

14 questions for 2014

To mark the end of 2013 we wanted to explore the public mood on some key issues that are likely to be a feature of 2014. Using a nationally representative sample of 2,035 British adults aged 18+, we posed a simple question: would Britain be a better or worse place to live in 2014 if these things happen?

We chose 14 issues that represent a mix of infrastructural, legal, political and social changes that could have an impact on our lives in the next 12 months (as well as a few more light hearted ones that quite possibly won't!) The survey, presented below, reveals broad agreement on several issues (energy utilities, the NHS and a single rate of tax) but polarised views on others (immigration, HS2, the EU).

The NHS is privatised

This is an issue that has been an ever-present throughout the coalition's time in power, with the PM facing questions over whether the NHS is being "stealth-privatised". Our survey shows that the vast majority of the public are against privatisation, even if it would mean lower taxes. Three quarters (75%) say the country would be a worse place to live if privatisation went ahead and only 10% say it would be better.

Looking beneath the headline figures, 18-24 year olds are more likely to support privatisation with 22% saying that the country would be a better place to live (although 62% still say it would be worse). Political allegiances have a surprisingly muted influence, with only 17% of Conservative voters believing that it would make the country better (compared to 6% of Labour voters and 10% of Liberal Democrat voters).

The energy companies are nationalised

Forget price freezes and rolling back social and green charges on bills, the survey shows that anger with the energy utilities has reached a point where just over half the population (51%) say that nationalising the energy companies would make the country a better place to live (countered by only 13% who say that it would make it worse).

The idea wins favour across wide sections of the population. This includes both high and low income groups as well as voters of each of the three main political parties. Support is highest among Labour voters (61%) but Conservative voters likewise back the idea (41% vs. 26% who disagree).

Immigration is banned

Immigration is already hitting the headlines once more as the end of transitional restrictions for Bulgaria and Romania approaches, and the survey results suggest that

the issue is unlikely to become any less controversial in 2014. Concern has reached a point where almost half the country (48%) thinks that Britain would be a better place to live in 2014 if immigration was completely banned *from any country*. However, and reflecting the polarised nature of the debate, a substantial proportion (31%) think it would make the country worse.

There is a strong age divide, with the majority of younger people siding against the idea – only 31% of 18-24 year olds say it would be better (vs. 43% who say it would be worse). In contrast, over half (57%) of those aged 65+ think that it would make the country a better place to live.

Regional differences are apparent, with the idea finding most favour in the North East and West Midlands where, respectively, 59% and 55% think it would make the country better. In contrast, London bucks the national trend and only 37% think it would make the country better (compared to a larger proportion – 43% – who think it would make it worse).

Social class is also an important part of the mix. While white collar workers in social class AB are evenly divided on the issue (41% think a ban would make the country better; 41% think it would make it worse), blue collar workers in social class C2 are strongly in favour – for every one person in this group who says a ban would make the country worse there are three who think it would make it better.

Britain leaves the EU

With the rise of UKIP and the prospect of an in/out referendum on the horizon, this issue shows a clear divide among the population. At present, a slightly larger proportion (39%) thinks that Britain leaving the EU would make it a better place to live, compared to 32% who think it would make it worse.

There is a clear divide between young and old, with over half (56%) of those aged 65+ saying it would make the country better compared to just 15% of 18-24 year olds. London is the most Europhilic region (only 33% say that leaving would make the country better) while the East Midlands is keenest for withdrawal (51% say it would be better).

The results according to voter intention highlight the internal divisions within the Conservative party – 42% of Conservative voters think that it would make the country better vs. a similar proportion (36%) who think it would make it worse. Liberal Democrat voters are keener to stay in Europe with almost half (49%) saying that an exit would make the country a worse place to live.

While views on leaving the EU may be divided, the British public are clear that they have no desire to adopt the Euro and lose the Pound any time soon – 73% say this would make the country a worse place to live while only 7% say it would be better.

HS2 is built

The country is split on HS2: Almost one in three (32%) say it would make the country better; one in four (25%) say it would make it worse; while 43% don't have a view or think it would make no difference. Understanding regional variations is critical:

- The South East and the North West are most positive towards HS2 – 38% and 40%, respectively, think it would make the country better;
- London is divided – 36% think it would make the country better but 38% think it would make it worse;
- Other regions are more ambivalent. In Wales, for example, over half (52%) don't have a view or think it would make no difference. Neither does Scotland perceive much benefit from HS2, despite the possibility of a future link north of the border – almost three in five (58%) don't have a view or think it would make no difference.

Road tax is scrapped

Petrol price rises are often portrayed as anathema to everyday British families. However, would they accept higher prices if it meant they didn't pay road tax? It turns out that they would. Approaching half (45%) say that Britain would be a better place to live if road tax was scrapped (but entailing higher petrol prices), while 28% disagree.

There is a clear age-gradient – while only 25% of 18-24 year olds say it would be better, this increases to 64% among those aged 65+.

A surprise General Election is called

Although currently leading in the polls, the survey suggests that Labour still has its work cut out. When asked if a surprise 2014 election leads to a Labour victory, less than one in three (29%) say this would make Britain a better place to live. A greater proportion (38%) thinks that it would make it a worse place to live, while as many as 21% think it would make no difference.

Reflecting the scale of the challenge the Labour faces in the South East, half (50%) think a Labour victory would make the country a worse place to live (compared to 22% who think it would make it better). The situation looks no less daunting for the Conservatives in the North – with greater proportions believing that a Labour victory would be good for the country in both Northern England (35%) and Scotland (39%).

Best of the rest

- **A single rate of tax:** In the run up to the election when tax cuts look set to take centre stage, the idea of a single rate of tax (at 30% of earnings) finds short shrift among the public – over half (57%) say the country would be a worse place to live in 2014 while only 16% think it would be better. Only among readers of the Financial Times does the idea find some favour (38% think it would make the country better, although even among this group 40% still think it would make it worse).
- **BBC license fee:** With Lord Patten's counter offensive against Grant Shapp's 'ill-judged' attack on the BBC still fresh in the mind, the BBC retains public backing but still has work to do. Over two in five (45%) think that the BBC losing its right to charge the TV license fee would make the country a worse place to live (a view held even more strongly, interestingly, among Conservative voters). However, almost one in three (32%) think it would make the country better, rising markedly among low income groups and those in social housing.
- **The Daily Mail goes out of business:** Close to one in four (26%) think the country would be a better place to live if the Daily Mail – the bane of the left (and, in Paul Dacre's words, the Metropolitan classes) – went out of business. Perhaps not surprisingly, the idea finds most favour among readers of the Guardian (53%), Independent (50%) and its sister i (47%). In contrast, 18% think it would make the country a worse place to live, while the largest proportion (44%) doesn't think it would make a difference.
- **The Christmas blitz starts later:** Half of the country (50%) say that the country would be better if shops and town centres could only start advertising Christmas in December, whereas only a small proportion (of presumably early bargain hunters) say it would be worse.
- **Banning buy-to-let:** The *Help to Buy* scheme might be providing some respite for struggling first time buyers, but they shouldn't count on widespread support for other interventions. While as many as one in four (25%) think that prohibiting buy to let mortgages would make the country a better place to live in 2014, they are currently outnumbered by those who think it would make it worse (37%).

Q We're coming to the end of the year so want to ask you some big questions that look ahead to 2014. So, would Britain be a better or worse place to live in 2014 if...

■ Worse ■ Better ■ Neutral

