as one of two most urgent problems



*Fig. 14*

at 18 per cent in August 1989 shortly after the Greens polled 15 per cent in the European Elections in Britain in June, relative concern fell away. There was a brief upsurge of concern to 16 per cent in June 1990, following 'Environment Week' at the end of April, a 'One World Week' of television programmes at the end of May, discussions of environmental issues at a World Bank meeting at the end of April and within the European Community at the end of May, and statements by the Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince of Wales in support of conservation and the environment. By the time of the April 1992 General Election, concern had fallen away to only 2 per cent.

A series of MORI polls conducted for *The Times* (9 October 1989) shows concern about 'Pollution/environment' as one of the two most important issues facing Britain today rising to much higher levels (mid 30s per cent) compared to the Gallup Poll. The explicit inclusion of 'Pollution' in the heading appears to boost

## *Ups and Downs*

expressions of concern substantially. The profile of concern over time is similar, however, with concern peaking on the MORI series in July 1989 and then falling away.

Ironically, according to Downs's arguments, the environmental issue should not have disappeared from public attention, since it has special features (outlined earlier in the article) which differentiate it from other social problems to which the issue-attention cycle model more completely applies.

### **Conclusion**

The Downs model of issue-attention cycle does not apply to those issues which have resulted in the highest levels of relative concern among the British public (see table 1). None of the economic issues conform to the model. Rather, most conform (with interesting variations) to the chronic model (unemployment, inflation, other economic problems). The public do not become discouraged, threatened and bored: they remain concerned about the issue while objective indicators of the issue remain high, and reduction in concern reflects reduction in the (at least short-term) manifestations of the problem rather than boredom with the issue or discouragement about the possibility of treating the issue. These issues are all valence issues, where all parties aspire to reduce the problem, and the cycle effect has occurred under governments of both parties.

Strikes and industrial relations appear to have moved to a pattern closer to the acute model, with spikes of concern about individual disputes followed by a total collapse of concern.

In terms of concern among the British public, international affairs does not conform to an issue-attention model, but to an acute model in which there is an abrupt and substantial rise in public concern followed by a total collapse of that concern when the immediate manifestation of the crisis disappears. Defence policy follows an election cycle model in the period 1979 to 1989 when party stances were at their most contrasting, but before and after that period defence was a non-issue as far as recorded public concern provides evidence.

As applied to concern about issues in Britain as recorded in opinion surveys, the Downs model does appear to provide an approximate fit to the health issue from the late 1980s, to the

# *Is there an issue-attention cycle in Britain?*

*Table 1. Issue models and policy issues*

Downs	Chronic	Acute	Electoral	Low-level persistent	Non-issues
Health	Unemployment	International	Defence	Pensions	Roads etc.
Environment	Inflation	Fuel Shortage	? ←	Education	<i>Not listed:</i>
Ireland	Other Econ.	Europe		(pre 1987)	Recreation
		Immigrants			Culture
		Strikes etc			Agriculture
		Law and Order*			Constitutional reform

\*Overlaying low-level persistence at other times.

Northern Ireland issue from the early 1970s and to the environment issue from the late 1980s. None of these issues fully meet all the characteristics set out in Downs (1972), but then neither does the environmental issue in the United States, as Downs himself points out (see table 2). The Irish issue comes closest since it directly affects only a minority of the population and constitutional issues are not intrinsically exciting to most British (rather than Northern Irish or Scottish) respondents; the social arrangement generating the problem were of benefit to 'a majority or a powerful minority', but that majority was within Northern Ireland rather than the UK as a whole. Health fits only one criterion indirectly in that resources relate to tax levels, though it could also be argued that the arrangements in the health service before 1991 worked to the advantage of a powerful minority, namely doctors. However, health is a policy area which has an impact on all families, though some more intensely than others at any particular time. Health is also an area which does appear to have intrinsic appeal for many people.

An important insight provided by comparing survey evidence of public concern with government policies is that public concern may follow, either in a positive or a negative appraisal, the announcement of government intentions to act. This contrasts with the condition → sparking events → public concern → government reaction model which appears to be implicit in the Downs

## *Ups and Downs*

*Table 2. Do issues following a Downs cycle match the criteria?*

	HEALTH	ENVIRONMENT	IRELAND
Minority affected	NO	NO	YES
Problem results from arrangements providing benefits (including lower taxes)	Tax levels Doctors	Cars Cheap energy Cheap waste disposal	Unionists
No intrinsically exciting qualities	NOT APPLICABLE	APPLICABLE	APPLICABLE

issue-attention cycle. There is clear evidence on the poll tax, and suggestive evidence on education, that government reviews or policy announcements can stimulate concern, rather than only *vice versa*. This would imply yet another model, a policy-initiated reactive model.

These conclusions do not constitute a total rejection of the Downs model. Rather they suggest the need for refining the specification of the conditions under which it may or may not operate. Ironically, given the way in which he is frequently cited, Downs himself set out some of the reasons why the simple issue-attention cycle model may not apply in his exploration of why the environmental issue in the United States might not fully match the model.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article has benefited from comments made at a staff-postgraduate seminar at the Department of Government, University of Strathclyde, May 1992, at which a presentation on the theme of this article was given. Practical considerations mean that I am unable to take on board all the helpful suggestions made in the discussion, but I have incorporated a number of the points suggested or otherwise strengthened the presentation of my argument.

In checking survey findings against events I have made substantial use of Foote (1988) and *The Times Index*..

### **Notes**

1. The Gallup report did include an 'issue salience' series of questions asked at intervals of several months, but this was not reported after 1982. Because this series was not frequent enough to be able to track issues monthly and covered only the period up to 1982, it has not been used in this article. The issue salience series provided an indicator of absolute rather than relative concern by asking a question 'How important would you say . . . is at the moment?' for a list of specified issues. Not all the issues covered by the 'urgent problems' series are covered in the 'issue salience' series and *vice versa*. Comparable issues include 'Controlling inflation', 'Maintaining law and order', 'Reducing unemployment', 'Improving labour relations', 'Increasing pensions', and 'Controlling immigration'.

Issues which are included in the 'issue salience' series but not the 'urgent problems' series and therefore give an indication of issues which may be important but are not picked up by the 'urgent problems' series include 'Improving national unity', 'Reducing taxation', 'Building more houses for owner-occupation', 'Improving race relations', 'Creating a fairer society', 'Protecting people's privacy', and 'Protecting freedom of speech'.

In contrast to the 'urgent problems' series, which focuses on the relative urgency of problems, the 'issue salience' series focuses on the amelioration of problems or the promotion of desired ends. The following issues were not covered by the 'issue salience' series but were listed as 'urgent problems': international affairs, defence, Commonwealth affairs, Ireland, health, education, housing (other than building for owner-occupation), other economic problems, fuel shortage, social security benefits (other than pensions), Common Market, and roads and transport.

2. The issue salience series referred to in the previous note did contain a question 'Do you think that anything can or cannot be done about . . . ?' and coded responses by 'Can', 'Cannot', and 'Don't know' for each issue. However, this question was not reported after May 1980. A separate series on 'government efficacy' was reported from 1986.



## *Ups and Downs*

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