

**NEO-LIBERAL REFORM AND ATTITUDES  
TOWARDS SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP:  
A REVIEW OF NEW ZEALAND PUBLIC OPINION DATA 1987–2005**

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**Abstract**

It is often assumed that neo-liberal reform has had a significant and negative impact on public support for social citizenship rights. This paper tests such an assumption by reviewing New Zealand public attitudes associated with social rights of citizenship across two decades. While acknowledging the issues that make it difficult to draw comparisons with the past, the paper argues that there is no overwhelming evidence that neo-liberal reform has resulted in a paradigmatic shift away from supporting social citizenship. For instance, New Zealanders now favour tax cuts over redistribution and wage controls, but there is evidence that they are not willing to sacrifice social spending on health, education and, to a lesser degree, targeted social assistance. Given the notoriously problematic nature of public opinion data, however, the paper contends that qualitative research is needed to further unpack these ambiguities and ambivalences in public attitudes towards social citizenship.

**NEW ZEALAND: A UNIQUE CASE?**

There is little doubt that New Zealand's economic and social institutions were rapidly and significantly reformed during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Boston et al. 1999, Kelsey 1993). Indeed, evidence suggests that the reform of New Zealand's Keynesian-welfarist institutions was faster and more extreme than elsewhere, including other "liberal welfare states" like Australia or Britain (Ramia and Wailes 2006, Vis 2007). For instance, in 1975 New Zealand ranked 34 out of 54 countries on a range of indicators for "economic freedom" (many of which are associated with neo-liberal policies), but by 1995 it had jumped to 3rd out of 141, with the biggest increase occurring in the latter decade (Gwartney and Lawson 2007).

Although the deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation associated with neo-liberal economics was often in tension with the fourth Labour government's (1984–1990) social agenda, this was not the case under National governments in the 1990s, whose economic and social reforms were more consistently "neo-liberal" (Humpage and Craig 2008). Their discursive focus on individual culpability was perhaps not as persistent as seen in the United States or Australia, but it was used to justify early and significant benefit cuts and the abolition of the universal Family Benefit in 1991, when unemployment was at record levels. Despite rejecting the work-for-the-dole scheme, which National established in 1998, and offering a more personalised case management approach, Labour-led governments in the 2000s further extended work obligations for benefit recipients to a wider range of groups

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(including the sick and disabled) and explicitly situated work as the first arm of welfare in the Social Security Amendment Act 2007 (Humpage and Craig 2008).

The international theoretical literature predicts that such fundamental and rapid policy shifts will have had a negative impact on public attitudes to social citizenship, which in the post-war period guaranteed a basic level of economic and social welfare for all citizens through rights to decent work, education, health care and assistance for the needy (Marshall 1950). With the introduction of “user-pays” charges in health and education, greater targeting of social assistance and a neo-conservative focus on “welfare dependency” and “personal responsibility”, neo-liberal reforms are said to have created a more market-based and coercive model of citizenship. This is thought to have altered the expectations citizens hold of one another and the state generally and, with fewer citizens perceiving themselves as having contact with the welfare state, made them less likely to support funding for this key mechanism for pursuing social rights (Brook 1998, Gilens 2000). In particular, the repositioning of obligations over rights in the neo-liberal era is said to have threatened the traditional notions of equality and solidarity, which have formed the basis of support for welfarist institutions (Brodie 2002, Shaver 2004).

This paper tests these theoretical assumptions by asking: Did New Zealand’s arguably unique experiences of neo-liberal reform significantly affect public attitudes towards the social rights of citizenship? It is acknowledged that this is not an unproblematic task. First, such theoretical concerns about the effect of neo-liberalism on public attitudes tend to assume that political reforms alter public attitudes, not vice versa (Stimson 1999). However, the speed of reform, along with less governmental interest in invoking public approval to legitimise change, appears to have made New Zealanders less accepting of reform than citizens of other countries (Vowles and Aimer 1993, Schmidt 2002), and New Zealand’s shift to Mixed Member Proportional Representation after overwhelming public support for change in a 1993 referendum suggests public attitudes can certainly influence the reform process (Karp and Bowler 2001).

International empirical evidence also indicates that concern about support for social rights diminishing may be overstated, with public opinion showing that citizens have adjusted to some of the newer neo-liberal arrangements while at the same time still considering social rights to be important (e.g. Svallfors and Taylor-Gooby 1999, Wilson et al. 2005). These contradictions are not necessarily the result of “illogical” thinking but rather demonstrate how “the public” draw on conflicting sets of traditions and moral repertoires when thinking about political issues (Dean and Melrose 1999, Dwyer 2002). Indeed, mixed repertoires may reflect the tensions between neo-liberal theory, which decries welfare dependency, and political reality, which has seen politicians loath to completely dismantle the welfare state due to its role in legitimising governments and capitalism more broadly (Hartman 2005).

Finally, there are methodological difficulties in attempting to review New Zealand attitudes to social citizenship. The paper uses existing public opinion data from the few regular data sources available to map changes in attitudes towards economic protectionism and the welfare state:

- the New Zealand Election Study (NZES)
- the New Zealand Values Study (NZVS)
- the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)
- the 1987 New Zealand Attitudes and Values Survey (NZAVS), commissioned by the Royal Commission on Social Policy (RCSP 1988).

In addition to the widely documented limitations of public opinion polling (see Crothers 1988, Vowles and Aimer 1993), it is important to note three specific caveats regarding the data presented in this paper.

- They are not always completely comparable across (or even within) surveys due to slight differences in the questions asked, so variances are noted where relevant.
- A lack of data prior to the late 1980s hinders our ability to fully assess the impact of neo-liberal reform.
- Poor and inconsistent data on the age, education, ethnicity and gender of respondents mean that the paper considers only the attitudes of “New Zealanders” generally, possibly blurring a polarisation in views between those who may have lost or gained from the reform process.

It is acknowledged that these factors may contribute to any ambiguity found in New Zealand public opinion.

Nonetheless, the available data are sufficient to begin mapping how public attitudes have changed over time and how neo-liberal reform may have affected public understandings of social citizenship in New Zealand. The paper does this by briefly reviewing attitudes towards economic protectionism, and then considering three more traditional areas of the welfare state: tax and redistribution, health and education, and targeted social assistance. Given Vowles et al.’s (1995) argument that New Zealanders have always been rather ambivalent towards the welfare state, the evidence suggests that no paradigmatic shift in public attitudes is evident and highlights the need for more in-depth, qualitative research so that we might better understand this apparent challenge to theoretical predictions about the impact of neo-liberalism.

## ECONOMIC PROTECTIONISM

Arbitrated minimum employment conditions and industry protections have always been important to the New Zealand “wage-earners’ welfare state” (Castles 1996), so economic protectionism is a good place to start when considering social citizenship. Under the Keynesian welfare model adopted by New Zealand, work was considered a social right and government took responsibility for ensuring that decent work was available through subsidies, import controls and centralised award-setting from the 1930s until the 1970s. After 1984, rapid financial and trade deregulation saw New Zealand go from being one of the most protected to one of the least protected economies in the world. The labour market was also transformed by the 1991 Employment Contracts Act, which replaced compulsory arbitration and collectivism with voluntarism and individualism. This offered employers greater flexibility but reduced employee security at a time of high unemployment and benefit cuts (Boston et al. 1999, Ramia and Wailes 2006).

Perhaps more than one might expect, Table 1 shows that support for issues relating to economic protectionism remained significant in all areas except wage control in 2005. For instance, when offered a list of policies that “might help solve New Zealand’s economic problems”, slightly more people supported import controls in 2005 (54%) than in 1990 (51%). Although the changed wording of the question might explain the recent rise, support for import controls in some form remained quite steady and significant, never dropping below 42%. This would seem to go against the deregulatory, free-trade mantra that has been central to neo-liberal economic policy since the late 1980s.

Support for the idea that trade unions are necessary to protect workers was also much the same in 2005 (65%) as 15 years earlier (66% in 1990), although support peaked in the early 1990s (when the Employment Contracts Act was introduced), dropped in the late 1990s, and then rose again in the 2000s, perhaps as a result of the Act being replaced with legislation less restrictive of unionism in 2001 (Cheyne et al. 2005). This is the case even though support for repealing the Employment Contracts Act decreased quite rapidly (from 48% in 1993 to 39% in 1999). Support for the idea that wages should be controlled by legislation also experienced a rapid decline from 30% in 1990 to 14% in 2002. It had risen slightly by 2005, possibly reflecting the emphasis Labour-led governments placed on improving minimum wage levels or, conversely, the Opposition's significant political rhetoric highlighting that wages were much higher in Australia than in New Zealand (Humpage and Craig 2008, Key 2005).

**Table 1 Support for Economic Protectionism (%)\***

	1990	1993	1996	1999	2002	2005
Increase import controls**	51	46	42	49	42	54
n	1,879	1,996	3,951	2,363	4,625	3,648
Big business is too powerful	70	70	64	63	51	49
n	2,027	2,219	4,026	1,982	4,639	3,668
Control wages by legislation	30	24	19	19	14	19
n	1,869	2,251	4,007	5,548	4,105	3,743
Unions necessary to protect workers	66	70	67	56	58	65
n	1,893	2,050	4,031	2,393	4,667	3,774
Employment Contracts Act should be repealed	–	48	42	39	–	–
n	–	2,027	4,893	5,606	–	–

Sources: NZES 1990, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2002, 2005.

\* All data are unweighted data and recalculated from a 5-point scale as a percentage.

\*\* In 1990 and 1993 respondents were asked about increasing import controls, in 1996 about their "support" for them, and from 1999 to 2005 about the introduction of import controls.

The only measure where support continued to decrease in 2005 was that concerning the power of big business. Supplementary data suggest that significant numbers of respondents in the 1990s may have believed big business was too powerful because they were resistant to foreign ownership of business, rather than to business in general (see Heylen Research Centre 1988, Vowles et al. 1995). Although far fewer NZES respondents considered big business too powerful in 2005, this argument might still have some resonance given the purported public antipathy to a Canadian bid to buy a significant share of Auckland airport, which led to the Labour-led government's 2008 decision to protect the country's "strategic assets" (Gaynor 2008).

In summary, New Zealand's sweeping and rapid deregulatory and industrial relations reforms from the late 1980s appeared to affect attitudes to work as a social right, to be protected by import/wage controls and strong unionism during the 1990s, but by 2005 support began to rise again: about half supported import controls and remained suspicious of big business, a significant majority supported unionism, and almost a fifth still supported wage controls. Despite an increasing tolerance for big business, these results collectively suggest that by the 2000s New Zealanders were in line with – or at least had had their attitudes shifted by – the Labour-led government's attempt to modify some of the harsher aspects of economic liberalism from 1999.

TAX AND REDISTRIBUTION

The Keynesian welfare state’s focus on material equality favoured not only economic protectionism but also progressive taxation and redistributive policies that shifted income from the wealthy to the poor. Neo-liberal theory regards individuals as self-interested and rational actors, and inequality as the result of poor choices; as such, it promotes reductions in personal and business taxes over redistributive policies. These ideas framed major reform of the New Zealand tax system in the 1980s, making it one of the flattest and simplest in the developed world (Roper 2008). In addition, redistributive policies were pared back with benefit cuts in 1990 and 1991 and greater targeting of social assistance, which now aimed to encourage self-reliance and personal responsibility rather than economic equality. There was no significant tax reform after 1996, but the political right promoted tax cuts as an important election issue in the 2000s, while Labour-led governments offered a renewed, if limited, focus on redistribution from 1999 (Liebschutz 1999, Cheyne et al. 2005).

With such a policy history one might expect a clear shift from support for redistribution towards a greater preference for tax cuts. Table 2 illustrates that about a third (36%) of respondents supported tax cuts as a means of solving New Zealand’s economic problems in 1993. The 1963 Voting Study (cited in Crothers 1988) reported a similar level of support, suggesting that tax cuts were a low priority for New Zealanders before the mid-1990s. By 2005, support for reduced tax had grown to 69%, implying that neo-liberal concerns about tax and personal responsibility had become embedded in the public consciousness. But it was not until 2002 that a clear majority favoured tax cuts, and even then 30% were happy with the status quo, or at least indifferent to change. In addition, 60% of ISSP (2000) respondents still supported progressive taxation in 1999, which is in tension with the regressive tax policies usually promoted by neo-liberal advocates. It is thus possible that “bracket creep”, whereby inflation pushes salaries/wages into a higher tax bracket, may be a major factor in the increase in support for tax cuts.

**Table 2 Reduce Taxes to Help Solve New Zealand’s Economic Problems (%)**

	1993	1996*	1999	2002	2005
Agree	36	47	42	51	69
Disagree	27	19	31	19	10
Neither**	37	31	27	30	21
n	1,968	4,911	2,350	4,638	2,761

Sources: NZES 1993, 1996, 2002, 2005.

\* Unweighted data.

\*\* Includes “indifferent” or “neutral” and “don’t know”.

Importantly, when NZES respondents were asked whether “government should reduce taxes and people should pay more for own health and education”, support in New Zealand grew only from a steady 19% in the 1990s to 23% in 2002, and then to 30% by 2005. The fact that less than half the number of 2005 respondents agreed with this question, compared to that referring to the economy, suggests that the desire for tax cuts remained conditional on social concerns, as the next section demonstrates.

Nonetheless, Table 3 shows diminished support (from 49% to 29%) for redistribution of income and wealth between 1993 and 2005, with a correlating increase in the number of respondents disagreeing with redistribution over the same period. It is notable that only half (49%) supported greater redistribution, even in 1993, perhaps indicating weak support historically. However, between one-third and one-fifth of respondents were neutral about this

issue, and in 2002 this group were about equal with both those who agreed and those who disagreed. This suggests that, in a context of low unemployment and more redistributive policies being implemented, many people were happy with the status quo, although their happiness diminished as the 2000s wore on – possibly influenced by the Opposition’s increased political rhetoric about tax cuts (see Humpage and Craig 2008).

Despite the significant number of neutral answers, there was a significant shift away from supporting greater redistribution, even during the 1990s when there was high unemployment and much media coverage of poverty and inequality. Although the Ministry of Social Development (2008) indicates that actual income inequality increased rapidly during the 12-year period depicted in Table 3, further data show the number of people agreeing that New Zealand was an unequal society decreased slightly, from 68% in 1984 to 60% in 1999 (Crothers 1988, ISSP 2000). It is difficult to ascertain whether this was the result of slightly different questions being asked, a growing tolerance of inequality influenced by neo-liberal rhetoric focused on self-reliance and welfare dependency, or whether the public genuinely believed equality had improved as the economy regained its strength. But the fact that almost a third of ISSP (2000) respondents (30%) in 1999 also believed that large differences in income were necessary for New Zealand’s prosperity suggests that neo-liberal discourses did have some impact.

**Table 3 Government Should Redistribute Income and Wealth from Rich to Ordinary People (%)\***

	1993	1996	1999	2002	2005
Agree	49	48	44	32	29
Neutral	21	21	22	36	26
Disagree	19	26	29	33	36
Don't know	11	5	5	0	9
n	1,939	4,050	1,961	4,621	3,654

Sources: NZES 1993,1996,1999, 2002, 2005.

\* Data are unweighted and recalculated as a percentage from an original 7-point scale.

In contrast to the more mixed support for economic protectionism, attitudes towards tax and redistribution thus changed quite significantly. Support for reduced taxes as a means of fixing the New Zealand economy steadily increased in New Zealand to 69% in 2005, perhaps reflecting the fact that New Zealanders had not benefited from recent and extensive tax cuts offered elsewhere, including nearby Australia. Furthermore, the number of people agreeing that New Zealand was an unequal society decreased during the 1990s, and less than a third (29%) of 2005 respondents supported redistribution. This suggests that New Zealand grew more tolerant of inequality, a characteristic of neo-liberal thinking, and that this affected support for redistributive policies.

## HEALTH AND EDUCATION

The Keynesian welfare model promoted (largely) free and universal health and education systems with the aim of achieving equality of opportunity while ensuring the steady supply of healthy and well-educated workers needed for a productive economy. In the neo-liberal era the New Zealand health system was transformed along commercial lines through radical decentralisation, cost efficiencies and user-pays charges for all but the neediest. Similar, but less rapid and radical, reforms were undertaken in education, particularly at the tertiary level (Easton 1999, Cheyne et al. 2005).

As the costs of health and education became framed as the responsibility of citizens, we might expect that fewer New Zealanders would regard them as social rights. However, Table 4 shows continuing and significant public support for increased government spending on health, even when respondents were aware of the tax cost. Indeed, the same number of people wanted increased spending on health in 1993 as in 2005. Significant fluctuations in the intervening years may be due to the prevailing economic conditions, although when the unweighted NZVS data from 1998 and 2004 are excluded, the trend looks steadier. The number favouring less spending was negligible (around 1%) in most years. Table 4 also indicates that fewer respondents agreed that government should be responsible for providing or ensuring “free health care for all” than supported increased health spending, with a rapid drop of support (10%) between 1993 and 1996. From then on support remained steady and a clear majority (65%) still favoured free health care in 2005 after more than a decade of neo-liberal “user-pays” rhetoric and reality.

**Table 4 Government Spending on Health (%)**

	1989	1990	1993	1996	1998	1999	2002	2004	2005
Increase spending on health	83*	71	79	84	92*	82	86	92*	79
n	1000	1865	2020	5094	1201	1959	4705	954	2770
Govt should provide free health care	–	–	76	66	–	66	64	–	65
n	–	–	2,017	4,731	–	1,979	4,657	–	2,743

Sources: NZES 1990, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2002, 2005; NZVS 1989 (cited in Perry and Webster 1993), 1998, 2004 (cited in Perry, postal survey).

\* Unweighted data.

Table 5 shows that most respondents (at least 63%) also supported increased spending on education, even if it might require a tax increase to pay for it, over the entire 16-year period presented. NZVS data indicate that support peaked at 90% in 1998, but when 1993 data are compared to those from the NZES for the same year, this study appears less reliable than the longer-established and more regular NZES, whose data suggest fairly consistent support (75–81%), with the exception of 1990. The number of NZES respondents favouring less spending in education remained negligible (1% since 1990), but support for “free education from preschool to tertiary” also dropped from 81% in 1990 to 75% in 1993, then further fell to 68% in 2005.

**Table 5 Government Spending on Education (%)\***

	1989**	1990	1993	1996	1998**	1999**	2002	2004	2005
Increase	78	63	75	79	90	76	81	89	70
Same	15	32	22	19	9	20	18	10	27
Decrease	5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
n	1,000	1,865	1,999	5,051	1,201	1,946	4,683	918	2,748

Sources: NZES 1990, 1993, 1999, 2002, 2005; NZVS 1989 (cited in Perry and Webster 1993), 1998, 2004 (cited in Perry, postal survey).

\* “Don’t know” has been excluded, so figures do not necessarily add up to 100%.

\*\* Unweighted data.

Calls for increased spending suggest that New Zealanders continued to regard health and education as a government responsibility in 2004/05, and although fewer people saw free access to health or education as either possible or advisable, a substantial majority still supported this idea. These findings are in tension with growing support for tax cuts, although, as noted, such support is much weaker when directly associated with greater user pays in

social spending. The continued desire for increased spending in health and education may reflect the ever-escalating costs associated with them, especially the former. However, it is also possible that the significant cuts in social spending generosity which accompanied rapid and market-driven reform – again, particularly in health – personally affected a large number of New Zealanders and encouraged them to maintain strong support for health and education as social rights of citizenship.

### TARGETED SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Despite continuing support for universal aspects of the welfare state, New Zealand has long favoured targeted, selective social programmes whereby the elderly and the sick and disabled have been considered more “deserving” than low-income families (especially sole parents) and the unemployed, with the former thus garnering more consistent support from the public (Cheyne et al. 2005). Nonetheless, the Keynesian model saw a definite role for government in ensuring those in need had a decent standard of living. Job creation schemes provided work for the unemployed during high unemployment, while a Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) was established in 1973 to support sole parents caring for children. From the late 1980s, however, the introduction of work-activation programmes increasingly framed joblessness as the personal responsibility of the unemployed person. DPB recipients also became targets of this concern with welfare dependency (Cheyne et al. 2005, Ramia and Wailes 2006).

Table 6 shows that support for providing the elderly with decent living standards remained consistently high across the 1990s and into the 2000s, while that for the unemployed was not only significantly lower but also appeared to be more dependent on contextual factors such as unemployment rates (see Ministry of Social Development 2008). The fact that support was highest in the mid- to late 1990s, when welfare dependency rhetoric was strongest and work activation was being extended, counters expectations that support for the unemployed would diminish in such a context.

**Table 6 Agree it is Government’s Responsibility to Provide and Ensure Decent Living Standards for the Elderly and Unemployed (%)**

	1990*	1993	1996	1999*	2002	2005
Elderly	94	94	92	94	93	94
n	1,865	2,029	4,860	2,401	4,686	2,765
Unemployed	59	70	65	68	56	54
n	1,873	2,005	4,789	1,967	4,637	2,734

Sources: NZES 1990, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2002, 2005.

\* Unweighted data.

Table 7 illustrates that the number of New Zealanders who agreed government should be responsible for providing jobs dropped from 86% in 1987 to 60% in 2005, with minor fluctuations that saw the lowest support in the mid-1990s. However, because the 1987 NZAVS question was slightly different to that asked in the other surveys, it is difficult to tell whether the significant drop between 1987 and 1990 was due to data inconsistencies or changed perceptions about the role (or ability) of government in ensuring decent work. The fact that support between 1990 and 2005 remains fairly stable (and is broadly consistent with that for government ensuring a decent standard of living for the unemployed, presented in Table 6) suggests the former might be the case.

Table 7 also shows support for increased spending on job assistance and training for the unemployed (even if it might mean more tax), which appears to have increased significantly



in the early 1990s (when unemployment rates skyrocketed) and then to have dropped again as these improved. This further suggests that opinion on this issue is highly contingent on the current economic context. Certainly, the fact that between 54% and 60% of respondents by 2004/05 still regarded government as responsible for providing the unemployed with jobs, a decent standard of living and job training/assistance implies that the neo-liberal framing of unemployment as a personal responsibility was not fully adopted.

**Table 7 Agree\* It Should Be Government's Responsibility to Provide a Job for Everyone Who Wants One and to Increase Spending on Job Training/Assistance (%)**

	1987	1989	1990	1993	1996	1997	1998	1999	2002	2004	2005
To provide a job for everyone who wants one	86	–	60**	57	57**	54	–	65**	59**	–	60**
n	1,524		1,880	2,020	4,669	1,206		1,957	4,625		3,633
To increase spending on job training/assist	–	61	–	74	–	–	63**	–	–	57**	–
n		1,000		1,249			1,169			912	

Sources: ISSP 1997; NZAVS Survey 1987 (cited in RCSP 1988); NZES 1990, 1993, 1996, 2002, 2005; NZVS 1989, 1993 (cited in Perry and Webster 1993), 1998, 2004 (cited in Perry, postal survey).

\* Agree combines “definitely should be” and “probably should be”. Note that questions asked in different surveys were worded slightly differently (see sources for details).

\*\* Unweighted data.

To illustrate this point further, Table 8 shows that although only a minority of New Zealanders have ever supported increased spending on the DPB if it might mean a rise in taxes, support for this almost doubled between 1989 and 1993. Although dropping again, support during 1998–2004 was higher than in 1989 and there was also significant support (between 39% and 48% across the 15-year period) for spending to remain the same. This is the case even though DPB beneficiaries were targeted by the welfare dependency rhetoric accompanying welfare reform from the early 1990s, resulting in their being subject to work-planning activity requirements between 1997 and 2002 (Cheyne et al. 2005). Although the three-way question asked does not allow us to determine whether support reflected a desire to assist sole parents or their dependent children more specifically, solid support for keeping spending the same and a surge of support for increased spending in 1993 suggest that New Zealanders did not completely buy the welfare dependency rhetoric and were concerned during the 1990s with the social impacts of neo-liberal reform, especially on families and children. This argument is backed up by the strong public resistance to National's proposed Code of Family and Social Responsibility in 1998 (Humpage and Craig 2008).

**Table 8 Government Spending on the Domestic Purposes Benefit (%)\***

	1989	1993	1998	2004
Increase	13	24	18	17
Same	39	45	48	46
Decrease	45	27	30	37
n	1,000	1,249	1,156	890

Sources: NZVS 1989, 1993 (cited in Perry and Webster 1993), 1998, 2004 (cited in Perry, postal survey).

\*Unweighted data.

The fact that support for spending on the unemployed and sole parents appears to have grown in difficult economic conditions is in tension with further data demonstrating a hardening of attitudes towards those in need. While NZAVS 1987 data indicate that large majorities saw the causes of unemployment to be structural prior to neo-liberal welfare reform, almost two-thirds (63%) believed some unemployed people “don’t try hard enough to get jobs” (Royal Commission on Social Policy 1988). Table 9 shows that the number of New Zealanders blaming individuals for their circumstances grew between 1989 and 2004, with a 35% overall increase (from 38% to 73%) in those who regarded laziness or lack of willpower as the cause of need. Support then dropped back to 60% in 2005. Respondents were offered a different number of reasons in 1989, requiring us to be wary of comparing it with other years, while methodological differences pose some difficulties in comparing 2004 and 2005. It is nonetheless clear that since 1998 New Zealanders have increasingly believed that individuals are to blame for their poor circumstances, even if such a belief may be subject to some rather rapid fluctuations (as seen in 2005).

**Table 9 Reasons Why People Who Live in Need Are Poor (%)**

	1989	1998*	2004*	2005
Lazy	38	37**	73**	60
Injustice	30	36**	27**	40
Unlucky	17	–	–	–
Other	15	–	–	–
n	1,000	1,144	653	1,226

Sources: NZVS 1989 (cited in Gold and Webster 1993), 1998, 2004 (cited in Perry, postal survey), 2005 (telephone survey, cited in Rose et al. 2005).

\* “Don’t know” answers have been excluded.

\*\* Unweighted data.

Given the strongly held belief that laziness is the major cause of poverty, it makes sense that NZES 1996 and 2002 data indicate support for the idea that “the unemployed should have to work for their benefits” increased from 68% in 1998, when New Zealand’s “Community Wage” work-for-the-dole programme was introduced, to 73% in 2002 (a year after it was abolished). Yet, surprisingly, there was no corresponding growth in support for people taking greater responsibility for themselves. NZVS data show that in 1993, 40% of respondents agreed that people should take more responsibility (Perry and Webster 1993). This dropped to 33% in 1998, before rising to 37% in 2004 (postal survey, Perry, personal communication), perhaps due to resistance to greater governmental interest in regulating social behaviour from 1999 (for instance, the repeal of section 59 of the Crimes Act, which restricted physical punishment of children). Only 3% fewer respondents wanted more personal responsibility in 2004 than 11 years earlier. If we assume that notions of self-reliance and personal responsibility are understood to be similar, this increase may have been bigger, for 68% of the NZAVS 1987 respondents agreed that “people should be more self-reliant” (Royal Commission on Social Policy 1988). However, the NZVS 2004 telephone survey found that 43% of respondents were happy with the current balance between government and personal responsibility (Rose et al. 2005).

By the mid-2000s, then, New Zealanders expressed mixed attitudes towards targeted social assistance. Although they had supported increased social spending for sole parents and job training and assistance during troubled economic conditions, they continued to believe that the unemployed were less deserving than the elderly, and, with need thought to be caused by individual more than structural factors, wanted them subjected to more work obligations. Yet

there was only minority support for increased personal responsibility, possibly because the public did not see these two things as the same. In this way, New Zealanders appeared to apportion greater blame for poverty in good economic conditions, but retained some sympathy with unemployed people and sole parents in harder times. They thus continued to see a role for government in providing an income and helping people find work while they looked for a job.

### CONCLUSION: TEASING APART AMBIGUITY

This review has found no paradigmatic shift in thinking about social citizenship rights in New Zealand since the implementation of neo-liberal reforms from 1984, although some significant changes are evident. New Zealand's rapid deregulatory and industrial relations reforms appear to have had an early impact on attitudes to work as a social right, but by the mid-2000s many seemed to support Labour-led government attempts to manage some of the harsher aspects of economic liberalism with increased support for import controls, unionism and wage controls. In social policy, support for redistribution had diminished by 2005, while tax cuts rapidly gained favour, but these trends were offset by a strong desire for increased spending in health and education. Support for those groups considered less deserving, including sole parents and the unemployed, was weaker but spending on the DPB and unemployment training and assistance gained favour during the early 1990s, contradicting expectations that neo-liberal attacks on welfare dependency would turn public opinion overwhelmingly against groups stigmatised as welfare dependent. Similarly, increased support for the idea that need and poverty emerge from individual laziness and for work-activation policies was countered by resistance to encouraging greater personal responsibility.

Importantly, despite weakening confidence in politicians, the majority of New Zealanders in the mid-2000s still saw a significant role for government intervention, albeit more in social policy areas, such as health and education, than in the economy. This indicates that they actively distinguished between the economic and social roles of the state, although fluctuations in attitudes according to the economic cycle suggest they did not completely disaggregate the two. By no accounts did the New Zealand public appear to adopt neo-liberal ideology with the same fervour as their political leaders and business élites (Vowles and Aimer 1993). At times, public attitudes appear to have mirrored political rhetoric about tax and welfare dependency (although it is difficult to determine whether attitudes reflected or changed politics), but at other times they sat in tension with policy shifts, such as the extension of user pays in education and health. In this way, New Zealanders demonstrated attitudes as mixed and contradictory as those reported in other liberal welfare states (see Humpage 2008a).

But the data available do not allow us to determine whether the ambivalent results presented reflect a polarisation of opinion between the different individuals and categories of New Zealanders surveyed at different times. It is also difficult to tease apart if and when the answers respondents offered to survey questions reflected their values and beliefs, their particular experiences of the neo-liberal reform, or their susceptibility to the political debates and discourses articulated by the political élite via the mass media (Vowles et al. 1995). Finally, it is impossible to tell if the ambivalence demonstrated is the result of a broader new political preference, as noted by Perry and Webster (1999), for a middling political ground where freedom and individualism are balanced by government responsibility.

These uncertainties, along with early work on a qualitative project concerned with current understanding of social citizenship in New Zealand and perceptions of change in social citizenship rights over time (Humpage 2008b), support international evidence that we need to further analyse the discourses used to frame opinions to understand two things: how one individual can draw on multiple discourses (including those embodied within neo-liberalism) when discussing social citizenship; and how age, ethnicity and gender result in different social groups drawing on different traditions and repertoires to do so. This additional data will allow us to unpack the tensions found here to explore whether the ambiguities towards social citizenship represent a continued historical ambivalence about the welfare state (see Vowles et al. 1995) or, instead, are more directly associated with the radical and rapid neo-liberal reforms New Zealand has experienced over the past two decades.

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